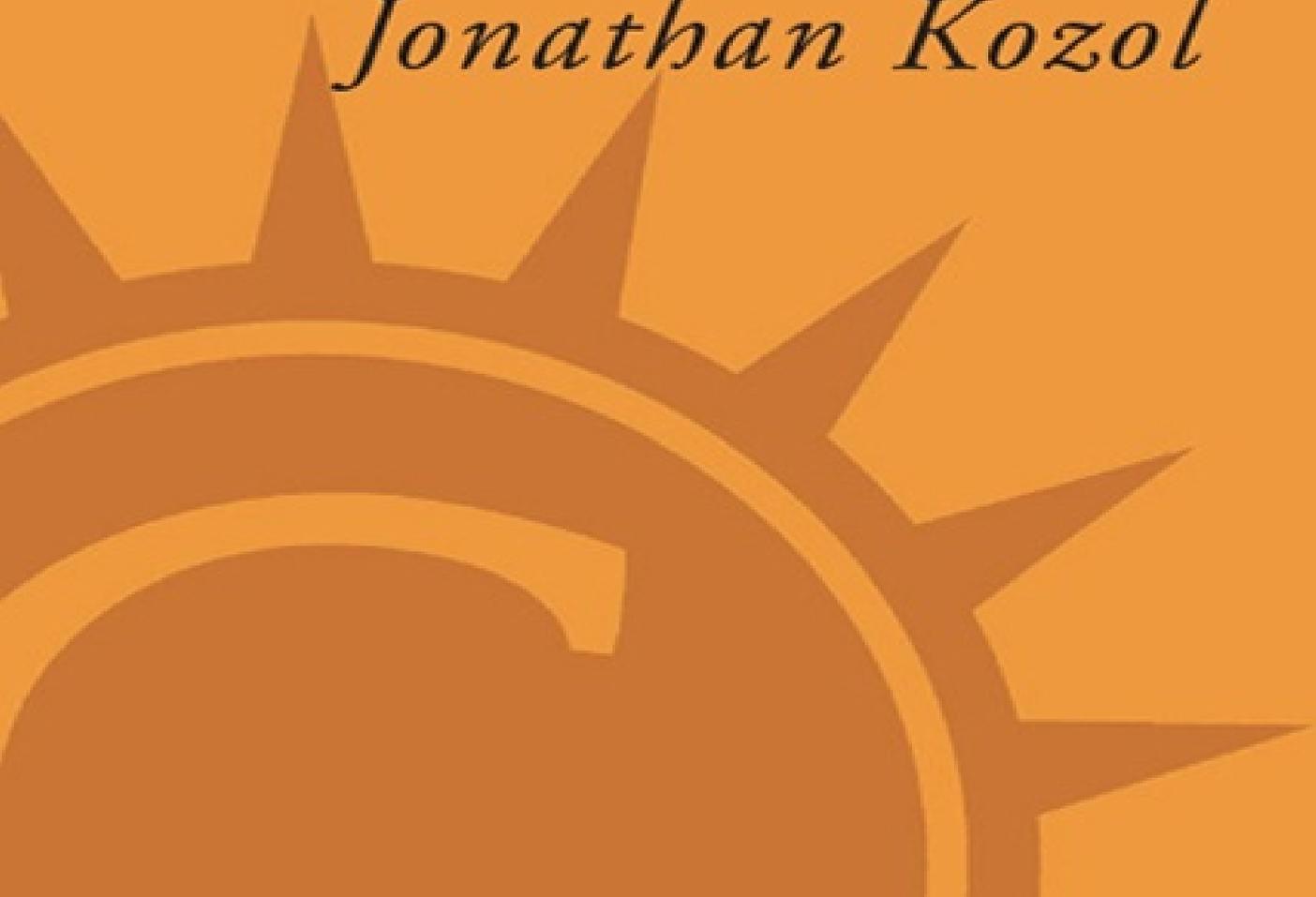


LETTERS TO A YOUNG TEACHER

Jonathan Kozol



Letters to a
Young Teacher

Jonathan Kozol



CROWN PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK

CONTENTS

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[TO THE READER](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[A Life Among Schoolchildren](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[Establishing the Chemistry](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[Reaching Out to Get to Know the Parents of Our Children](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[Teaching the Young, but Learning from the Old](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[Wild Flowers](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[The Little Piper](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[The Uses of “Diversity”](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[Beware the Jargon Factory](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[Aesthetic Merriment](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[High-Stakes Tests and Other Modern Miseries](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[The Single Worst, Most Dangerous Idea](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[It Is Evil to Tell Lies to Children](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[Loss of Innocence](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[Teachers as Witnesses](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[PREFACE](#)

[Goodbye for Now](#)

[AFTERWORD](#)

[APPENDIX I](#)

[Recipe for Green Slime](#)

[APPENDIX II](#)

[Leads and Contacts](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[NOTES](#)

[Other Books by Jonathan Kozol](#)

[COPYRIGHT](#)

For Francesca

and for all those other
teachers, young in age
or young at heart, who
come into our classrooms
with a love for children and
a thirst for justice

TO THE READER

The letters in this little book were written to a first grade teacher I will call Francesca who, after she had taken a position at an inner-city school in Boston, soon began to write to me, as many teachers do, and invited me to visit in her classroom.

In order to include some of the issues raised by other teachers in whose classes I have visited and who have written to me on a friendly impulse, as Francesca did, I have expanded the scenario from time to time by incorporating some of their experience into my portrayal of Francesca. I have also disguised a number of the details of Francesca's situation, including certain biographical matters and time factors that might otherwise invade her privacy in ways that I believe would be unfair to her.

Francesca, however, is a very real and wonderful young person who is also an astute observer of the politics of education and who, in her conversations and her correspondence with me, proved to be a shrewd, sometimes irreverent, and persistent questioner. Some of her questions forced me to reach back into my own career and to unearth almost forgotten memories. On occasion, this has led me to restate an incident or conversation from one of the other books I've written about children in the course of 40 years. I'd like to thank Francesca for impelling me to share these memories with her, even when they sometimes painfully remind me of mistakes I've made, either in the classroom as a teacher or, in later years, in efforts to resist a public policy or practice I thought damaging to students.

Most of all, I want to thank her for the favor she has given me in making me feel welcome in her classroom and—by her willingness to speak with candor of the challenges she's faced—bringing me so very close to the immediate and day-by-day concerns of those who, like herself, have chosen to devote their lively spirits and their deepest ethical ideals to the education of our children.

—Byfield, Massachusetts, April 2000

CHAPTER ONE

A Life Among Schoolchildren

Dear Francesca,

I was very happy that you wrote to me and I apologize for taking two weeks to reply. I was visiting schools in other cities in the first part of the month and I didn't have a chance to read your letter carefully until tonight.

The answer to your question is that I would love to come and visit in your classroom and I'm glad that you invited me. I'd also like to reassure you that you didn't need to worry that I'd think your letter was presumptuous. I like to hear from teachers and, as you have probably suspected, I feel very close to quite a few of them, especially the ones who work with little children in the elementary grades, because those are the grades I used to teach. I think that teaching is a beautiful profession and that teachers of young children do one of the best things that there is to do in life: bring joy and beauty, mystery and mischievous delight into the hearts of little people in their years of greatest curiosity.

Sometimes when I'm visiting a school, a teacher whom I may have met once when she was in college, or with whom I may have corresponded briefly, or a teacher whom I've never met but who has read one of my books and feels as if she knows me, sees me standing in the corridor and comes right up and tells me, "Come and visit in my classroom!" Sometimes she doesn't give me any choice. She simply grabs me by the arm and brings me to the classroom. Then, when I get there, typically she puts me on the spot and asks if I would like to teach a lesson or ask questions to her children.

I love it when teachers let me do this, but I almost always do it wrong at first, because it's been a long time since I was a teacher, and I often ask the kind of question that gets everybody jumping from their seats and speaking out at the same time. Six-year-olds, when they become excited, as you put it in your letter, have "only a theoretical connection with their chairs." They do the most remarkable gymnastics to be sure you see them. A little girl sitting right in front of me will wave her fingers in my face, climbing halfway out of her chair, as if she's going to poke me in the eyes if I won't call on her, and making the most heartrending sounds—"Ooooh! Ooooh! Ooooh! Ooooh!"—in case I still don't notice that she's there. Then, when I finally call on her, more often than not she forgets the question that I asked, looks up at me in sweet bewilderment, and asks me, "What?" It turns out she didn't have a thing to say. She just wanted me to recognize that she was there.

The teacher usually has to bail me out. She folds her arms and gives the class one of those looks that certain teachers do so well, and suddenly decorum is restored.

It's a humbling experience, but I think that it's a good one too, for someone who writes books of education to come back into the classroom and stand up there as the teacher does day after day and be reminded in this way of what it's like to do the real work of a teacher. I sometimes think that even education writer, every would-be education expert, and every politician who pontificates, as many do so condescendingly, about the "failings" of the teachers in the front lines of our nation's public schools ought to be obliged to come into a classroom once a year and teach the class, not just for an hour with the TV cameras watching but for an entire day, and find out what it's like. It might at least impart some moderation to the disrespectful tone with which so many politicians speak of teachers.

In my writings through the course of nearly 40 years, I have always tried to bring the mighty and ferocious educational debates that dominate the pages of the press and academic publications, which the voices of our teachers are too seldom heard, back from the distant kingdom of intimidation and abstraction—lists of "mandates," "sanctions," and "incentives" and "performance standards" and the rest—into the smaller, more specific world of colored crayons, chalk erasers, pencil sharpeners and tiny quarrels, sometimes tears and sometimes uncontrollably contagious jubilation of which daily life for a real teacher and her students is, in fact, composed.

I'm often disappointed, when I visit some of the allegedly sophisticated schools of education, to recognize how very little of the magic and the incandescent chemistry that forms between a truly gifted teacher and her children is conveyed to those who are about to come into our classrooms. Many of these schools of education have been taken over, to a troubling degree, by people who have little knowledge of the classroom but are the technicians of a dry and mechanistic, often business-driven version of "proficiency and productivity." State accountability requirements, correlated closely with the needs and wishes of the corporate community, increasingly control the ethos and the aims of education that are offered to the students at some of these schools.

But teachers, and especially the teachers of young children, are not servants of the global corporations or drill sergeants for the state and should never be compelled to view themselves that way. I think they have a higher destiny than that. The best of teachers are not merely the technicians of proficiency; they are also ministers of innocence, practitioners of tender expectations. They stalwartly refuse to see their pupils as so many future economic units for a corporate society, little pint-sized deficits or assets for America's economy, into whom they are expected to pump "added value," as the pundits of the education policy arena now declaim. Teachers like these believe that every child who has been entrusted to their care comes into their classroom with *inherent* value to begin with.

Many of the productivity and numbers specialists who have rigidified and codified school policies in recent years do not seem to recognize much preexisting value in the young mentalities of children and, in particular, in children of the poor. Few of these people seem to be acquainted closely with the lives of children and, to be as blunt as possible about this, many would be dreadful teachers because in my own experience at least, they tend to be rather grim-natured people who do not have lovable or interesting personalities and, frankly, would not be much fun for kids to be with.

A bullying tone often creeps into their way of speaking. A cocksure overconfidence, what Erik Erikson described as "a destructive conscientiousness," is not unfamiliar too. The longer they remain within their institutes of policy or their positions in the government, the less they seem to have a vivid memory of children's minuscule realities, their squirmy bodies and their vulnerable temperament.

their broken pencil points, their upturned faces when the teacher comes and leans down by their desks to see why they are crying.

I suspect that you and I will come back to this matter many times. For now I simply want to say I'm very, very glad you're teaching here in Boston, because that means that I can visit sometimes without your class without needing to make plans long in advance. Thank you for saying it's okay if I stop by one day without much prior warning, which makes things a whole lot easier for me. As you know, you're teaching in the neighborhood where I began to teach, so I definitely will *not* need to ask you for directions!

I promise to visit as soon as I can. Meanwhile, I hope the next few weeks are not too intimidating for you. You said you like your principal and that she's been kind to you. That's one big victory to start with. I'm sure there will be many more during the weeks ahead. In spite of the butterflies you said are making "many, many loop-the-loops" within your stomach almost every morning as you head for school, try hard to enjoy this first month with your children if you can.

It will someday be a precious memory.

CHAPTER TWO

Establishing the Chemistry

First Days in the Classroom

Dear Francesca,

You asked me how I felt the first day that I ever taught within a public school.

The truthful answer is that I was terrified, even more than you were, I suspect, because I'd had no preparation as a teacher. I had gone to Harvard College, where I was a literature major, then had studied briefly as a Rhodes Scholar in England and had lived in Paris, where I'd studied writing in the company of older writers who were living there.

When I came back to the United States in 1964 and decided I would like to teach in public schools, I knew nothing about teaching and had never had a class in education. But my lack of qualifications didn't seem to matter to officials in the Boston Public Schools, who were so desperate to hire almost anyone who would agree to teach in one of Boston's poorest neighborhoods that my application was approved without much questioning.

I found myself, within three weeks, assigned to teach a fourth grade class in Roxbury, the section of the city where the black community of Boston was confined to live, a pattern of confinement, you've noted, that exists unaltered to the present day.

My school was in a ghostly looking, badly overcrowded, and physically decrepit building where my students couldn't even be provided with a classroom of their own. We had to share an undivided auditorium with 35 other children in another fourth grade class, and with a choral group, and sewing class (fifth grade girls, all black, were taken out of academic classes for an hour every day to learn to sew on old machines like those my grandmothers had used), and with a group rehearsing almost a fall for a Christmas play that somehow never was produced.

One windy afternoon that fall, a rotted frame of windows in our make-shift class collapsed. I was standing close enough to catch the frame before the glass could shatter on the children sitting just beneath it.

Some of the children seemed to have accepted these conditions or, at least, did not appear to feel they had the right to question them. Others did not suffer these indignities so passively but seemed to simmer with hostility toward many of the teachers and the principal. When the anger of these kids erupted, they were taken to the basement of the school, where whippings were administered by a

older teacher who employed a rattan whip which he first dipped in vinegar in order to intensify the pain that it inflicted on a child's outstretched hands. The year before, one of the students in my class landed in the hospital after one of several whippings he'd received. His right forefinger had been permanently distorted as a consequence.

In the spring, the principal assigned me to another fourth grade class that had a classroom of its own but was in an even worse condition than the class in which I had begun, because the children in that room had had a string of substitute teachers almost the entire year. In the course of the preceding months, twelve different teachers had appeared and disappeared.

One of the most unhappy of these teachers, an emotionally unstable person who had no experience in teaching and an oddly frenzied look within his eyes, seemed to be a kindly man, but he could not control the pent-up anger of the children. One very cold day he made the bad mistake of stepping outside on the platform of the fire escape to clap the chalk erasers. One of the children slammed the door shut while he was outside. He banged on the door and shouted warnings at the children, but they wouldn't let him in. A teacher, alerted by the noise, who came into the room at last, said that he was red in the face and stamping his feet—"like Rumpelstiltskin!" in her words—until she opened the door to rescue him.

That was his last day at the school. Seven additional substitute teachers came and went during the next ten days. At that point, the principal told me this would be my class for the remainder of the year.

As you can imagine, I began my first day with those children with the deepest trepidation. I knew how angry and distrustful they'd become—rightfully so, in view of all the damage that the school had done to them by now. But I also knew it was essential for me to suppress the self-doubts I was feeling and do something, anything I could contrive, to give the kids the confidence that a new beginning had been made.

It wasn't easy at the start. I literally had to shout the children down during the first few days in order to be heard. I think they were shocked by this, because I'd worked with some of them in small groups earlier that year, and they'd never heard me raise my voice like that before.

Once the class calmed down a bit, I sat on my desk and made a promise to the children: I told them that they would not be abandoned. I told them I was there to stay. I don't know why it is that they believed me. They had no reason to accept such promises from yet another teacher. I do know that from that point on, I did my damndest to exploit every bit of personal theatricality I had at my disposal in order to infuse that room with energy and, as best I could, with the exhilaration that might bring some smiles to the very sullen faces that had come to be their adaptation to conditions that most children, rich or poor, in any school or district would have found unbearable.

Francesca, I don't want you to imagine that I was immediately successful. There are too many stories about "super-teachers" who walk into hopeless situations and work instant miracles. Those stories make good movies but don't often happen in real life; and I know that, in my own case anyway, I did not work any miracles that spring. Some of the kids remained resistant to me for a long, long time, and there were two or three who never really opened up to me until the last weeks of the year. But I did discover—and I still don't understand the chemistry that made this happen—that most of the

children seemed to trust me, and one reason for this, I believe, is that they could see that I did not condemn them for the chaos and confusion they'd been through, because I told them flatly that they had been treated in a way that I thought unforgivable.

Then, too, because I've always had a tendency to say exactly what I think to children, but to do so in a way that isn't too discouraging and gloomy, trying always to extract some kind of humor or sense of absurdity out of a situation that appears like an impossible calamity, I think most of the children actually got to like me, which, as in the case of almost any first-year teacher, is the kind of unexpected blessing that we pray for.

In the Boston schools in those days, there was a prescribed curriculum, not unlike those lists of standards, lesson plans, and day-by-day instructions that are given to the teachers in most inner-city schools today. Obedience to rules and orders was a constant emphasis in all of these materials. Teachers were provided with a list of notable quotations which we were to post on bulletin boards, to read aloud, or have our students memorize: "He who would command others must first learn to obey.... The first law that ever God gave to man was a law of obedience.... True obedience is true liberty.... Every day in every way it is our duty to obey.... Obedience sums up our entire duty."

The phonics text I was supposed to use was a basal reader in which there were no black characters. There were a couple of illustrations in the book in which the faces of the characters were light brown or tanned, which may have been a timid nod to racial sensibilities, but the stories in the book had no connection to the lives of anyone who was not white and middle class. The antiquated social studies textbook I was given by a woman who was called "the master teacher" for the fourth grade classes at the school, an overtly racist publication, portrayed the people of Africa as "savage and uncivilized." Their skins are of so dark a brown color that they almost look black. Their noses are large and flat. Their lips are thick. Their eyes are black and shining.... Their hair is so curly that it seems like wool. They are Negroes and they belong to the black race." Of the children of Switzerland, by comparison, the textbook said, "These children are handsome. Their eyes are blue. Their hair is golden yellow. Their white skins are clear, and their cheeks are as red as ripe, red apples."

The first thing I did was to rip down from the walls and blackboards all of these materials—"obedience" quotations and the rest—and to stash the social studies textbooks in a box and seal it shut and stuff it in the closet. Then, drawing mostly on my own delights and memories, I tacked up prints of paintings by Joan Miró and Paul Klee and brought in some records of French children's songs, and some calming music by Schuman, Ravel, and Brahms.

Again, drawing on my own experience from college days and from the years I'd spent in Europe, I introduced a few familiar poems of Robert Frost, some early lyrical poems of William Butler Yeats, and some beautiful posters of the streets of Paris and its skyline, and a map of Paris too, which became of special interest to the children when I told them I had lived there and showed them the street on which I'd lived.

I ultimately ditched a set of horrible lesson plans in social studies I'd been given and did a unit about Paris, which included measuring distances, calculating costs of buying food at small cafés, and other elements of daily life within a city I knew well enough to make it something of a geographic adventure for the children.

As I said, I can't pretend that all of this was magically successful. I certainly would not propose that any of these amateurish efforts on my part ought to be considered "innovative models" for another generation of beginning teachers. I simply wanted to begin by teaching things I knew and loved and felt that I could talk about with genuine excitement, since I thought—and this turned out to be the case—that my own enthusiasm might well prove to be contagious.

The children, to be honest, never took to Miró, but one of the paintings of Paul Klee, which I called "Bird Garden," was an instant favorite and it caused a pile-up of bodies every time the children had a chance to file past it on the way to recess or when they were lining up before dismissal. The art instructor at the school told me that she thought a painter like Paul Klee was too sophisticated for the children of this neighborhood. I didn't argue with her, but I think the children in my classroom proved her expectations to be incorrect.

I won't go into any greater detail now about the various changes that I made to try to bring some optimism about learning to those 35 fourth graders whose achievement levels had been knocked flat by the time I came into their room. (Only seven were reading and writing at grade level when I came into the class. Nearly a third were still at second grade level. I had to figure out a way to deal with that as an immediate emergency.) The point for now is not to give a breakdown of the strategies I tried but to respond to the familiar questions—"What do you *do*? How do you break through the lethargy you find?"—that teachers ask me when they come into a classroom where the spirits of the children seem to have been bludgeoned into dull passivity by previous months or years of instability.

Most teachers, fortunately, do not come into situations quite as awful as the one that I encountered, but many have described to me conditions that are only slightly less horrendous. They also tell me—and this is the case not only with those teachers who have entered education on a "fast-track" program that sends them into urban schools with only a few weeks of preparation, but also with those teachers who've attended schools of education—that they have been given almost no advice at all on strategies for breaking through that first and frozen moment of encounter with a class that has already undergone the kind of pedagogic battering my students had experienced before I was assigned to them.

"Start out tough and stick to the prescribed curriculum," new teachers are too frequently advised. This, in my belief, is the worst possible advice. Establishing a chemistry of trust between the children and ourselves is a great deal more important than to charge into the next three chapters of the social studies text or packaged reading system we have been provided: the same one that was used without success by previous instructors and to which the children are anesthetized by now. Entrap them first in fascination. Entrap them in a sense of merriment and hopeful expectations. Entrap them in "Bird Gardens."

Even if teachers are obliged to use those scripted lessons that are commonly believed to be essential instruments of intellectual control for students in the inner-city schools, I still would urge them, if they're given any choice at all, not to start with these materials until they've built a sense of trust and of good-natured camaraderie between the children and themselves. This may require leveling with the kids, even in some rather subtle ways, about the teacher's own opinion of these mandated materials. It may also call for some discussion of the rules and regulations in the school with which the teacher needs the children to comply in order to protect her, and the class, from undue scrutiny.

One of the first things that I told the children in my class was that, if they wanted me to have the freedom to keep on with certain things they seemed to like, they would have to do a really good job in the one specific area I knew was of particular importance to the principal. As you might have guessed, Francesca, this had no connection to the lessons that I taught or, indeed, to anything that took place once I closed the classroom door. It had to do with keeping perfect order when we left the room to file downstairs to the bathrooms or to recess.

The children got the point of this without my needing to explain it further. They already knew what mattered most within the school and proved themselves to be adept at what amounted to a kind of co-conspiracy between us. When we had to go downstairs or file to another room for whatever purpose, they behaved like little soldiers, walking quietly in line, staying on the right side of the stairway, stopping when I told them to, and scarcely whispering a word.

We were soon rewarded by a visit from the principal. “Mr. Kozol,” she announced as she stood there in the doorway, “I have a compliment to give your class. The entire school is talking about how these children have been filing in the stairways.” She said that this was evidence of how “mature” and “cultured” they’d become. “You can be very proud of them,” she said.

One of the children gave me a big “V” for victory the minute that she left the room. For the next six weeks I didn’t have a single visit from the principal or anybody else in the administration.

I guess that what I learned from this was that if a teacher knows that he or she is likely to disengage from certain of the pedagogic practices established in a school, the best defense is to be very good at certain *other* practices that matter greatly to the school authorities. If a class that’s been unruly for a long, long time suddenly grows calm and well behaved and, superficially at least, obedient to rules that are important to the school, the teacher becomes valuable—and, after a run of teachers who have quit, almost indispensable—because the need to reestablish order in that classroom comes to be the highest possible priority.

I don’t want to end this letter on a note that seems unfairly to impugn the motives or priorities of principals in general. In your case, I know you feel that you’ve been fortunate to have a good and insightful principal who shares a number of your views on the prescribed curriculum and who also has a bit of mischief in her personality and seems to enjoy and to appreciate that quality in you.

When I walked into your class last week for the first time, you were sitting in that old black rocking-chair surrounded by your students, who were gathered on the reading rug, some of them with their knees scrunched up in front of them, others lying on their stomachs leaning on their elbows. You said that most of them at that point couldn’t read or write more than about a dozen words, but you were slowly turning the pages of a word-and-picture book you told me you had loved since you were a child, and you were reading the story to them in that special voice you have which seems to make each sentence sound like something irresistibly delectable. Even the tiny boy, Arturo, whom you referred to as your “little bear,” who came into your classroom, as you put it, knowing “almost nothing about anything,” was leaning on his elbows looking up at you with a kind of dreamy adoration.

I know how hard you’re working with him now to bring him into the big world of letters, sounds, and numbers; but even by that morning, only four weeks after school began, you had already won his

over somehow to the very nice idea that he would be surrounded this year by a veil of tenderness and beauty. He obviously felt safe with you and was in the early throes of a child's first love for his teacher.

I saw you give a few quick "looks" to one of your whisperers and squirmers who was finding it extremely hard to pay attention. But you never let your voice turn cold, and your eyes and those of the restless child met each other in that very candid way that seems to say, "Okay, we understand each other. Now back to the story!"

The children had known you only for a month, but the chemistry had already set in. No curriculum, no rules, no lists of "standards," no externally established regimens, however good or wise they may appear to some, can substitute for this. That bond of trust and tenderness comes first. Without that, everything is merely dutiful—and, generally, deadening. It is not for dutiful aridity that people who love children become teachers.

CHAPTER THREE

Reaching Out to Get to Know the Parents of Our Children

Dear Francesca,

Thank you for inviting me to come and visit with your class on Halloween. It was fun, and I was glad to meet the parents of so many of your children.

And, in answer to your question: No! I don't think you were being unfair in the least in saying that too little help is given to young teachers, before they begin to teach, in thinking about ways in which to build a good relationship with parents. It's one of the most important challenges a teacher faces, and I think this is particularly so when racial issues are at stake within a school, for instance when most of the faculty is white but almost all the children are black or Hispanic. I also agree that it's even more important to reach out with special care to parents who may seem at first to have the least involvement in, or least sustained commitment to, the education of their children.

Obviously, there will always be some parents who, for complicated reasons of their own, may not be responsive even to the best attempts a teacher makes in this regard. Still, I think it's all too easy for young teachers, even quite unconsciously, to write off the parents who are not cooperative at first, instead of trying to discover why it is that some of them will not respond to messages that we send home or seem reluctant to show up for meetings that we schedule. One of the most common statements that I hear from first-year teachers is that parents of the children with the greatest problems are the ones who never seem to make it to class meetings, or to schoolwide meetings, or to individual appointments to which we invite them to discuss the challenges their children face. "She never shows up" or "shows up late" or "seems uncomfortable and edgy." Principals sometimes also note that these are the same parents who do not support the PTA or volunteer to help out with a school trip or a "Pumpkin Fair" or other school activities.

The parents who are most reliable, and most cooperative, those whom the media refer to as "the savvy parents," quickly win the loyalty of teachers because they are genuinely helpful. They also tend to share more of the social styles and the value systems of the teachers, so that teachers feel a natural rapport with them and find it easy to converse with them. In the case of less cooperative parents, on the other hand, I've known many teachers who throw up their hands and, out of sheer impatience or a feeling of futility, give up on any serious attempts to engage their interest and end up never really knowing them.

I always wish I could encourage teachers in these situations to reflect a little on the reasons why some of these parents are resistant to participating in a school's activities and why, when they try to do so, many seem uneasy, even vaguely hostile, and reluctant to speak candidly to teachers. When

was a teacher in Roxbury, it soon became apparent that a number of such parents, who had been given a rockbottom education in some of the same schools 15 or 20 years before, looked upon these schools as places of remembered misery and failure and prolonged years of humiliation. So, even at the age of 28 or 35, they were still uncomfortable in coming to a school and were also insecure about their capability for speaking cogently to teachers about literacy skills, for instance, which in many cases they themselves did not possess.

These were the parents, for example, who did not speak standard English fluently, who typically used double negatives, and verbs like “axed” instead of “asked,” a common mispronunciation in some inner-city neighborhoods. They were aware that this was viewed as “ghetto talk” by principals and teachers, with the consequence that they were viewed with subtle disrespect, or feared that they would be so viewed, by middle-class administrators. They didn’t want to be subjected to embarrassment and therefore spoke as little as they could at classroom meetings and gave terse responses to the questions they were asked, which was interpreted as evidence of lack of dedication to their children.

Some of these parents had good reasons to distrust their children’s principals, who were not always open with them about serious problems in a school and often spoke to them in pedagogical jargon that was not informative but functioned as a barrier to real communication, a pattern that some principals, unhappily, continue to this day. Only a few years ago in the South Bronx, for instance, the principal of P.S. 65, a school I’ve visited off and on for more than a decade because I’ve known many children who were students there, refused to level with the parents when the school was facing a high turnover of teachers, which had done tremendous damage to the academic progress of some of the classes at the school.

One of the children I knew well, a charming little girl whose nickname was Pineapple, had no less than seven different teachers in two years. This was not as bad as what my students underwent in Roxbury, but it dealt a heavy blow to Pineapple’s basic skills in math and reading and would leave her thoroughly demoralized about her own abilities for several years, despite the fact that she was obviously very bright and was an eager and ambitious student.

Three years later, her younger sister, Angelina, whom I’d known since she was four, was in a fifth grade class whose teacher quit one morning without warning—as it happened, on a day when I was visiting. The principal couldn’t find another teacher for the class, so the children were assigned to younger grades in which they were given little more than “busy work” for several weeks. The parents, who, by sheer coincidence, had to come to school that morning to receive report cards, which were given to them by the principal, were not told their children’s teacher had walked out. And the principal tried to make sure that I wouldn’t learn about this either, by not allowing me to visit Angelina’s class, even when I so requested, and by not explaining to me that, if I insisted upon going to her room, I would find no children and no teacher there. She knew that Angelina’s parents were close friends of mine and was concerned that I’d relay this information to them, which I surely would have done, in order to enable them to take whatever action still was possible on her behalf.

Good principals are candid with the parents of their students; but there are others who put up a wall of distance and denial that creates an atmosphere of cynicism and distrust among the people of the neighborhood. So even while administrators may deplore that parents of the kids in greatest trouble never show up for school meetings, many of them manage to make sure that those who do

show up learn virtually nothing that can help them to defend their children's interests.

At my school in Roxbury, the principal repeatedly complained that parent meetings she announced would be attended typically by only a few dozen parents at the most, and she made unkind remarks about the “culturally deficient values of the Negro parents” who, she said, unlike the previous generation of white parents at the school, were “not committed to their children's education.” But the meetings that she held were stiff, perfunctory affairs, never very friendly and not terribly informative. Despite the cupcakes and the cookies that were set out for the parents in a show of hospitality, she seemed to find it hard to loosen up enough to make the parents feel that they were really welcome in the building. If she had a capability for warmth or humor, it was well concealed. The parents who did come to these meetings tried their best to be polite, would nibble at the cookies and attempt to smile in reaction to the frozen smile that the principal displayed.

At first, as a new teacher, I accepted the opinion, widely stated in the school, that the parents were to blame for all of this somehow—although, in retrospect, I can't imagine how. It was one of the very few black women on the faculty who suggested to me that the parents were intimidated by the principal and that the school appeared to them as something like a fortress to which they were given entrance only in submissive roles that made them feel like mute observers and discouraged them from coming back a second time.

My own students, as I've noted, had a dozen substitute teachers prior to the time I was assigned to them. So it didn't seem surprising to me that not many of their parents thought it worth their while to come up to class and talk with me. How long, after all, could they expect that I'd be there? On an impulse, finally, I started visiting the parents of my children after school, driving to their homes in the late afternoons or early evenings and just knocking on their doors.

Some of the parents would look alarmed to see me at their door and would think their child had done something wrong. (Home visits were generally made only by attendance officers or social workers when a child had been truant or had badly misbehaved.) When I explained that I was simply in the neighborhood and wanted to stop by and meet them, I was almost always asked to come inside and was usually asked to stay and visit for a while. If it was near suppertime, parents would often ask if I'd had dinner yet and, if I said I hadn't, would insist that I sit down and have something to eat with them. Sometimes, too, I brought my girlfriend with me, which turned out to make things more relaxed and natural.

I got the impression that the parents liked this opportunity to show us hospitality. And meeting them on their own turf, rather than within the school, seemed to free them from the shyness or anxiety they otherwise might feel. I got to know a lot about my students in these visits, but they also helped me to break down the incorrect assumptions I'd imbibed during my college years from reading some authoritative-sounding works of sociology about the parents of black children.

I soon discovered, for example, that not all the children's homes were “bare of books,” as some sociologists I'd read had either stated or implied. And even parents who were only marginally literate were familiar often with at least some passages of writing that had special meaning or historic significance for people in the African-American community. One of the parents who insisted that I “sit down right there at that table” and let her prepare me something good to eat introduced me for the

first time to the name of Langston Hughes, of whom, like all the other authors of the Harlem Renaissance, I'd never heard at Harvard even though I was a literature major—a reflection, possibly of yet another kind of “deprivation” than the version urban sociologists tended to emphasize.

I later told my principal about these visits, thinking she'd be pleased with me because one of the catch-cries of that era in the Boston schools was “to bring the school and neighborhood close together.” Instead, however, she expressed dissatisfaction and she told me I had made a bad mistake which was not in keeping with “appropriate professional behavior,” by making visits to my students' homes. “Parents will not respect you if they see you in that way,” she said. When I asked her what she meant by “that way,” she explained, “In an unprotected social situation.”

“Let the parents come up to *you*” (our school was at the top of a hill)—“don't you go down *them*.” She said I'd lose professional respect if I permitted them to know me on a social basis in the homes, or in a store, or on the street. She also said it was especially unwise to bring my girlfriend with me. “You never know,” she cautioned me, “what somebody might think....”

This was the first time I had heard the term “professional behavior” used to indicate the opposite of natural behavior. It puzzled me then, and it still does. I didn't believe I'd forfeited my dignity by making friendships with some of my students' families. Much to the reverse, I found it led to long-awaited breakthroughs with some of the students in my room and, best of all, that parents who had not come up to school before now did so, if not frequently, at least on some occasions.

Novice teachers often tell me they've been cautioned, in the same way I was, to be wary of the neighborhoods in which they teach. Physical dangers are evoked most often, but I suspect the physical risks of visiting our students' homes or walking in the streets in which they play are less significant than something more akin to an emotional uneasiness about the act of crossing lines between two worlds of race and social standing. I also think that crossing lines like these as often and as comfortably as we can will teach us more than any of those classes offered frequently to educate students about “multicultural relationships,” as useful as some of those classes are.

If we only care about establishing relationships with confident and better-educated parents, we need never leave our citadels. But if we want to get beyond that circle of the marginally middle class and reach out to parents who are less empowered and less trustful of us at the start, and on a basis that is *not* perfunctory and psychologically unequal, I don't think we should accept the definition of “professional behavior” as my principal interpreted the term and as it is still conveyed to many first-year teachers.

If our goal as teachers is to serve our children in the best ways that we can, and if it helps us in that effort to learn something of their parents and the lives they lead at home, I don't think we ought to worry whether parents may consider us less worthy of respect when they discover that we lead real lives, and eat real meals, and even maybe like to spend our free time with our girlfriend or our boyfriend. Psychologically healthy people are not likely to be damaged by permitting parents to discover their humanity.

I noticed in your class on Halloween that almost every child's mother, and a good number of fathers too, were in that room. When the children sang the “Pumpkin Song” they had rehearsed with

you and suddenly went blank and, for a moment, couldn't come up with a single word, I noticed that the parents looked protectively at *you*, as if they didn't want you to be disappointed.

At the end of the party, you got lots of hugs, not only from the little ones. Your eyes were glowing. You looked so happy and so much at ease among the mothers who were chatting with you by the blackboard while the children, in their pumpkin costumes, got their coats and backpacks from the closet and lined up beside the door.

I know you'd made a few home-visits by that time and that you had given out your cell phone number to the parents and that some of them would call you when they had a question about homework or their child's class behavior. But I could also tell that many of the parents had begun to feel affectionate to you, as if you were a friend to them already.

I wish that students from a school of education could have been there in that room. They would have gotten a wonderful sense of what it's like when somebody who's not afraid to open up her private world a tiny bit, and doesn't feel she has to tighten up her personality to gain respect, is given the reward of loyalty and trust by those whom *she* has trusted with the knowledge of the human being she really is.

CHAPTER FOUR

Teaching the Young, but Learning from the Old

A Cautionary Letter

Dear Francesca,

You've asked me several times what helped me most in getting through that difficult first year at P.S. 30 in Roxbury. It's not an easy question, because I have never been quite sure of what it was that gave me the stamina to keep on in that classroom, which was commonly referred to, at the time when I was transferred there, as "the worst class in the building" and whose students were described to me by one of the tougher teachers at the school as "simply a rotten group of kids."

I suspect one of the answers, as you probably surmised from my last letter, is the friendship I was able to establish with a number of the parents. But, in strictly pedagogic terms, the greatest help came from an older teacher, not a whole lot older, but a woman who'd been working at the school for six or seven years and, apart from her real gifts as an instructor, had already learned to navigate the complicated politics within the building.

She was a special education teacher, one of the best I've ever had a chance to watch close-up in her interaction with her pupils, and had been assigned the students, mostly boys, who were working at the lowest levels. Many of them had neurological or psychiatric disabilities, but others were children who had nothing wrong with them, in clinical respects, but who had disrupted other classes and whom other teachers couldn't bring under control.

Fortunately, she was in the classroom next to mine and had grown acquainted with the children in my class throughout the months before I was assigned to them. She knew what they'd been going through and was therefore able to advise me on the problems of specific children and the academic status of the class in general. If it were not for the multitude of good suggestions she kept passing on to me from day to day, and the personal encouragement she gave me at the ends of days when almost everything seemed to go wrong, I'm not certain I'd have had the courage to remain within that room.

Some of the young teachers whom I've known at P.S. 30, which for many years was one of the better elementary schools in the South Bronx, have told me how much they relied upon the same kind of support from a number of the older teachers in the building. One of those older teachers was my close friend Louis Bedrock, who had been working at the school for more than 15 years. Another was an African-American woman, Frances Dukes, in whose second grade class I loved to visit because of the masterful but never over-bearing way she guided children who had learning problems, or restless

children who were easily distracted, back into the strong, demanding rhythms of the schoolday she had charted out for them. A magnificent teacher, who flooded her room with children's books, every one of which she told me she had read and treasured through the years, she had a quiet but commanding look of earned authority within her eyes.

When children misbehaved, she never seemed to need to speak an angry word but stood right there in front of them, folded her arms, and looked directly at them, as their grandmothers might do. The younger teachers loved her and turned to her for comfort and support. Some of them came to think of her as if she were *their* mother or grandmother.

I was in her classroom on the last day of the year before she left the school and went into retirement. Strict as she tried to be, she couldn't keep from crying as the children came up shyly to her desk and handed her the letters they had written her and which, as children often do, some had folded over nearly half a dozen times into tiny packages the size of postage stamps, before she said goodbye to them forever.

This memory of Frances Dukes comes back to me because I think that many first-year teachers miss the opportunity to take advantage of the years of rich experience and of accumulated wisdom about children that the most effective older teachers can convey to them. In their conversations with me, some of these young people give me the impression that they look upon the veteran teachers at their schools as unsophisticated or not "innovative" in whatever way that term is being used, depending on the package of most recent innovations that may happen to be held in favor in a given period of years. I'm sure I was guilty of that error many times, even when I later taught in a much better school, with a larger number of extremely good and seasoned teachers, than the one in which I started out in Roxbury.

You once told me of a problem like this that developed in the year when you were student-teaching at a school in Philadelphia, although at the start, if I remember this correctly, you did not perceive it as a problem, as I know you do today. You described a cluster of young teachers in the building who attached themselves to one another, spoke of their frustrations and their insecurities with one another, worked on lessons with each other, and, because they shared so many of your tastes and values and had come from backgrounds not unlike your own, became your closest friends within the school—a situation of which sounds natural and, on the face of it, seems to make perfect sense.

Unwittingly, however, as you later recognized, the camaraderie that you established with these other teachers of your age had the effect of leading you to pretty much ignore the older teachers in the building, those who had been working there for decades in some cases and who would remain there after most of the young teachers you'd befriended had moved on to other schools or districts or, as you have told me, gave up teaching altogether.

This is the part that you have said now makes you "squirm" when you think back upon the consequences that this had: Most of the older teachers in the school were African-American. All of the young women who became your friends happened to be white. Without so intending, you'd been drawn into a situation that was bound to polarize the faculty between the young newcomers and the relatively "set" and staid and perhaps not always terribly exciting veterans, whom some of your friends appeared to view as obstacles to "new ideas," much as bright teenagers often have an unkind

tendency to dismiss or denigrate the values or opinions of their parents.

This may have been an accurate perception in some cases. Every ethnic group, it seems, turns out its share of stick-in-the-mud warhorses who refuse to reexamine any of their practices, no matter how they may change within the world or in the neighborhood around them. Still, as you have noted since, there were also plenty of terrific older teachers in that school with whom it would have been to your advantage to establish close relationships. And, as you now recognize, the cliquishness of that small group of relatively privileged young women to whom you'd attached yourself inevitably left those older teachers with the sense that they were being viewed with disrespect or generational hostility. Add to this the racial factor, and the end result, as you've observed, was a kind of covert sense of warfare between young and old, and white and black, within the precincts of one building.

Some of the young white teachers I have met, several of whom came into public education through one of the "fast-track" programs to which I've referred, have found themselves in situations not unlike the one that you described. A number of them, unhappily, have subsequently left the public schools and gravitated into semi-private charter schools, or joined with others of their age to create a new school of their own, in which they give me the impression that they feel relieved at being liberated from the "oldtime" faculty and principals with whom they worked before. More than a few of them I'm sad to say, are now supporting privatizing schemes.

In your case, Francesca, it was clear that you would never turn in that direction. The entire process by which you began to reexamine your experience in that first year in Philadelphia and your persistence in believing that, no matter what frustrations you had undergone, the ultimate struggle for the education of our children will, and must, take place within the borders of the public schools themselves, is one of those redemptive stories that we seldom hear about in media reports. The media more often celebrate those whiz-kid graduates of colleges like Yale and Princeton who abandon public schools in order, as the privatizing forces claim, to "break the mold" of education by creating what admittedly, are sometimes quite impressive schools but, in the larger scheme of things, are little less than boutique institutions.

After my first year in Boston, I regret to say that, for a year or two, I also grew intrigued by the appealing possibilities. Looking back upon my state of mind during that period, I recognize an element not just of natural impatience, even healthy indignation, at the terrible conditions I encountered at the school in which I'd worked, but also of a brisk, smart-aleck certitude that within mere ten months I'd somehow learned enough to turn my back upon the efforts of those tens of thousands of good teachers elsewhere in my city and throughout the nation who remained within the trenches of the public schools that served the vast majority of children.

Some good advice from wiser and much older friends brought me to reconsider the direction I was heading. Instead, I sought and found another teaching job at an elementary school in which the principal was empathetic with at least some of the practices I was attracted to. And even though she frequently would sit me down to counsel me on errors I was making—I had a hard time learning to teach math effectively at first, one of several areas in which my inexperience was evident—she did this in a manner that was not censorious and was almost always helpful.

This was in a suburban school that had recently become part of an interdistrict integration program

that enabled inner-city children, on a voluntary basis, to enroll in some of the top-rated systems just outside of Boston. So I had the opportunity for the first time to see black children who had started out in several of the city's bleakest and most deeply segregated schools enrolled in classes in a pleasant looking and uncrowded building—I now had 19 students in my class, instead of 35—where virtually all of them made far more rapid progress than they'd ever made before. The parents of the kids from Roxbury seemed to feel at ease when they made visits to the school, because the principal was effortlessly open and relaxed with them, and she was sincerely grateful that they trusted her to educate their children.

She could be strict with teachers when she had to be, but she was also an engagingly good-natured person, a romantic soul at heart who seemed to look on life and childhood and education as a limitle adventure. She liked to shock me and the other teachers by telling us of what she called her “youthful indiscretions” when she was an Army nurse in World War II in Italy, although she never spelled out what those “indiscretions” were, which made them sound more wicked and exciting.

One day, when the children in my class were working on their book reports while listening to music from a tape of operatic tunes I had brought to school, the principal waltzed into the room, grabbed me around the waist, and made me dance with her in front of all my students. I was embarrassed because I'm an awful dancer, but my students thoroughly enjoyed this spectacle and inevitably, teased me later without mercy by their imitations of my awkwardness. My early impressions of administrative cheerlessness in public education dissipated quickly.

You were wise enough not to permit yourself the detour I had briefly taken. I recall your telling me that, when you started looking for a teaching job in Boston, you purposely avoided looking at the charter schools but searched for a position in an ordinary public school and found one before long which the principal appeared to have a nice relationship with parents and a good rapport with children and where she also made it clear, as did several of the older teachers, that you would be welcome on their faculty.

I know you feel you made the right decision. When you told me just before Thanksgiving that your principal had started phoning you at night after you had told her that you'd grown discouraged by the reading difficulties of a number of the children, I remember your relief and the restorative effect that had upon your state of mind. Your voice was full of its old energy again. I also remember the encouragement you felt when one of the fifth grade teachers, who had had far more experience than you, started coming down into your classroom in the afternoons and sharing with you challenges that she was facing too.

In one of his best-known poems, W. H. Auden wrote of Dr. Sigmund Freud, “All that he did was to remember like the old and be honest like children.” A first-year teacher who is only 22 or 23 years old obviously cannot “remember like the old,” but he or she *can* learn not only about teaching practice but, often more important, about moral steadiness and personal self-confidence from those who can remember.

I know that Auden's poetry or, as you have put it, “poetry of almost any kind at all”—even poetry of temperament and teaching style—does not tend to be included in those “methods and materials teaching” courses or those “educational foundations” courses that are standard elements of teaching

sample content of Letters to a Young Teacher

- [read *The Pomodoro Technique*](#)
- [read online *The Returned, Part I \(Star Trek: New Frontier, Book 19\)* book](#)
- [click *A Fistful of Knuckles \(Life on Mars, Book 2\)*](#)
- [download Helvetet inifrÅ¥n: Femton Å¥r i Sveriges stÅ¶rsta brottsorganisation.pdf](#)

- <http://honareavalmusic.com/?books/Knitting-Without-Needles--A-Stylish-Introduction-to-Finger-and-Arm-Knitting.pdf>
- <http://poulterandmac.com/?books/The-Returned--Part-I--Star-Trek--New-Frontier--Book-19-.pdf>
- <http://sidenoter.com/?ebooks/View-Updating-and-Relational-Theory.pdf>
- <http://thewun.org/?library/European-Cookies-for-Every-Occasion.pdf>