EVERY spring, I turn over a new leaf (so to speak), vowing that this year I will garden. Last Saturday, the warm sunshine and light breeze made it the perfect day to make good on this year’s promise. So I donned my rubber gardening shoes, pulled out my color-coordinated gardening tools, and headed out to plant flowers along the bank of the creek that runs through my yard. I suppose that in the spirit of full disclosure I should say that “creek” is the word my landlord uses to describe the little stream of muddy water. A cartographer would more likely refer to it as a drainage ditch. Whichever name is more accurate, I’d decided to plant day lilies along its bank. I dug carefully spaced holes to exactly the depth prescribed by the planting instructions and then packed dirt around each flower. After repeating the process several times, I stood to admire my work. Looking at the meager amount of work completed and pondering all the holes yet to be dug, I wondered why I had ever thought this was a good idea. Just then, something brought me to an abrupt stop.

It was the lilacs. A gentle wind had carried their aroma across the creek. Seemingly overnight the buds had transformed from the promise of bloom into full, thick blossoms. As my lungs filled, my body sank to the ground, and I closed my eyes and gave myself over to the lilacs’ magic. I was transported back in time and found myself standing in front of the three-room tar-paper house on Ottello Avenue where I grew up.

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It was not a happy place, and I was not a happy child. Life was full of extremes — too many people in too little space, never enough to go around, but far too much for a child to experience far too soon. There was little safety to be found on Ottello Avenue. My mother worked all night in the fireworks factory, and my father worked all day operating an elevator in the local General Motors plant. Their schedules left my brother and me on our own. Long before the term “latchkey” was invented, we took care of ourselves from early morning until late in the evening.

The image of that house was hard for me to revisit, but the lilac bushes reached out for me and invited me inside. My imagination pulled a lilac-laden branch aside, and I peeked in. That’s when my mind gave me the gift of a memory so real it was as though I could reach out and touch it. I could see us, my brother Tom and me, there in all our childish glory. My blond hair jutted out wildly, as was its tendency, especially on mornings when I couldn’t find a comb to provide its curls at least some guidance. And there was Tommy standing shirtless and barefoot, his blond hair cut close to his head, his cotton shorts twisted crookedly around his waist. I smiled at the memory. He was always such a dork.

Yet Tommy was a remarkable person. At 4, he was a regular reader of Superman comic books and could reasonably explain how archenemy Mr. Mxyzptlk traveled from the fifth dimension to torment the Man of Steel. As for me, well, I had managed to finish the first grade without learning to read much of anything. But I had other skills. One was preparing escape routes.

On that day, we were deeply engaged in one of my favorite escape scenarios — the Hollywood discovery. I’d heard stories of people like us who were just minding their own business when a talent scout happened upon them and bing-bang-boom, those people were rich and famous. I wanted us to be ready when the scout showed up on our little street in Dayton, Ohio.

Tommy and I held long sticks that we called canes, and we were deep in conversation. His eyes were sharp and clear, and his attention was focused completely on me as I choreographed the dance we would perform for the talent scout. As I enthusiastically pointed my “cane” here and there, Tommy nodded his head obediently. My brilliant plan fully articulated, we began.

Standing side by side, we wildly twirled and whirled. And as we tap-danced ourselves into a frenzy — or did what we thought was tap-dancing — we began to sing a song we had practiced hundreds of times before. It
THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

was our song, and we knew every word.

“Oh, we ain’t got a barrel of money,” we sang more loudly than well. “Maybe we’re ragged and funny. But we’ll travel along, singin’ a song, side by side.” I watched with anticipation for the big finish I knew was coming. “Through all kinds of weather,” we sang in unison as we planted our canes firmly on the ground in front of us and came to a hard stop in our routine.

“But, Bobby,” Tommy said seriously, “what if the sky should fall?”

“Oh, Tommy,” I replied in feigned amusement. Then we sang the last line together with all the gusto we could muster, “As long as we’re together, you know it really doesn’t matter at all.” We ended our song and dance with the two of us standing, legs apart, bent at the waist, our chins resting on the top of our canes.

“Oh, it was beautiful,” we told ourselves, certain that when we were discovered, our performance would delight audiences everywhere. But we did not rest on our laurels. We practiced over and over again for days and weeks to come — two barefoot children together, hidden from a hard world under the lilac bushes.

The future had seemed so distant, but the dream of a better life sustained us. I thought Tom and I would always be side by side, but a few years back, the sky did fall when Tom died unexpectedly.

As I thought about those two children and what lay ahead of them, my mind drifted to a conversation I’d had with Marsha, a teacher friend, after she attended a Ruby Payne workshop. Ruby Payne wrote the highly popular and heavily criticized Framework for Understanding Poverty and parlayed it and the ideas it espoused into a highly lucrative consulting business. Today, she and those who work for her offer hundreds of workshops for teachers, administrators, and community members around the country every year.

I remembered Marsha telling me that the workshop had changed everything for her. At last she understood something about the children she had been teaching for more than 26 years. Her students’ families experience extreme financial stress and are of a cultural and ethnic minority. Having grown up in a middle-class, white family, Marsha has always struggled to understand the community, families, and children she teaches and has always been frustrated that she could not. Still, she has always tried. Marsha tells me she has even prayed for understanding.

I suppose it shouldn’t be surprising that Marsha and teachers like her are seduced by Payne. She promises clarity — a clarity even Marsha’s prayers have failed to deliver. And it is so simple. Payne has mapped out all the strategies for Marsha. The trick, Payne’s approach says, is to teach children of poverty to play by middle-class rules. So if Marsha follows Payne’s directions, she can “solve the problem” of poverty and the families who live in it. All she has to do is to “un-teach” the “hidden rules of poverty” that prevent her kids from succeeding. Why wouldn’t Marsha try? She really loves the kids she teaches. She wants their lives to be richer, fuller, less troubled. If only it were that easy.

Much has been written about Payne’s work. Critics point out that she never addresses the unequal education poor kids receive and that she preaches a deficit model. We don’t have to change society or schooling — just poor people. Sitting there on the bank, I realized that my real concern about this message is that it never could account for those two tap-dancing children, the promise that existed for their futures, or the ways we could help them prepare. I don’t recognize the families Payne uses as “case studies” in her books, except as the stereotypes I have fought most of my life.

The thing is, I told myself, economic distress and the situations it creates are as varied and complex as the children who experience them. In the place where I grew up, no one expected children to leave the neighborhood. Teachers knew — or thought they knew — what we needed, and they were determined to guide us along their path of low expectations. Fortunately for Tom and me, we didn’t know that our future had been mapped out for us. We were lucky that way.

Payne seems to say that the best thing we can do is teach poor kids to act middle class. If we can only “fix” them, then the world will open up for them. But the real fix lies not in the children but in the inequalities and societal norms that prevent children from having equal access. In the small world of our classrooms, we can get to know our children as complex individuals living unique lives and help them to build their dreams and achieve their goals, not — as Payne suggests — our middle-class expectations of success.

Lost in my thoughts, with clarity seemingly only moments away, I was snapped back into the present by the phone ringing in my kitchen. Many more day lilies needed my attention, but I’d had enough. I picked up my gardening tools and headed toward the house. “So much for that new leaf,” I thought. “No wonder I don’t do this more often.” But after a few steps, I ignored the phone and walked across the creek to the lilac bush, gathered a branch laden with blooms into my arms, and buried my face into its blossoms. And for just an instant, it was as though I were hugging Tommy once more in the safety of our lilac fortress.