Letters to a Young Teacher

In the following passages, adapted from Mr. Kozol’s newest book, the author and a beginning first-grade teacher share their reflections on the life of a teacher, the kids they have come to know, and how to put the fun back into learning.

By Jonathan Kozol

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’s 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 of 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
I sometimes think that every 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.
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heartrending sounds — “Oooh! Oooh! Oooh! Oooh!” — 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 on 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 every 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, in which the voices of our teachers are too seldom heard, back from the distant kingdom of intimidation and abstraction — lists of “mandates,” “sanctions,” “incentives,” “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 policy 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 either. 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 squirming bodies and their vulnerable temperaments, their broken pencil points, their upturned faces when the teacher comes and leans down by their desk 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 in 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.

Jonathan

— Winning the Heart of Captain Black —

Dear Francesca,

I’ve been wrestling with your question about children who come into school with a defiant attitude that seems to challenge every effort that we make to teach them and who seem to mock our very presence in the classroom, as if they’ve decided in advance that we are people they won’t like and who probably should not be trusted.

I meet many children like this sitting in the classrooms of the public schools I visit in the poorest sections of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. These are usually the hardest kids to teach and pose the greatest challenges to teachers. And this is especially the case with teachers who are just beginning their careers and whose initial insecurity may function as an invitation to such children to confront them and to break down their self-confidence right from the start. Some of these children are so outright rude, sarcastic, and denunciatory to the teacher — and so loaded with hostility to other children — that they singlehandedly can bring almost all serious instruction to a halt.

Many young teachers, as compassionate and patient as they try to be, tend to react to kids like these by making what is basically a surgical decision: “I cannot do a good job for the other children in the room if I permit this boy to take up so much of my time and ruin things for everybody else.” So, even though it goes against their principles, they tend to isolate that child in whatever way they can and try to lock him out of their attention for extended periods of time.

I noticed, when I visited your class the first time, that there was a child like this in your room who gave you so much trouble that you had to put him at a table in the corner where he could not constantly distract the other children from their work. I knew that you

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felt bad about this because you reluctantly conceded that you thought he was a fascinating child. You said, “I kind of love him for his style, his defiance, but he has no common sense and absolutely no politeness.”

His tall and loose-limbed body had a gangly and slightly comical appearance, which I thought that he exploited like a stage comedian when he was walking through the room. You said, “He acts as if he’s made of Silly Putty. He never just sits down like other children do. He makes it a theatrical performance just to get back to his chair.” You also told me that the first week of the year, before you put him at the table in the corner, he vaulted over the back of his chair one afternoon and kicked someone behind him in the face.

On the morning I was there, he didn’t strike me as malicious to the other children. He had his head down on his table, pressed against his folded arms, and simply seemed to have decided to ignore you and the other students altogether. When I went and stood there near him in his corner and said “Hi” to him, he looked me over briefly and then blew me off without a word. He didn’t even bother to lift up his head. He just sized me up from where he was and closed his eyes again.

One of the other kids, however, told me, “He is mean!” And there was one week, as I recall — it might have been the week after I visited — when you said you had to ask your principal to keep him in her office for the first part of each day because he kept on getting up and wandering around the room and looking over children’s desks and doing irritating things like grabbing their erasers or their pencils.

The only time I saw him acting somewhat less resistant was when he was on the reading rug one day while you were reading from that lovely book about “the grouchy ladybug,” one of the many books by Eric Carle I noticed in your room. He obviously liked the story and paid good attention for a while, although even then he kept on pushing other kids who were taking up the space he seemed to think he needed for himself so he could stretch out on his belly and lean on his elbows and look up at you as you were pointing to the pictures.

As soon as the story was over, however, he reverted to his customary manner and, by a circuitous route which I thought was clearly meant to be annoying to you and the other children, he made his way back to his table, where he thoroughly turned you off as if he had a TV clicker and decided that your program wasn’t good enough to watch.

The next time I was there, I saw that you had moved him to a desk beside the blackboard where you had a better chance to keep an eye on him and where you could try to bring him in from time to time to join some of the class activities, a few of which, like moving around those red and blue and yellow bars of different lengths, he seemed to find intriguing. You told me that he finally confessed to you that he had gotten bored from doing almost nothing all day long and gave you to understand that he was now prepared to let you make his life more interesting, if you had the skill to do it, for the hours when he had to be in class.

In November, when I visited again, he didn’t look so hostile anymore but still would interrupt the other kids while they were working on their journals or were doing independent reading, and he still kept getting into quarrels about pencils, colored crayons, or whatever other objects he could grab from other children’s desks and then insist they were his own. When he did this, I was impressed to see you use your sternest-looking frown — you got quite good at that — to get him to stay relatively quiet and polite at least for periods of time.

You told me that his name was Dobie but that he insisted upon being known as “Captain Black.” And I recall that, on an impulse just before Thanksgiving, you made a visit to his home and brought him a box of brownies you had baked for him. You said that you were shocked to find he didn’t have a bedroom but was sleeping on a small bed in the same room as his sister and his mom. But you also told me you were “a nice lady,” “the best teacher in my school.” You said that you were startled when he told his mother you were “a nice lady,” “the best teacher in my school.” How could he possibly say that to his mother when he gave you so much trouble all day long? And he gave you at least what you said was “a ho-hum hug” when it was time to leave.

In academic terms, the first sign of a breakthrough I could sense was when he started filling up his spiral pad with bits of narrative that opened up some of those angry memories and fears he’d been reluctant to reveal to you before. You said that you began to use these sentences to introduce him to the very grown-up task of looking at his own words and rewriting them so that the vowels, some of which you said that he already knew but stubbornly ignored, began to go where they belonged. After you had told him that old saying about “silent e,” which, when it follows a consonant, makes the vowel that comes just before the consonant into a “long O” or “long A” or “E” or “I” or “U” — I think you said it makes that vowel “brave enough to say its name” — you told me he kept “jumping” you by tell-
ing you this rule, as if you’d never heard of it, each time that it applied.

It was only eight weeks earlier that you had thought of recommending him for a “referral,” which would probably have led to his assessment as a boy who was “developmentally delayed” or “psychologically impaired” or something worse — one of those many labels that so often end up as the self-fulfilling prophecies that stigmatize a child not just for one year but for the course of his career in public school.

I try to bend over backwards not to start extracting overly big meanings from small spurts of progress. In doing so, we tend to dwarf and overstate the first few modest steps that previously resistant children suddenly begin to take once the dam that held them back is broken and at least a little stream of curiosity and stirrings of their intellectual vitality begin to flow. Nonetheless, if there’s a lesson to be learned from his experience with you, and yours with him — because relationships like these have always struck me as a kind of complicated and mysterious duet between a teacher and a very vulnerable child — it may be simply this: None of us should make the error of assuming that a child who is hostile to us at the start, or who retreats into a sullenness and silence or sarcastic disregard for everything that’s going on around him in the room, does not have the will to learn and plenty of interesting stuff to teach us too, if we are willing to invest the time and the inventiveness to penetrate his seemingly implacable belief that grown-ups do not mean him well and that, if he trusts us, we will probably betray or disappoint him.

I do not mean, Francesca, in saying what I did about assigning “labels” to a student, that children who have serious psychological problems, or other kinds of problems such as speech pathology or difficulty in the processing of words they hear, cannot benefit tremendously from being given extra help by speech or language specialists, for instance, or by school psychologists. Clinical needs, when they’re real, require clinical solutions. And special education teachers, like the one who taught a number of severely damaged children in the room right next to mine in Boston and who helped me so much at the start of my career, are priceless assets in a school in almost any neighborhood at all.

At the same time, I think that teachers need to be as patient as they can, and rely on every bit of ingenuity that they command, before they assign these kids to categories out of which, as they move from grade to grade, they sometimes never can escape. “It becomes a trap,” you said. “It’s so much easier for children to go in than to get out.” In Dobie’s case I think that time has proven that you made the right decision.

When Dobie finally started writing longer, more coherent entries in his spiral pad, and when the floodgates opened up enough so he could vent more of the anguish he had hidden up until that time, you told me you were startled once again to find out how much turbulence and social violence he had already undergone. Turning that pent-up anguish into satisfaction at the progress he was making in his literacy skills may not have saved him from the other sorrows and dangers he’s likely to encounter in the years ahead. Even if the progress he is making now should be sustained during his next four years in elementary school, there are the ever-present risks that he will face when he moves on into the less protective world of middle school.

Still, victories are victories. And I recall that when he wrote that powerful piece of narrative for you about the Sunday afternoons on which he visited his father, who was in a prison out in western Massachusetts (I think you said that he’s still there) several hours from his home, you said it made you cry. You told me that you put it on your bedroom wall.

It seems that Dobie has accepted you at last and sees you as a special friend. The letter you showed me that he gave you just before the holidays will, I bet, soon earn a place up on your wall as well. “Dear Lady Mamalade,” he wrote — you told me he had asked you what you liked for breakfast and you said that you loved orange marmalade and butter on your toast — “I think yur wunder full, plus also cheezy, plus also good and wunder full. Love, Captin Black.” I liked especially what he squeezed in down at the bottom of the page: “PS.
And you better tell me Thank You for this letter be kuz I workt hard on it!"

You said he told you that this was your Christmas present — “the only one” you’d get from him, he added. It’s hard to imagine any other present that was likely to have made you happier. If I were Dobie’s teacher, I’d be very bit as proud as you were to receive a letter like that from a child who was so determined to dislike you when he walked into your classroom in September.

You told me once you knew that you were fortunate to have a class of only 20 children and one in which there weren’t a bunch of other kids who started out distrustful you the way that Dobie did. I know a teacher in New York who had three boys like Dobie in her class last year and several girls with very hostile attitudes as well. And these were older children — I think they were third-graders — and it was a big class, nearly 30 students, so she couldn’t give each of these kids the time and the attention that she knew they needed and deserved. She told me that she often cried at night out of frustration.

This is why I think that class size is so terribly important. In a class of 20 children or, as I saw not long ago in one of the elementary schools not far from Boston, only 16 children in one room, kids who come into the class with an edgy attitude but a lot of pent-up energy, as Dobie did, are far more likely to be given personal attention than are children in the badly overcrowded classes that I visit in so many other inner-city schools. The likable humor that emerged at last in Dobie’s personality and the powerful feelings that he finally got down on paper get “locked in” for kids like these. When they’re not disrupting class, they sit and brood and look as if they feel encaged. It’s like seeing spirit trapped in stone.

Langston Hughes wrote something strong and memorable about the often-gifted little rebels who, because of their rebellious ways, are written off too rapidly and ultimately penalized severely by society:

Nobody loves a genius child.
“Kill him — and let his soul run wild!”

Well, all these little rebels who begin by flaunting their distrust and adversarial abilities in front of teachers in the first months of the school year are not “genius children.” But many of these children do have gifts to bring us if we grant ourselves — and if our schools allow us — time enough to listen to them carefully and also time to forge the subtle bond that will permit them to reveal themselves.

I think that Dobie has been blessed to have you as his teacher, but blessings in the very special world of elementary school have always had a lovely reciprocity. I can tell from the elation and the tenderness for Dobie that were so apparent when you phoned me here last night that you feel you have been blessed by knowing him as well. He dared to open up his heart to you. You made that possible.

Jonathan

— Wiggly and Wobbly and Out! —

Dear Francesca,

I promised I would think about the question that you asked me in the playground of your school the other day after the children were dismissed and most of them had already gone home. Shaniqua and another child were still waiting for their mothers and were studying some kind of very big and ugly-looking bug they had discovered crawling on a spot of grass that had appeared as the snow was melting.

While you were watching them, you asked me whether anyone I know who’s setting education policy these days ever speaks about the sense of fun that children have, or ought to have, in public school or the excitement that they feel when they examine interesting creatures such as beetle bugs and ladybugs and other oddities of nature that they come upon — or even merely whether they are happy children and enjoy the hours that they spend with us in school.

The truth is that in all the documents I read that come from Washington, or from the various state capitals, or from the multitude of government-supported institutes where goals are set and benchmarks for performance of our students are spelled out in what is usually painstaking detail, I never come upon words such as “delight” or “joy” or “curiosity” — or, for that matter, “kindness,” “empathy,” or “compassion for another child.” Nothing, in short, that would probably come first for almost any teacher working with young children.

There is no “happiness index” for the children in our public schools, and certainly not for children in the inner-city schools, where happiness is probably the last thing on the minds of overburdened state officials. Perhaps there ought to be. The school boards measure almost every other aspect of the lives our children lead in school but never ask if they look forward to the days they spend with us.

Fortunately, there are many teachers who, no matter what pressures the states and federal government impose, refuse to banish these considerations and, by
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their nature, could not do so even if they tried. I told you once of a young teacher whom I met some years ago in the South Bronx whose name was April Gamble, a perfect name, I thought, for someone in the springtime of her life who was starting out on her career in the third grade. Her students had sent me one of those fat envelopes of friendly letters children sometimes send to writers, asking if I’d visit them someday when I was in their neighborhood. One of the children wrote, “My name is Pedro. I am 7 years old. Would you come and visit us for 6 hours so we could tell you everything about our life?” He signed his letter, “From my heart to my eyes, Pedro.”

I couldn’t resist those invitations, so one day I called the principal and went to meet the class. Pedro happened to be sick that day, so I didn’t get to meet him. But I got to know some of the other children in the classroom pretty well and later kept in touch with them.

At one point during the morning, the discussion I was having with the children got a little out of hand—you’ve noted that this happens to me now and then—and the teacher realized that I wasn’t sure how I should handle things. She seemed to know exactly what to do.

She rose to her feet and put one hand, with fingers curled up slightly, just beneath her mouth, and curled her other hand in the same way but held it out about twelve inches to the right. I watched with fascination as the class subsided from the chaos I’d created and the children stood and did the same thing Mrs. Gamble did. All these children with one hand before their mouth, one to the side, and with their eyes directed to the teacher. What was this about?

Then the teacher started humming softly. Then she briefly trilled a melody in her soprano voice, and some of the children started trilling their own voices too. And suddenly I understood: It was an orchestra, and they were the flute section! In their hands were the imaginary flutes. Their little fingers played the notes, and when the teacher bent her head as if she were so deeply stirred by the enchanted music she was hearing that she had to tilt her body in response, the children bent their bodies too.

The principal, who was standing in the doorway, seemed to be as fascinated by the sight of this as I was. I could see that she admired Mrs. Gamble as a teacher but was obviously taken also by the sweetness of her manner—the precision of her fingers on the keys! And then the teacher danced a bit from foot to foot before the children, and I thought of Papageno and Tamino and the lovely tune Tamino plays in Mozart’s Magic Flute, and the children danced from foot to foot as well. And then the music ended and the teacher put away her flute with an efficient and conclusive motion of her hands, and all the children did the same and we began our class discussion once again.

What I remembered later wasn’t only an effective trick for bringing third-grade children who had grown a trifle wild back into a calm and quiet state of mind. It was also the impromptu dance the teacher did, only a step or two, but just enough to fill the moment with gratuitous amusement so that, even in regaining grown-up governance over those joyful little protons and electrons that I’d inadvertently set into motion, she also showed herself to be a woman who was not too overly “mature” or too “professional” to show the happiness she felt at making magic music for the children with a magic, and imaginary, flute.

When Mrs. Gamble trilled her voice and ran her fingers through the air, she didn’t simply play the flute. She also played the playfulness within herself and seemed to play the spirits of the children too. She later told me that one-third of all the children in her class and in the school suffered from asthma, which was common in the South Bronx as a consequence of New York City’s policy of placing toxic installations like waste burners in the neighborhood. You wouldn’t have guessed it on that morning. For a minute there, we might have been a thousand miles from the city in a magic forest where the evening air smells fresh and green and not one of the spirits of the woods has any trouble breathing.

I’ve watched other teachers use their own inventive ways to spice the school day for their children with brief words and moments that are like their evanescent tributes to the need for impulse and for beauty in the classroom. This doesn’t mean that they ignore the necessary skills they need to teach but that they feel the confidence to interweave the teaching of those skills into a context of aesthetic merriment that satisfies and does not enervate the children’s sense of curiosity and joy.

I remember a first-grade class in Minnesota where the bookshelves and the color-coded reading bins were filled with hundreds of children’s books and stories, or-

“Wonderment” is a word you seldom find in any of those documents that tabulate the items of essential knowledge children are supposed to learn.
ganized according to the levels of ability they would require for a child to understand them. Books on bears and worms and caterpillars had positions of particular distinction in the sun-filled corner room in which the class took place. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and some of the other works of Eric Carle were favorites of the children, and for a memorable period of time they had their own real caterpillar in the room, a “woolly bear caterpillar,” as these 6-year-old researchers ascertained with some assistance from their teacher.

On the day the teacher brought him into school, all other class activities came to a halt for a good period of time. He was a beautiful creature, with rich brown and orange hair that looked like fur, and in the weeks that followed, children often slipped out of their chairs to pet him softly with their fingers or simply to study him with wonderment.

The day he disappeared into the gray cocoon that he was spinning was, of course, momentous for the children too. And when he at length emerged as a very splendid tiger moth and the teacher opened the window and he flew away one April afternoon, celebratory rites were held for him but were followed by a study of life cycles among caterpillars and additional small members of his species.

I used the word “wonderment” in speaking of the feelings that the presence of this caterpillar had awakened in the children. That’s another word you seldom find in any of those documents that tabulate the items of essential knowledge children are supposed to learn in order to assume their place someday, as we are told, in the national economy and help to “sharpen our competitive edge” in “the global marketplace.” (I actually saw a “mission statement” with those words posted in an inner-city elementary school not long ago. Why on Earth should kids in elementary school be asked to care about their future role within the global marketplace? Why should teachers foist this mercenary nonsense on them in the first place?)

I loved the reflections that you sent me on the role of whim and wonderment within the classroom. “If at the end of the day,” you said, “I find Arturo standing at the window instead of reading at his seat,” and if you notice that he’s “wide-eyed” and “entranced” by looking at a squirrel in a tree, you said you would not call to him “to sit down and pick up his book.” In fact, you said, “I might even join him there” in order to remember what it feels like to be young enough to take so much amazement in a squirrel. “I won’t be responsible,” you wrote, “for hurrying my children out of that age when many things are interesting and so much is new.”

Even in the presentation of mandated lessons, I’ve noticed that you try hard to adapt them with a sense of playfulness to the concerns that have immediate connections with your children’s lives. The last time I visited your class, I saw a time line posted on the wall above the reading rug. I know that time lines are a commonplace device that first-grade teachers use to introduce their students to a recognition of progressions from one day or month or season to the next. But this was no commonplace variety of time line. I would call it “a time line with a sense of humor.”

In fact, as I remember this, it wasn’t even called a time line. It was called a “Tooth Line,” as the sign you’d written just above it read. Very convincing-looking teeth, which I think you said that you had cut out of a piece of cardboard, had been placed in little slots along the left side of a sheet of something that resembled fiberboard. All the children in the class could find their own teeth somewhere in one of those slots. I saw “Shaniqua’s Tooth,” “Arturo’s Tooth,” “Dobie’s Tooth,” et cetera.

At the top of the chart you had created four “tooth-status” columns. The first column was for teeth that hadn’t yet come loose. The second column was for “Wiggly Teeth,” the third for “Wobbly Teeth.” The...
fourth column was for teeth that had come “Out!” (I liked the exclamation point you put there because it’s a big event for children when they finally lose a tooth, whether or not they get rewarded every time with a quarter or a dollar underneath their pillow.)

As children reported on the status of a tooth, their cardboard tooth would be advanced across the chart to “Wiggly Teeth,” then “Wobbly Teeth,” then “Out!” The thing about this time line that I think had caught the fancy of the children was not only that it had been built upon a series of events that obviously matter very much to 6-year-olds but also that it clearly had been done with a degree of frolicsome intent. “Wiggly” and “wobbly” are fun to say. They’re slightly silly-sounding words. I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s one reason why you picked them.

The teaching of sequences, progressions, and categories is, I know, a very important part of early education. But, as you demonstrated in this instance, there’s no reason why these concepts must be taught in shopworn terms that are external to the students’ lives. Immediacy, and a sense of fun in the immediate, can infiltrate the teaching of these concepts too.

The march of little teeth across that chart was, in itself, inherently amusing. When I asked one of the children which one was her tooth, she went right up and pointed to it. “This one is my tooth,” she said, then stuck her fingers in her mouth to show me which one of her teeth it was. On the chart it said that it was “wiggly,” but after she had moved it around awhile with her forefinger and thumb, she took the cardboard tooth out of its slot and slipped it into “wobbly.” I know that you like to have the children do these things collectively when everyone is seated on the rug. I guess I should have told her to hold off and do it the next morning, but she did it out of impulse.

Francesca, I know this letter, like some others I’ve been writing to you recently, is proving to be more rambling than I intended it to be. But if there’s a common theme in all of this, it has to do with the upholding of a sense of artistry and imaginative creativity on the part of teachers at a time when both are under serious assault. A couple of years ago, a high official in the U.S. Department of Education said that the objective of the White House was “to change the face of reading instruction across the United States from an art to a science,” a statement that could not have brought much comfort to those teachers who believe that books have more to do with artistry than metrics and that teaching children how to read them calls for somewhat different skills than teaching physics or geometry.

But this longing to turn art into science, as it turned out, didn’t stop with reading methodologies. In many schools, it now extends to almost every aspect of the school day and the lives that children lead within it. Artistry and furry caterpillars do not stand much of a chance against these cold winds blowing down from Washington. All the more reason, then, for teachers to resist these policies and to use their ingenuity in every way they can to undermine the consequences of this pseudoscientific push for uniformity.

In a class in North Carolina that I visited last year, the teacher had tacked up a pleasantly defiant poster on one of the classroom walls. “How to Be an Artist” was the heading. “Stay loose, learn to watch snails, plant impossible gardens, . . . make friends with freedom and uncertainty, look forward to dreams. . . .”

The teacher didn’t slight the basic skills. Her low-income students did okay on their exams. But when I asked about the reading method she was using, whether every aspect of her reading lessons was prescribed for her or whether she was free to innovate in any ways at all, she shook her head like someone who was shaking off an irritant — a flea or a mosquito.

“I like to mix it up!” she said and tossed her long hair gleefully, then pivoted around to keep an eye on one of the rambunctious boys sitting in the back part of the room.

I like the way you “mix it up” as well. I hope that many other teachers coming into urban schools will feel the wish to do the same. Down with concerns about “the global marketplace!” Up with “Wiggly” and “Wobbly” and “Out!” Childhood does not exist to serve the national economy. In a healthy nation, it should be the other way around. We have a major battle now ahead of us, not just about the tone and style of a child’s education but about the purposes it should espouse and whether we, as teachers, need to go down on our knees before a brittle business-driven ethos that is not our own. We need the teachers who are coming to our classrooms making up their minds, before they even get here, which side they are on.

Goodbye for Now

Jonathan

Dear Francesca,

This will be my final letter to you for a while. You’ll be traveling with your sister for a good part of the summer, and I’m going to be traveling for several weeks as well.

Before I say goodbye for now, I hope that you will understand if I want to take this opportunity to say a few brief words about a recently departed friend who’s
given me more affirmation of my own ideas about the sensibilities and education of our children than any other grown-up I have known since I was a young teacher.

I suspect you know that I am thinking of Fred Rogers, since I’ve told you how important he became to me as a steadfast presence in my life during the 10 years prior to his death and how hard it is to fully recognize, even to this day, that he is really gone.

I met Mr. Rogers late in 1992 when I was in Pittsburgh to be interviewed at the public television station where “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” was taped. At the end of my interview, as the studio technicians were untangling the wire and the microphone they had attached to me, I heard a voice behind me calling me by my first name as if we already knew each other. There, only a couple feet away, looking exactly as he did on television except that his hair was turning gray, was Mr. Rogers.

He brought me into his studio and, at my request, showed me the closet where he put away his jacket at the start of every show, and then the setup for “The Neighborhood of Make-Believe,” and, naturally, the trolley train. And he introduced me to the man who played the role of Mr. McFeely on the show, all of which impressed me every bit as much as I imagine it might have impressed me about Mario.

Then we sat down on his sofa for the first of many conversations we would have in years to come. He questioned me about my book Savage Inequalities, which I had published earlier that year, and he was so courteous and patient when I gave him rambling or awkward answers (I was at first a little nervous to be chatting suddenly with somebody whose mannerisms and whose face were so familiar to me) that I soon felt utterly at ease and no longer had that sense of something “just a bit unreal” that I usually feel in talking to a person who, to me, belongs within the borders of a TV screen.

From that point on, we spoke on the phone or corresponded with each other every month or so. We also managed to arrange things so that we could meet from time to time, once in Washington, the second time in New York City, where he asked if he could go with me to the South Bronx to meet the kids I wrote about. On that occasion, he asked me first if I thought his presence in the neighborhood might be “intimidating” to the children, a thought that never would have come into my mind. I teased him a little and replied, “I bet they can handle it!” So he said, “Okay! Then let’s go to the Bronx!” When he asked me how I went there from Manhattan, I told him that the quickest way was by the Number 6 train to Brook Avenue. The idea of going on the subway seemed to please him very much.

The ride on the train, the visit to an elementary school where several of my favorite teachers taught, the hours spent with children in the kindergarten classes, the visit we made later to a nearby afterschool, where a little boy named Mario descended on him instantly (and wrapped his arms around his head and gave him a big kiss right in the middle of his forehead, then looked him in the eyes and told him, “Welcome to my neighborhood!”) — all of this became imprinted on my memory as one of the most joyful days I ever spent in the South Bronx.

He later sent me photographs he took that day, assembled in an album with handwritten annotations next to pictures that held special meaning for him. Next to a picture of Mario, who was holding a stuffed animal beneath his arm, he wrote, “This one is my favorite.” In subsequent months and years he kept on asking about Mario.

In retrospect, though, I think it was the teachers we had visited who were most affected by the time he spent with them. He squeezed himself into the kindergarten chairs so that he was at eye level with the children who surrounded him. He questioned them about their lives or objects on their desks or in the room that were of interest to them, and he listened to their answers with his usual respectfulness and did not try to hurry them. He met with teachers in the older grades as well and asked them many questions about children in their classes. One thing that he didn’t ask them about was the test scores of their pupils.

That visit took place in 1996. He made another visit with me to the neighborhood in autumn of 2000. As the momentum for intensive testing of young children and for scripted and didactic methods of instruction rapidly intensified during that period, he told me he had grown increasingly disturbed. The quiet way in which he spoke of his disconsolate reactions to this rising tide of what he viewed as an unnatural severity to children at a vulnerable moment in their lives reinforced my own beliefs more powerfully than any of the words or writings of the more specifically credentialed and established critics of these policies.

He also used to ask about my private life and would then return to something I had mentioned, maybe even six months after I had told it to him. For reasons that I didn’t understand until a little later on, he grew especially attached to my dog, Sweetie Pie.

After Fred had seen a photograph of Sweetie Pie, he began to ask about her all the time and soon began to send her letters, usually for no particular occasion, but always on her birthdays. He would also call her on the
phone at times and ask to speak to her, and, when I put her floppy ear beside the phone, he’d talk to her, and she would sometimes give a good woof in reply.

He must have kept a careful calendar of birthdays of his friends because he never missed one of her birthdays and, if we were not at home, he always sang her “Happy Birthday” on my answering machine. He later told me she reminded him of his first dog, “whom,” he said, “I loved beyond all measure. . . . I got her for taking terrible-tasting medicine when I was 3. She lived until I was 21. You can imagine how I loved her.”

A few years after that, when Sweetie Pie grew ill with a malignant tumor on her nose that pressed against her optic nerve and threatened to invade the bone around her brain, he asked me for repeated updates on the chemotherapy she had to undergo. At one point that fall, her right eye had to be removed, and I hesitated for almost a month to tell Fred of her worsening condition. He wrote me a long and worried letter in which he said, “I hope your silence about Sweetie Pie doesn’t mean the worst.” It was, by then, the middle of December. He didn’t mention in his letter that he too had recently been diagnosed with a malignancy. That letter about Sweetie Pie was the final message I received from him. Seven weeks later I read in the Boston Globe that he had died.

Francesca, I’ve spoken of the emphasis Mr. Rogers used to place on leaving open space and open time for children to express themselves and, when they do, the need for us to listen to them carefully. Now he’s gone, and we are in an age of stern intentionality in which the possibilities for leaving open space and open times in which our children can reveal their secrets and unveil their souls have been diminished greatly in too many of our schools. The sacredness he saw in children has now been supplanted by more chastening concerns as to their future economic value, their “utility” and “productivity,” words and ideas, as you can imagine, that he did not like at all.

Fred had studied theology as a young man, as I think I may have told you, and had been ordained in the Presbyterian denomination with “a ministry to children.” But he also identified with children in a manner more intrinsic to his personality than that which is perhaps suggested by a word like “ministry.” He wrote a song in the last year of his life, one he never had a chance to finish, that he called “The Child Who’s in Me Still, and Sometimes Not So Still!” I love that title. It reminds me of the look of sheer exhilaration on his face when we were riding to the South Bronx on the subway. He seemed as excited as a young boy might have been by all the lights and noises and the people coming through the train to sell CDs and flashlight batteries and those many other items that are sold, illegally perhaps, for bargain prices to the passengers.

That song inevitably makes me think, as well, of all those easily exhilarated and impulsive first-year teachers that I meet and many older teachers too who have never wholly given up the child in themselves and might not be nearly as good teachers if they ever did. I look to those teachers to hold to their hearts the legacy that Mr. Rogers left us. It’s a fragile legacy because, although he was immersed in Eriksonian ideals and had studied with Erikson scholars and, of course, knew Erikson himself, nothing about his way of listening to children or being with young children is considered “research-based” or “scientific,” which are the code words of acceptability these days, as you know all too well.

Mr. Rogers’ legacy is viewed as “soft” and “too impressionistic” in an age when very hard and measurable outcomes have been stringently demanded by the overseers of public education, whose certitude about the practices that they enforce seems nearly absolute. I pray that teachers of all ages will reject the cheap rewards of overstated absolutes and honor instead the self-effacing virtues of the kindest man and wisest friend of children we may have the opportunity to know for many years.

Jonathan

— A Postscript to Francesca —

As you’ve noted several times, Francesca, many education students who want very much to teach in inner-city schools are given the impression, sometimes even by their own professors, that working in these kinds of schools will be a painful sacrifice — all struggle, but no joy. As I think you knew somehow before you even started out, it’s not like that at all. At least, it shouldn’t be. Even in the most adverse conditions, the work of a good teacher ought to be an act of stalwart celebration. It is in that sense of celebration, in my own belief at least, that teachers who have chosen out of love to work with children find their ultimate reward.

If there is a single message I wish I could pass on to young teachers and to people thinking about teaching, that would be the one. It’s not political at all, not on the face of it; but fighting to defend the right to celebrate each perishable day and hour in a child’s life may, in the current climate of opinion, be one of the greatest challenges we have.

I hope you have a wonderful summer and please tell your kids that I send lots of love!

Jonathan