

We eventually hiked to a place where snow appeared in patches all around us. The river went underground at that point, and a steep switchback trail led up to Mt. Wilson. From there, our campers could choose to hike as far up the mountain as they wanted, or they could hang out at the base, take a break, and explore the locale.

I started out with Patricia, Freddy, Silent, Maria, and a restored Droopy to try and make it to the summit. About halfway up, I tired of looking at the trail eight inches from my face, and wimped out. I left with a slight apprehension, because I could tell that Maria and Droopy had a little romance brewing, but I trusted Pat to keep an eye on the situation. We all met back at the camp around three o'clock for a late lunch of hard boiled eggs, peanut butter sandwiches, and tortillas with cheese and chili.

The delay waiting for the Popeye and Dopey had thrown off my calculations. Our plans were approximate to start with and not based on the kind of research about temperature, weather, and daylight that real outdoorsmen or -women take into consideration. My mountain experience consisted of a few day hikes and a couple of overnights in this same forest.

Around six o'clock, we began hiking back to a clearing about 40 minutes downstream, but the evening set fast and the sun vanished on us. It got a lot colder. The forest began to lose color, and the trees absorbed the gray of the rocks. For some unexplained reason, no one could find the flashlights. I had never been hiking on a moonless night. In the city, there's always some light—you can always see something. I put my hand right at my nose, and it wasn't there.

It began to rain. I had thought it might, but I didn't think a light rain would be dangerous. From under the huge trees, it would look pretty. I'd never really been camping outside of these local hills, where teenagers went to make out in the evenings. It was impossible to me that they could be dangerous.

The group compressed. All light was gone, and you could only tell who was around by voice.

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"If I die, Homes, my mom's gonna sue your ass:"

"Where are you? Is everyone okay?"

Everyone started yelling. From the back, they were saying, "The water's going up too much."

I'd also never been hiking during a storm. A stream rises just like water in a tub. The trail was gone, and the stream, which had been seven feet away, spread across the canyon floor and then moved up to our knees. Everyone was staying against the smooth sides of the canyon.

"*Pendejo*," I said to myself, "this is how that shit you read about in the papers happens: 'Idiot counselor trapped in canyon with teens and no flashlight. All drown.' " We were only two miles above Arcadia, which meant our bodies would wash up tomorrow morning at the Santa Anita Fashion Mall or the racetrack.

Kids were now holding on tightly to shrubbery. "Where are we going?" people were shouting. But the sound of the water had grown as loud as our voices. The girl with the back brace tried not to cry. No one wanted to move anymore. The stream had become a river that pulled against our legs. No one could see the faces next to them.

"I'm climbing up to see what's here," said Casper, who sounded like he was in front. He disappeared for two or three minutes. Everyone got quiet. Then we heard him shout down, "There's a little patch up here we can fit into I think. Tell everyone to come up. I'll help them."

"Start going up," Mark told those in front. "Just follow the wall."

"The packs are too heavy," someone complained

"Throw them in the water," someone else answered.

"That's my shit. I need it."

"You wanna drown with it, stupid?"

People went up slowly, following the voices in front of and above them. Patricia and two of the boys inserted themselves

Pendejo is a term used primarily in Mexico and indicates that one is a fool or idiot of elevated proportions.

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like spikes up the side of the hill to buttress and guide those crawling up. At the back of the procession waited Droopy, the girl with the brace, and me.

"I'll take the little *chavala*," Droopy offered. "Just put her on my back." He was thin but hard, with long arms that felt like well-inflated tires. I had the girl in a lock, with one arm tight around her waist, trying not to push the brace into her skin. I could tell it hurt, but I could also imagine her slipping and disappearing. I tilted her onto Droopy's back, and she did a monkey wrap around him with her legs and arms. Droopy leaned into the hill, looking for edges to lock his long fingers into. I could hear the slow alternation of a hand, followed by another hand, then followed by a foot, then the other foot, and then his fingers again, looking for something jagged and solid to curl around.

The laughing, blaming, and cursing didn't go on very long in the rain. We huddled and waited. We spent a very long time in the dark. No one slept that night, and no one had food to eat the next morning.

With the first bluish light, we became aware that we had climbed up to a large campground and could have moved a few yards to some shelter. But the temperature dropped right before sunrise, so we all got up and began moving—sloshing for the most part—back up the hill to our cars.

Mark and I got blamed for all of the suffering. But the kids talked about that trip for months—and now years. It was complained about rather fondly. I counted the trip a success.

In our ultimate aim, however, we were failing.

The club kept the kids busy, the trips were fun, and some of the tutoring and badgering had helped a bit. But we were disconnected from the most important parts of the day and from the real tasks of growing up. Our work had nothing to do with school and family and the real process, day in and day out, of learning how to become an adult. I still could not get the gang members to succeed in, or even attend, school. I had no power

* *Chavala* is slang for girl.

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against their addictions, and I could not help their parents keep them home at night. Yet, I saw that their parents, teachers, and probation officers were all well-intentioned and working as hard as they could to help these kids.

What I had learned, several times over now, was that success depended on gathering several different kinds of adults together and surrounding the gang members throughout the day with help. Organizing such an effort took time, and in the end I could only reach a small number of children. Yet, nearly all the gang members responded positively to offers of help. It became obvious that gathering the gang members in one place all day would be much more efficient than trying to reach them as they scattered throughout this large school and crazy neighborhood.

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Everything But the Money

In the 10th grade, I began giving clarinet lessons, my first real job. Mrs. Macias paid me \$4 to teach her daughter, and I could stay for dinner as well. I don't know if her intention favored music or the idea that, as a church boy, I would be a good influence on Kathy. Either way, I took the music end of it very seriously. All through high school, I developed private students.

I paid for my first year of college by continuing private lessons and working as a singing monkey for a delivery service called Gorilla Gram. I'd show up on a yellow moped with a banjo and a tap-dancing brunette, and the two of us would musically deliver a message. The gig vacuumed its share of dignity, but I have always preferred independent kinds of employment.

My second year of college, I met another guitarist, Mark Olvera, and we got jobs at El Azteca in San Gabriel, offering table-to-table romantic serenades to diners. Mark also gave private lessons, so we teamed up and opened our own music school. We had no idea how much time a new business took. We had sleeping bags in the closet, because we seldom left before midnight and had clients first thing in the morning. After a year, we decided to close the business as it would keep us from ever finishing college. But it gave me experience in running a small operation, working with employees, and developing a teaching program. When the conservatory closed, I applied for the job at Adams.

I liked working with Mr. Scanlan. Being on the road with him proved interesting, and he gave me the freedom to be his

partner and not just a translator. Besides helping the truant officer, half of my salary involved coordinating a program between USC and our junior high school. The university set guidelines for how its students would be used, and my job was to follow them and place these volunteers with classrooms throughout the school. I, however, funneled all the university volunteers into situations where they worked with gang members. This did not meet the program's intentions. USC rightfully asked that I be replaced with someone who didn't have such an overt agenda and such a hard head when it came to just doing what I had been asked.

The administration at Adams should have canned me, but they were a wise, confident bunch; and if not for one of the assistant principals, Marilyn Nuerenberg, I would have left the neighborhood, and nothing more would have occurred.

Mrs. Nuerenberg replaced me in the position, as USC had requested; but instead of firing me, she took some money from somewhere in the budget and gave me a desk, a phone, 15 paid hours a week, and the following directions: "Half the day, keep working with Mr. Scanlan. But you have the other half to do something for the gang members at Adams. Be creative." That was it. She was a smart lady and good manager. She knew what to do with someone like me.

So with time to think, and the dilemma of what to do with the gang members I had gathered, an idea began to percolate. For all of their nettlesome behavior, and in part because of it, I loved and enjoyed Smiley, Droopy, Popeye, Happy, and all these other characters. Couldn't we start a place from scratch that developed with their needs in mind and their success at heart? Instead of chasing gang kids around and trying to force them into classrooms in which they failed, couldn't we provide a place not to go to as punishment or as a weak alternative to regular school but rather that focused on their success? I approached Mr. Siskel, the other assistant principal, with the idea. I think a lesser person would have patronized this 22-year-old assistant to the truancy counselor. Instead, he just said, "Look into it, and keep us informed."

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In the following weeks, my principal, Dr. Ikeda; Mrs. Nuerenberg; Mr. Siskel; and Mr. Scanlan all sat with me at various times or stood with me in the lunch yard while I was on supervision. They helped detail what such a place would be like. It would have a master teacher, but volunteers and paid aides would reduce the adult-student ratio to one adult per five students. Every kid would get personal attention. We would also involve probation officers, a family therapist, and liaisons with as many community resource providers as possible. The new school would provide field trips and ceremonies and concentrate on positive experiences. Parents would be our partners.

Space proved the limitation. Overcrowded, Adams had several student tracks that ran year-round. Even stair wells and broom closets were used for instruction. The only solution, in my view, would be for the school district to purchase a large, industrial building, on the corner of the PE yard, that had been put up for sale. I made telephone calls to everyone in town and circulated a petition among police officers, local ministers, probation directors, and business people asking the school board to consider purchasing the building. Then I arranged a meeting with Rita Walters, our Board of Education member, and Sid Thompson, our regional supervisor.

Mrs. Walters and Mr. Thompson liked the idea and took it to the Board of Education as a request. But it all came down to money. The building owner wanted much more than the district could pay. Without a space, the idea ran aground—except by now I had told the gang kids, in my own one-step-ahead optimism, that the idea was a sure thing. They would have their own place. We had been talking about it for weeks.

There was no way to just let this go.

If you call enough people, someone out there has an answer. Out of curiosity, and with suspicion that there might be an avenue here, I called departments throughout the city and then the state until I found the person in charge of legitimizing private schools. I asked him what it took to open a private school in California.

Nothing. No requirements.

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As long as the building met safety codes, and the school director forwarded a list of who attended and what courses they were taking, anyone could open a school. The teachers did not have to possess any particular set of credentials. Even a former employee of Gorilla Gram could establish one.

The only immediate impediment to taking the idea from Adams and going private was, of course, the one thing that wasn't available, and seldom is.

Money.

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Do Like Sugar Ray

The news from our small television provided background noise while Mark and I tore open the boil-in-bag rice. We talked about the gang kids, as we always did at dinner. Our efforts to help them were stalled, and we both knew it. For the time being, Mark had decided to concentrate on the Norwood tenement project, and I really didn't know where to go with the school idea.

We stopped talking and listened to the television for a minute.

Mark heard the engine first. Then I tuned in. Like dogs, our ears flipped toward the direction of the door.

"That sounds like your van," Mark said, standing up.

"Hey," we both barked. We ran toward the door.

Sure enough, the brown Econoline, with the new stereo that Oso and Casper had put in for free, was turning the corner.

"Didn't you have a kill switch?" a neighbor asked.

"Yeah," I said sheepishly. "They must have found it." But I was lying. This was one of the few times I hadn't turned it on. I had thought about doing it—it would have only taken a few more seconds—but I was hungry.

As I was about to learn, a lot of things can happen riding the bus.

I often visited and spent the night with my parents in Highland Park. Without the Econoline, this meant an early morning bus ride back to the truancy office. I got on at the

beginning of the line, but within a mile there were people standing. There was no chivalry; young men like myself sat comfortably while old ladies took flight in the aisles every time the bus came to a stop. They were too weak to hold onto the rails, and only the other bodies, thickly packed, kept them in place.

When I took an evening bus back to Highland Park, we had to pick up the people who worked at the Farmer John meat-packing plant. We also picked up the people who worked for the produce wholesalers, the Chinese fish markets, and the live-poultry dealer on Florence. They all smelled quite different coming home than they did in the mornings.

On one such ride, a Vietnamese girl sat next to me. We rode a few more stops, and then an old blind man in a black sailor cap got on. He tried to find a clearing for himself as people did football maneuvers around him to get on or off. The girl stretched out her arm, grabbed the blind man's hand, and pulled him toward her. In one move she got up and pushed him into her seat. It seemed to be a part of her to do this, she did it so naturally.

Her consideration embarrassed me, so I offered her my seat and stood into the crowd. With my arms upstretched to hold onto the overhead handrail, I busied myself by scanning the small ads that formed a row over the windows. Amidst the ads for credit dentists and personal injury lawyers was one from the Campaign for Human Development. Beneath a picture of an open hand against a black background, small white letters offered a telephone number and seed money for community self-help projects.

I immediately remembered something that had been passed on to me about Sugar Ray Robinson, the great boxer whose youth foundation kept a lot of kids busy in this part of town. I had just finished a soccer coaching assignment with the Sugar Ray Robinson Youth Foundation. He gave us balls, a bus, and uniforms. Even though they didn't play soccer, Creeper and Smiley had joined the team for the trips around town to different games. During the next to last game, they had disap-

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peared and come back with shovels and garden tools from somewhere. So, during the last game, I said they had to stay with the team and play. I made the mistake, however, of putting them on defense. This weakened the team and made everyone play too hard, so that one of our players took a spill, breaking one arm and spraining the other.

Taking care of the team medical insurance for the injured player involved going over to the Sugar Ray headquarters. I told one of the supervisors about my disappointment at not being able to open a school for the gang kids.

"Do you know how Sugar Ray would handle this?" he asked. "When Sugar Ray goes to a congressman and asks for funding, he knows the congressman is always going to start up with the ifs: 'If we can talk someone into it. If it fits into the budget.' Sugar Ray stops them before they can get in more than one if. He tells them, 'It's not *if*, it's *how*. *How* can we get this done? Not *if* we can get it done.' If you stay with the *how*, you eventually find a way." That advice that has never failed me.

On the bus I found a possible *how*. I borrowed a pen from the man next to me and wrote down the phone number on my forearm. I still had it there when I talked to Sister Natalia later that afternoon.

Catholic Charities operated a small community center called El Santo Niño (the Holy Child) near the junior high school. On Sundays, it functioned as a church when a priest from St. Vincent's would hold services there. The rest of the week, kids came for day care or after-school activities. Sister Natalia Duran directed the center. She was 36 years old, beautiful, and an activist—not that those three have any relation to each other, but they were qualities that defined her at the time. I remember how she used to lay in the driveway of the immigration service to prevent the deportation of Salvadoran refugees. She had vision and nerve.

Sister Natalia gave me a part-time job at the center running after-school groups when I quit my job at Adams to pursue the idea of starting a private school. No one had asked me to leave,

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but I felt uneasy using a public school job to open a private school, especially when everyone at Adams had been so good to me. So Sister Natalia bought me some time.

When I told her about the ad I had seen on the bus, Sister Natalia directed me to the regional director of Catholic Charities, Sister Georgianna, who was from the same order. Sister Natalia thought that Sister Georgianna would be able to help me with the grant from the Campaign for Human Development and maybe even offer space for the school at El Santo Niño.

I remember two conversations with Sister Georgianna. In one, she told me that it was necessary to have radical nuns who blocked driveways and created social disturbances, but it was also necessary to have nuns within the system who did not overtly attack it and who could go to Washington, D.C., and negotiate deals that might save the same refugees Sister Natalia cared for. That made sense to me. Like working with kids, you need to both push them and also support them. There are always two bookends.

The second conversation occurred on the phone from her hospital bed. She had taken ill soon after I mailed her a copy of my grant proposal. She not only took it with her to the hospital, but Sister Georgianna offered to support the proposal. She let me know that Catholic Charities was not in the school business and that, officially, she could only approve an intensive tutoring project. In spite of that disclaimer, she understood that a tutoring project taking place every day from 9:00 to 3:00 would be, de facto, a school. As much an activist and risk taker as Sister Natalia, she went to the legal limit with me. She would support me, but for one year only. This would provide a start, and then we would see what could be done from there.

She passed on the proposal to a bishop whose job consisted of commending projects to the grant selection committee. The bishop asked her bluntly, "Do you really believe in this project?" She told him yes.

The Campaign for Human Development awarded us a \$10,000 grant. It wasn't much money to put a school together,

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but it was more money than I had ever seen. My aunt in Mexico had started her first school by holding class under a shade tree on my grandfather's farm.

I did a little math. If I hired a second teacher, and we each made \$600 a month, the money would be gone before year's end. If I charged 30 students \$20 a month, however, we'd actually have some money left to buy a few things for the classroom. I knew the parents of even the poorest student could come up with \$5 a week, and a token payment might even make the school a bit more valuable to everyone.

Sister Georgianna gave me the auditorium at El Santo Niño to use without charge and administered the grant for me. She also put us under the umbrella of Catholic Charities for non-profit status. Frankly, she covered my backside to give these kids at least one year.

I wrote a letter to the state superintendent of private schools. I told him a school was operating by the name of El Santo Niño and that classes were being held at a Catholic Charities site. The superintendent didn't need to know anything about profit or nonprofit status. He just asked two questions: Did the fire marshal okay the site, and where would student files be kept for the next 10 years? I forwarded a certificate for the first question and gave my parents' address for the second.

I had dinner that night at Smiley's house and asked his parents if he could attend the new school. They said yes, and I had my first student. I also asked his sister out on a date, and she said maybe. All in all, it was a very good beginning.

* * * * *

When I was younger, a 19-year-old illegal immigrant from Mexico had been helping the amateur gardeners in my neighborhood. Chemo had recently arrived from an Indian village in Oaxaca. He told me while fertilizing my mother's lawn one day that he had seen a program on television about a place called Argentina. The country had life and opportunity, and the people were good. He felt that in that country, much awaited him.

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Chemo came from a village of 200 people who planted corn with sticks and carried water. He had been to second grade. He disappeared soon after our conversation. The neighbors say he went to Argentina.

Much gets accomplished in this world by people who refuse to consider how impossible a journey might be. In their minds, they have already arrived, and reality just has to catch up.

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Books, or Sharky Goes to Prep School



I heard from Miquelito, the custodian at El Santo Niño, about the drive-by that had occurred out front the previous December. He had heard the shots outside, carried the 13-year-old in from the sidewalk, and laid him on the soft cotton snow under the auditorium's large Christmas tree. He could do nothing except hold the young cholo, life falling away through the small bullet holes in the boy's neck.

In that same corner of the auditorium, Miquelito and I now placed a table, two chairs, and on the table a globe with sunken valleys and ridged mountains you could feel with your fingers.

I put away the altar, chairs, and candles, but left the big cross, St. Martin, and the Virgin. I organized 10 folding picnic tables into three rows. The lumber yard on Central Avenue donated a long slab of plywood and several cans of blackboard paint; the owner taught me how to use them to make a durable chalkboard.

The local grocers also pitched in on supplies. "Food for Life" volunteered to give us bread for sandwiches once a week, and Iris, a local food wholesaler, donated gallon cans of peanut butter and jam. Not much variety, but at least we would have sandwich stuff available if students forgot to bring sack lunches from home.

I began looking for a second teacher, someone who could work for \$600 dollars a month and have a good time doing it for

one year. I asked Mark if he wanted to take it on, but he had school to finish and by this time was devoting all his extra energy to keeping the tenement club at Norwood functioning. So I put out an offer of employment.

The advertisements on university job boards and local papers elicited plenty of replies. Unfortunately, most of the applicants wanted absolute guarantees of safety. Most also possessed too strong an urge to preach, or a desire to reduce the whole problem down to drugs, religion, family, racism, or some other narrow agenda. Even more problematic, most viewed educational success or failure as only marginally related to the behavior of gang members. I, of course, saw it as fundamental.

I finally found a person at Cal State L.A. with whom I felt comfortable. Juan Esqueda had a sense of humor and a flexible attitude, enjoyed rascally kids, and shared my view that this problem involved a broad attack. At 21, he was a year younger than me and had grown up in a similar East Side neighborhood. It also helped that his mother made us these fat chicken tacos for lunch every day.

With Juan hired, a grant in hand, some furniture, enough peanut butter to last a year, and a space to work in, it was time to look for volunteers. As our neighborhood university, USC was the logical place to begin recruiting. I called the graduate school of education, and they put me in contact with a professor involved in the teacher training program. After one brief meeting, Dr. William Lee volunteered to send me some of his best student teachers. He worked out a plan that allowed the volunteers to earn credit for participating in the project, even though it lacked accreditation;* that exposed young interns to some

* Accreditation, of course, signifies that a school, besides being legal, has also been reviewed by an independent association. All public and Catholic schools are accredited. The process is hugely expensive, however, and simply wasn't feasible for a small school like ours. The main drawback to lacking accreditation is that some universities might question the grades of an applicant more so than if they had graduated from an accredited school. In our case, this was a small consequence for kids who, up to this time, had little chance of finishing school at all.

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rough kids; and that employed the experimental methods of a young person like myself. Dr. Lee had no fear: He thought it would be a good experience for his trainees.

Textbooks, however, were a no go. They would have cost several thousand dollars for each student to have his or her own books for history, math, science, English, and Spanish. Even with the \$20-a-month student tuition, our small budget left only a few hundred dollars for supplies. So I went looking for free books. They had to be at various reading levels, with lots of pictures, and touching on as many subjects as possible. These we received from a well-known private school and from L.A.'s Central Public Library.

For the first call, Sharky and I made a trip to the Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy for Girls, an elite boarding school where I helped assemble their elaborate theatrical productions. The head of the drama department made arrangements with the school librarian for me to inherit their used books. When we got there, a tall, beautiful, cordial Asian American girl helped us around. Obviously affluent and educated, she made quite an impression on both of us. Sharky carried boxes in his gray khakis and starched, oversized T-shirt, bobbing behind her in that funny walk he perfected and now did without thinking.

On the drive back down the hill, he mentioned, "I'd like to have a girlfriend like that *chinita* [Chinese girl]—clean and, you know, nice."

"You might have to change a few things for a girl like that."

"I know, Homes. It's like my friend, Tomas. In his house, he got all kinds of trophies for him and his dad. Baseball, football."

"You ever play sports?"

"In the projects, they used to take us dirt biking. It was bad, Homes. But I never got no trophies."

Lots of the books from Sacred Heart had titles like *The Secret of Hastings Hill*—with pictures on the cover of tortured-looking girls on windy cliffs—but there were assorted history and science readers as well.

To get other books, I went to the central library downtown, where teachers could check out 100 books at a time for an entire

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semester. It was late in the day, and I was in a hurry—and unfortunately by myself this time. I parked about six blocks away—close by downtown standards. I figured they would have some kind of ramp where I could pull up and load the books I picked out. I'd run back to the car and drive back for them.

When I checked out, they gave me one huge box and a smaller box to put on top of that. Both were loaded. The library had no ramp to pull up to, and it was near closing, so they needed me out of there with my books. I couldn't leave the books on the sidewalk and expect they would be there when I got back.

I heaved the boxes up on my shoulder, got a few steps, and let the whole thing drop. I put the books back in the boxes and decided I would have to do this in stages. I lifted the big box against my stomach and waddled forward 10 yards, put it down and came back for the little box and brought it past the big box. Then I went back for the big box, did my power lift up to my belly, and staggered up to the little box. I had made it 20 yards from the library. The day gave up on me as the sun slipped over Bunker Hill into West L.A. The boxes were already showing wear from the way I was jerking them around. A box full of books is really heavy.

I began to think I wasn't in shape to do this all the way back to my car. My arms were already beginning to feel like jelly.

I lifted the big box, this time trying to get it on my shoulder again to see if I could make it further. It flew right past my shoulder, suddenly and unexpectedly light, and seemed to fly into the sky. A tall African American man in jeans and a green tank top had taken hold of it and now had it on his shoulder.

"You looked like you needed help. Where are you going?"

"It's pretty far—all the way to Pico. I'm taking these for my students, but it's too heavy for me."

"I've got you."

"Are you sure? I wasn't able to get a few feet at a time with them."

"Allah is my strength, brother."

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After a couple of blocks, he was tilting, the weight of the books trying to push him over. But he managed to carry the box all the way to the car, with only occasional help from me as I would free up one arm so I could reach up to give a little support. I was very, very grateful to him.

And to Allah, for keeping an eye out for me.

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Rice and Beans: Teaching Gangs in a One-Room School

In Los Angeles, many Mexican restaurants display the portrait of an Aztec warrior bowed on one knee. He holds a dead princess in his arms, and his feathered head faces the Aztec heaven. In one of my earliest memories, my father sits across a restaurant table from my brother and me and explains the meaning of this ancient image:

Toward the last years of the empire, during the age known in Mexico as *El Quinto Sol* [The Fifth Sun], a warrior and the daughter of an Aztec king fell in love. Although the warrior knew that only a man of royal birth could marry this princess, he nonetheless begged her hand. The young warrior vowed he would face any challenge the king put to him.

Such a demand had never been made on an Aztec king and would usually have resulted in death for its arrogance. But the king saw an advantage to the warrior's zeal. He proposed to the suitor the following task: "Bring to me the heads of my 10 enemies on your sword, and you will marry my daughter." The king's reasoning was sound. He believed that no warrior could survive this; but in trying, a few of the king's enemies

might perish. And he would rid himself of the warrior's nuisance.

Years passed. The young man disappeared into the vast world of tribes and nations in search of the enemies of his king. The princess waited for his return.

Upon the 12th year of this quest, scouts reported to the king that a warrior approached the great city of Tenochtitlan. He possessed a sword with 10 heads pierced upon it.

But as the Aztecs well knew, the gods are indifferent to man, and each day brings its own battle. The morning the warrior returned, the princess found a viper among the flowers in the palace garden, and its bite killed her.

The warrior asked only one favor of the king—that he be allowed to bury the princess alone and in a place of his own choosing. As was tradition, a high priestess of the temple offered the princess to heaven and, after prayers of mourning, wrapped her in sacred cloth. She was then given to the warrior, who carried her in his arms toward the great volcanic mountains above the city. There he held her upon one knee and begged the heavens to bury them together.

The mountain where he made this plea is still there, but it is very different today than during El Quinto Sol. Before the death of the princess, this high region had little rain and never saw snow. But upon hearing the voice of the warrior, the goddess Tonantsin, the mother of all creation, felt moved and chilled the sky. In time, clouds formed, then rain, and then snow—snow that covered the ground where the warrior held his princess and then, inch over inch, buried them together.

They are still there, under the perpetual snow on this mountain.

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On a trip my family made to Mexico City years later, we drove by a pair of mountains surrounded by volcanic rock. We stopped the car, and my father pointed out that the larger mountain had a bent peak at the summit, and this peak overlooked the smaller mountain next to it. "There they are," he said. "The warrior and the princess. Can you see them?" The mountains themselves had assumed the shape of the couple they had entombed.

The world is about stories to me. My parents told them continually. One moment, my mother was telling the tale of how the Virgin of Guadalupe hid my great uncle in her cloak to make him invisible during the revolution. The next, my father was looking up over his science magazine and explaining that

Everything in the universe is made of the same stuff. We are all made of atoms, and the only difference between a dog's tooth and a dog's tail is how the atoms are stuck together. If you put them together in one shape, they are strong as diamonds. Change their shape, and a diamond becomes water. Your atoms and those in a piece of marble are made of the same bits of energy. An atom is an atom. The only difference is how they are knitted together. If I rearranged your atoms into a different shape, I could turn you into anything—a tortilla or a polyester suit.

Mexican stories mimic our cooking: Fact and fiction, like rice and beans, are stuffed into the same tortilla. But this is how I learned to love learning. I understood sitting with an adult, hearing a story, asking questions, and being guided to thought about them. I didn't understand the undifferentiated droning of schoolbooks and school teachers. To me, my father's chemistry lesson is a story not much different from an Aztec legend. It isn't just a set of facts, but a small tale of how the world is held together. It makes a point and does so in a colorful manner.

I knew that, at El Santo Niño, even the least able student would learn if I broke the world into stories like those my father

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offered. A slow or young student could, at minimum, picture the invisible atoms and recall that everything was made of them. Such a student I planned to offer a C for comprehending the core of the story. More advanced or older students could go further and get an A or a B for relating additional details about the story of atomic bonding or Aztec history.

In terms of the daily routine at El Santo Niño, the mechanism for this to occur would be simple and repetitive—relating a story to the whole group, then having the students work in small groups under the guidance of volunteer teachers, followed by a whole group discussion, followed by a test (with the questions given before hand—I don't believe tests should be mysteries). We would move on to new topics when the last student had captured the minimal, main concept necessary for a C and when I felt it was appropriate to finish those aspects of the lesson in which more advanced students had involved themselves.

I knew this would be impossible to do without several teachers on hand. This kind of instruction would require significant adult attention and a generous flexibility with time. This was why I placed a priority on adults in the classroom over textbooks and would have students consistently tutoring other students as part of their own learning. I knew, too, we would have occasional rough landings, as some students would be ready for new things while others needed to stay on certain subjects. But life is a compromise. This system would work better than anything else to keep the slowest students moving forward and the most able pushing their own limits.

Of course, we learn nothing unless we grapple and play with it awhile. This belief was fundamental to my understanding of how to teach. Asking a student to even minimally understand—and not just parrot—an idea involves a struggle. That struggle takes time and guidance. Without such a sustained interaction, learning is superficial and quickly forgotten, usually after the first test. An acceptable understanding of atomic structure, for example, would have been for the student to draw an atom or make a paper model of how atoms are connected in different

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molecules. For some students, conceptualizing an atom in this manner came easily, and they needed an interaction of greater complexity; for others, even the basic idea of atoms was unwieldy and took considerable play to grasp the concept.

Conceptualizing a curriculum as a series of stories provided the first rule of teaching for me. The necessity of a sustained interaction, a guided struggle, gave me the second. I learned the patience that this requires from my music teachers. No musician ever allows a student to move from one piece of music to the next until the student masters the first piece. When the private lesson begins, a student plays the clarinet or guitar, and the teacher listens and watches very carefully, stopping the student to point out what areas need more attention.

Music instruction happens as a closely guided process between master and student. The time necessary to learn something new isn't set at the beginning but rather is discovered at the end. Music taught me how to listen to a student's struggle and progress measure by measure and to say, "Let's take this a little slower," or "Let me hear you play it again," when necessary. Music taught me that, unless I preferred to fool myself, I could not move on until my student had mastered the work before him or her.

A great teacher not only has passion for a subject and concern for the student, but also a passion for the process of learning. A great teacher willingly navigates the student, even as the pupil squirms away, fights back, or gives up. That is part of the process and only indicates that something is stuck and needs to be shifted.

When I started El Santo Niño, I understood that learning ignited when three relational events occur between a teacher and a student. First, the teacher presents a story—not a set of facts or a chronology of events, but a story. The difference is that a story builds to a point of importance, prods the imagination, and makes a point. A story has urgency and meaning for the teacher. It is imbued with intention when delivered to the student. As my father's tales exemplified, this remains true whether a lesson stems from history or chemistry.

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Second, something must be physically and mentally manipulated, turned over, looked into, questioned, and picked apart. The student has to interact with the story, while a teacher follows that movement and helps give it shape.

Finally, you have to allow enough time for learning to take place. With a coherent, meaningful story and a sustained, guided struggle, any person could learn just about anything, provided sufficient time. A student's progress, and not the wishes of the curriculum, indicates when sufficient time has been provided.

These three steps applied for me whether the object of scrutiny consisted of an historical narrative or a skill such as factoring numbers or replacing a brake pad. The learning still transpired in that sustained and intent-filled contact among teacher, student, and some point of attention. It still required the teacher to have vision and urgency; to provide a sustained interaction; and, crucially, to allow enough time for the alchemy to ignite.

Those were the principles I consulted when planning for a group of kids who, until now, had not enjoyed school or had success with it.

What to teach proved to be another interesting dilemma.

Math instruction depended on their current levels of achievement, so a test could tell us where to begin. Thus, math was the easiest subject for us to plan. I already knew we would have two groups in class—one that needed work on varying levels of arithmetic, and one ready for algebra. We had enough teachers in the class to accommodate these differences. Math aside, the rest of the curriculum would take some ingenuity.

To be a great teacher, one must understand that the stories a teacher passes on have the capacity to alter the lives of those who receive them. Otherwise, they aren't worth telling. Teachers who possess this conviction don't just follow textbooks. They select from all they know and choose the knowledge that, at this time and for a particular group of students, will make a difference.

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Each teacher has his or her own reasons for the stories he or she tells and the material he or she teaches. For one, it may be the conviction that these lessons will make life more enjoyable; for another, the belief that this information will make a student viable in college. For yet another, it may be about instilling pride or raising consciousness or providing a means of secure income for pupils. The point is that teachers must know exactly why they have chosen to teach particular material on a particular day. And they must be passionate about the importance of the subjects and the necessity that every last student learn them.

I wanted to give the gang members at El Santo Niño a set of stories that would make the larger world more interesting and appetizing and therefore worth sticking around for. I wanted them to see that the good things of this world were accessible, therefore increasing their motivation to work steadily and plan carefully. Finally, I wanted to pass on a strong rationale for a sense of self-worth.

I decided on the following curriculum. These would be the stories students would take with them when they left El Santo Niño.

Stories to Foster a Strong Sense of Self

- The nobility of a Mexican or an African past.
- The struggles and heroes of U.S. history.

Stories to Make the Physical World Meaningful

- What do we see when we look at the night sky?
- What makes the wind blow?
- What causes earthquakes, volcanoes, and tornadoes?
- Space travel.
- Molecules.

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Stories to Make Their Bodies Meaningful

- How to lose weight.
- Major diseases and how they destroy the body.
- The functions of the organs, and the main parts of the brain.
- The human cell.

Stories to Arouse Curiosity About the World Beyond the Neighborhood

- How do each of the major religions pray, dress, and think about God?
- What does the world look like, who lives in it, and what is there to enjoy when traveling around it?

Stories to Make Global Conversation Comprehensible

- Current politics—enough to understand a newspaper.
- Communism and Capitalism.
- Nuclear weapons and what they do.
- The Vietnam War.
- Deforestation.
- The U.S. Constitution and civil rights.
- The three branches of U.S. government.

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Stories to Sensitize the Cultural Palate

- Ancient Roman and Greek history, gods, and myths.
- The beauty of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Debussy.
- Michelangelo and *The David*.
- The poetry of Langston Hughes.
- The art of the ancient Aztecs, Diego Rivera, and Frieda Kahlo, which inspired the murals of Los Angeles.

I believed each of these stories had significance and that each and every one of my students needed to internalize them. I had an absolute belief that these stories would make a difference in my students' lives, given our willingness to guide, struggle, and wait.

* * * * *

There is an old Mexican saying: "You don't have to arrive first, but you do have to know how to arrive."

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13 Roll Call

Pirate, Creeper, Smiley, Sharky, Playboy, Happy, Sad Eyes, Lonely, Psycho, Woody, Droopy, Shadow, Yogi, Spanky, Sparky, Casper, Goofy, Lil' Man, Joker, Peanut, Sleepy, Wino, and Sad Girl. That was our opening day crowd.

This was most of the local gang. Of those who didn't show, Popeye was in jail now, and Silent was living in Fresno with an uncle. I had heard that Shorty had moved in with Nikki and her mom in Compton, though I hadn't seen him in months, and that Puppet was pregnant and living in a group home. Tiny had decided she would be fine in the local high school, and I agreed. She had become quite a volleyball player, especially for her size, and wanted to get involved in athletics at Jefferson High School.

Sharky was 13 and the youngest member of the class. Yogi, who would be 20 soon, was the class senior. The neighbors called it, "*la escuela de los cholitos*"—the school of the little gang members. True, you couldn't get in unless you were a gang member; and except for Lonely, who was from Diamond Street, and Lil Man, who was new in the neighborhood and wouldn't say which gang he was in, you had to be from Primera Flats or Clanton.

The names kids brought with them were not arbitrary. Every kid displayed some characteristic that matched his or her *placa*.^{*} A "Tiny," for example, was usually either very small or really huge. The Tiny in my old neighborhood of Highland Park

^{*} Literally, a badge; in this case, the nickname given each by the gang.

was a 400-pound mastodon. In this part of town, both Tiny and Peanut held appropriate monikers for petite-size girls. If you were a "Playboy" you had to be good-looking. "Goofy," "Joker," and "Popeye" were names for cutups and clowns; "Wino" and "Psycho," for the stupidly daring.

I had learned by now that each gang member had his or her own reason for the trouble he or she was in. It was never simply a drunken dad, a negligent mom, lack of an after-school job, bad public school teachers, or peer pressure. I knew their parents, and I knew their teachers. In this same neighborhood lived thousands of teenagers with similar backgrounds, who were poor and had family problems, and yet they did not belong to gangs or get into trouble. These gang members were the exception. They had histories of trouble, both at home and in school, but the reasons varied from kid to kid.

Pirate carried with him a painful angst that made him partial to drugs to relieve his pain. He had two hardworking parents who had always involved themselves in his schooling, taken him to Little League, and done all the right things. For his brothers and sisters, it had worked. But for Pirate, all 6-feet-5 of him, it just wasn't enough.

Creeper could not stay still. His body consisted of one thin bone, and he had a "lazy eye" on his left side—many ghetto kids have amblyopia. He was as squirmy and as hard to hold as a fish. His grandfather, who was raising him, was trying, but it wasn't enough.

Smiley had a good heart and loved to dream, just like his brothers. But his mind had difficulty keeping things in order. At 15, he hadn't learned to add simple numbers, even though he had a sister in college and successful, blue-collar parents.

Sharky, who was born in this country, simply couldn't read. He was not dumb, and he had nine years of school behind him, yet he struggled to complete the alphabet or sound out a syllable for me.

Playboy was a smart, articulate, good-looking student. A standout among these boys, he was bored and needed to be reigned in and better occupied.

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At 15, Happy moved through life daydreaming, drinking, and scared of the bullets that followed him as he rode his bike home. He was a good-hearted, clueless, girth of a kid. His parents often came over and thanked me for working with him. "He's a good boy, just confused," they would tell me.

Best friends, Sad Eyes and Lonely were two bright girls bored with public school and attracted to gang boys. But they were not the type of girls to be victimized. They considered themselves cholas, but they also had aspirations, and they didn't get mixed up with the drug culture beyond the kind of experimentation typical of many teenagers.

Psycho wasn't mean, but he was like a giant, muscle-bound 8-year-old. Before he knew it, he would do something stupid and be in lots of trouble. He needed self-control, and lots of it. He walked home naked one day when Sad Eyes's brothers waited for him after school, gave him a thrashing, and took his pants—payback for impulsively grabbing Sad Eyes in class. He was sorry a few minutes after he did it, but too late to pacify her family.

Woody was a typical bad boy with poor academics, but he also had a work ethic gained from helping nights in his father's janitorial business. A young man on the verge of insight and maturity, he just needed a bit of catching up and, like most teenagers, some mentoring from someone who wasn't his parents.

Droopy could fix television sets, had two siblings on the way to college, and made great company and conversation. But he had a fuse in one hand and a blow torch in the other. Once angry, nothing mattered, and only regrets followed. His addiction to paint made it worse. He was always good when he was with me or with a relative, but this couldn't be all of the time. Regular public school—where they gave him a seat for an hour and got in his face if he moved—created an impossible situation for him. The local school wouldn't take him back since he beat up a teacher. I rarely had problems with him, but I understood how he was geared, and I had the flexibility to shift my expectations when necessary.

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Shadow, Sharky's older brother, was an example of the typical slow learner, the mildly retarded. He loved juvenile hall because of the discipline of prison life and the fact that, in the jail school, everyone worked at their own pace. Outside of juvenile hall, he spent his time high on paint and quietly following the other boys around.

Yogi moved like the big bear he resembled—6-foot-4 and over 200 pounds—but he was never violent and not a drug user. All the boys liked him. He was a very peripheral gang member who had dropped out of school in the seventh grade and was running an auto painting business out of his parents' front yard. He belonged to the gang because they were the only kids he could hang out with during the day.

Spanky frustrated teachers. He was a 14-year-old with the maturity of 7-year-old. He was not dangerous, but lazy, a bit spoiled, and childish. As a rule, he would stare at a teacher all year without ever putting a pencil to paper. He seldom passed a class.

Sparky, like Playboy, had smarts, never engaged in violence, and seldom went beyond moderation in drug use. He was a genuine businessman: Unlike the other gang members, he made serious money in the drug market and knew how to save it. He was a busy guy and didn't have time for the other boys' shenanigans.

Casper's father pastored a small local church. Casper suffered a heavy addiction to paint, sherm sticks, and alcohol, but was always helpful and polite. Like Happy, he had a fundamental intelligence that had never been tapped but which required constant refocusing and reworking of the school material. Otherwise, he just sat passively vacant and retained nothing in class. He was a sweet boy but was still very willing to get in your face if he felt put down or threatened.

The school psychologist at Adams had assessed Goofy as having an above-average IQ. He possessed a subtle sense of humor, but also a learning disability that prevented him from exercising his gifts. He spent his days, morning till evening, stoned at the park, staring at the sky and talking nonsense—hence, the name Goofy.

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Lil Man scowled all the time. He was a small, angry African American kid who always wore a blue cap that shielded his eyes and squashed his curls. Completely illiterate, and scared of anyone finding out, he was a sweet, no-nonsense kid when he wasn't being threatened.

Joker, like Yogi, limited his participation in the gang to the movies, partying, and kicking around with some of the boys. Of noble character, and not violent or criminal, he had an aging mother to take care of and had dropped out of school at a young age to work. His drug use never went beyond something remedied by *menudo*^{*} and Tabasco sauce the next morning.

Peanut measured only 4-feet-6 at age 15. She was a slight, pretty girl with long black hair who paid attention to nothing but boys. Most days, getting Peanut out of bed involved a protracted struggle between her and her mother. Because she lived only a couple of doors from the school, we could hear the volleys as her mother shoved her out the door.

Sleepy was Peanut's brother. Almost ambitious, and possessing a snide sense of humor, he asked on the first day of class, "At our prom, do we all dance with Sad Eyes and Lonely?" He dressed well, worked when pressed, but could be a real jerk at times.

Winó, a Puerto Rican transplant from New York, told me as soon as he showed up, "I'm dumb. I didn't even finish first grade. I don't know nothin' about school. The police didn't even try to find me when I went AWOL from camp.[†] They knew I would do something stupid and they would just catch me."

^{*} *Menudo* is tripe, the stomach lining of a cow. It is a Mexican breakfast dish. You boil it all night. No one really gets used to the smell, but you learn to sleep through it. It has hominy in it and is served with lemon, oregano, onions, and chili over the top. It has a chewy, slippery texture that takes practice to enjoy.

[†] Camps are run by the California Youth Authority (CYA) and by local juvenile authorities as well. CYA camps tend to have tight security, whereas local camps depend on their distance from the cities to discourage runaways. Kids do go AWOL frequently, however. If the escape is impulsive, the runaways are usually caught a few miles down the road. If the escape is planned, and the kids have arranged for some kind of ride to pick them up, then catching up with them takes a bit longer.

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Sad Girl was living in a foster home after having been molested by a brother-in law. Her parents were in El Salvador. Her foster mother had put her in a church group which had improved her behavior. Feeling very alone, she had run through a series of boyfriends, and her foster mother feared she was simply trying to get pregnant.

What bound these teens as a group was that, for reasons from boredom to poverty to mild retardation, they had all slipped out of the net and were now floundering. In other circumstances, the very bright ones would have been working toward scholarships in programs for gifted students, the ones with learning disabilities would have received the help they needed, some who were bored would have been offered alternative education programs, the emotionally taxed and addicted would have had access to counseling, and the low-income students would have been offered some options to combine school with work. For many reasons, all had let go of the community's—our community's—towline to adulthood. And, being children, they simply stayed stranded, got into trouble, and made things much worse for themselves.

Gang members are not from Mars or Venus. Their behavior differs only in degree from expected teenage behavior. They share commonalities that are the reasons for their affiliations, and also differences that account for their idiosyncratic behaviors. They are not brainwashed or automatons. Within the larger group, individual cliques follow their own prescriptions.

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PART THREE

A VILLAGE SCHOOL
FOR THE CHILDREN
OF THE GANG

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Sharky and Lil Man Learn to Read

Sharky struggled with the alphabet, and reading went some thing like, "The . . . ho . . . horse . . . house . . . for . . . what's this word?"

"Sharon. It's a name."

"I don't understand this story. It don't make sense."

Lil Man was worse than Sharky. He knew the first half of the alphabet, but after that it got dicey. He had no idea of how to put a vowel and consonant together to make a syllable. He was from one of the African American gangs in Watts, but neither the kids nor I knew anything more about it than that. Eighteenth Street was the monster gang everyone here worried about. Bloods and Crips we never thought about. Lil Man didn't make an issue of it. After only two weeks at the local high school, the principal had expelled him and put him on OT. He was supposed to take a bus to the Metro Continuation School downtown. His grandfather didn't think he would go, so he had signed him up here, "where the Mexican boys who cause trouble go."

Nietzsche said, "Nothing is as expensive as a start." Starting is slow, and foundations take time; but as they firm up, it becomes possible to make time and even catch up with those who got out of the gate with a better step. So I sat with Lil Man and Sharky after school and said, "You guys can't read, and that's not your fault. Nobody's taken the time to teach you. I'm

going to teach you to read well. It'll take about half the year. To get an 'A,' your job is to learn to read. Everyone's got a goal—that'll be yours. If you don't learn, then I don't know what I'm doing."

I typed out three sheets with simple phonetic combinations of vowels and consonants—hundreds of them. The first sheet began with the syllables, "co, co, la, la, da, da, ba, ba, be, be. . . ." I put it in front of them, and said, "Follow me." After a few minutes of that, I placed a simple book in front of them, and we read together. I took the lead on these exercises quickly and with conviction, so there was little opportunity for complaints or embarrassment. They read out loud throughout the day after that, always with someone listening.

Yogi was good for that. He lived behind the school and came over to brush up on the basics, maybe get a diploma, explore what else might be out there for him. He would sit and listen to them read; so did Sad Eyes or Lonely, and sometimes Droopy or Smiley, once it became normal to hear their staccato, struggling voices in the background. As the class got used to it, a tired or bored student would ask to go listen to Sharky or Lil Man read awhile.

One day in January, the class was drawing the organs of the body, Spanky and Casper were with Juan going over the globe and matching countries to pictures from *National Geographic*, and Sharky was reading about how the slaves were brought on ships and sold. From his end of the picnic table, Sharky blew out a perfect set of notes: "Many people died on the ships." He stopped and glanced up at me. "I don't read all slow and stopping anymore, ay Homés?" He looked a little startled with himself.

"No, you don't. You got it down, Sharky."

Lil Man never gave that kind of proclamation. As he gained competence, he began lifting his cap back so he could look you in the eye, and started fighting the other students for a seat nearer the front of the class.

* * * * *

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Sharky and Lil Man Learn to Read

5

An 8-year-old girl from the Jordan Downs housing project received attention in the newspapers several years ago. She held a one-room play school in the housing project's recreation center, and her young students had improved remarkably in their reading levels.

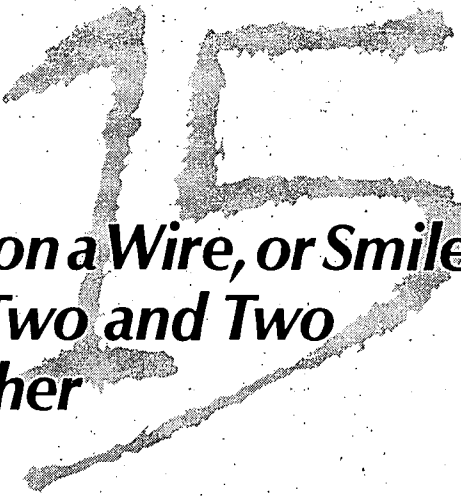
I picture her in a circle of children, listening, correcting, directing them to read a sentence again "the right way." That's what an 8-year-old would probably do.

Why is that so hard for us?

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Birds on a Wire, or Smiley Puts Two and Two Together

There are kids in gangs who do violence to others and to themselves; and there are those who fear it, who are shy, apathetic, and scared. They are shadows in the gang, neither stopping nor participating in the violence.

Smiley had dreams. He was curious and kind. Other gang members were "destructive," which unsettled him. I remember fondly that he made a bench of wood crates for us to sit on while I waited for the bus after school. He hid it behind a tree and would pull it out when he walked me to the bus stop at the end of the day.

One afternoon, I had to close the Catholic community center, where I worked in the evenings, to rush his dog to the vet. He had asked a neighbor to clip the Doberman puppy's ears so it would look mean, the way Doberman's look. But by the time I got there, the dog was butchered and bleeding to death under a tree where Smiley had placed it.

"I want to save its life," he told me. We drove to the vet, who had to put the dog to sleep. The vet told me, "I see many of these things, and they're awful. But if I went to court or got into each case, I'd have no time to help animals or keep my business. You know what I mean." I was angry about the dog, and he was letting me know that he wasn't into pursuing it.

Smiley was full of regrets. "I didn't know, Homie. You know, I just wanted it to look tough. I didn't know, Homie. The man told me he knew how to cut ears. He jacked up my dog."

Smiley had two siblings in college, a third who played in a band, and two hardworking, decent parents. They owned a home that had been carefully maintained. Yet no one, not in school or at home, had noticed that Smiley was completely uneducated, that schooling had left no trace on him. He was unable to do any mathematics at all, nothing requiring more addition than could be done on his fingers. He could not give you any historical facts or the name of the planet he inhabited. Yet he was in the ninth grade and had attended the local elementary and junior high school. He had learned to hide, to manage impressions with kindness and cleverness.

Until recently, I thought this only happened in inner cities, but my friend Ami Kern, a scholar in rhetoric and a performance artist, told me that she was illiterate until the sixth grade, when a teacher finally busted her. "They made me go to a special school," she told our philosophy discussion group one evening, somewhat embarrassed. "I learned how to copy, and I listened really well so that it seemed I knew what was going on. Even when they sent me to the school, I still tried not to learn. They had to keep changing the way they taught me so that I had to read and couldn't cheat. Now I read a novel a week."

When Smiley began the year at El Santo Niño, he could read at about a fourth- or fifth-grade level, which, except for Playboy and Pirate, was exceptional for the group. In Smiley's case, literacy was not problematic. His biggest and fundamental deficit was math. In the same way that Lil Man and Sharky hardly knew their alphabets when they started, Smiley could do no arithmetic except count on his fingers. He could not add simple equations in his head or on paper.

Watching Smiley struggle with arithmetic, I learned much about the relation of one mental process upon the others. Smiley obviously had intelligence, and he was observant. When I had to go to court over a problem with a landlord, he advised me to take a lawyer with me.

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"I can't afford one."

"Anybody with a suit and a briefcase, Homeboy. He just has to look like one."

And he could read. So why the lack of knowledge? Apparently, his inability to hold numbers in head and to understand a concept like multiplication also hampered his efforts to put together other kinds of information. He knew about the world in bits, but they did not come together into wholes that made sense. He knew about Earth, and he knew he lived on a planet. He just didn't know that Earth was the planet he lived on. Smiley had difficulty putting two and two together when it involved listening to strings of information.

The only solution to his difficulty with numbers was to imagine what it would be like to think like him, and then to invent a method of guided imagery that would train Smiley away from his fingers when counting. We worked on addition and subtraction for months, and then multiplication and division for months.

The daily routine began with birds: "Smiley, close your eyes and imagine five pigeons."

"Where are they?"

"On a telephone wire. Have one fly away. Can you picture the ones that are still on the wire?"

Guiding his thought processes in this direct manner proved to be the needed therapy. In time, numbers became a part of him, and he could manipulate and order the things in the world the way that only math allows. By year's end, he was picking up fractions with ease—his mind had developed a facility with this process of breaking the world into pieces that he could move around and reassemble.

"I couldn't even do two plus two before I came here," he told his mother when she thought about pulling him out of the school.

Of course, this new skill affected other areas as well. He had learned to put together disparate pieces of information and see their relatedness. This gave him an interest in history and Chicano politics, which he developed into an avid hobby.

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Like all basic learning, the beginning was tedious, frustrating, and laborious—drills out loud, drills on paper, and constant guided practice. It took several weeks before anything significant occurred. But after the first insight, followed another; and when he had finally disciplined his mind to hold numbers constant and to manipulate them, he learned math without further difficulty and the world became a more accessible place to him.

* * * * *

When I was working on the Pima-Maricopa reservation, my colleagues and I once argued about whether certain students had genuine learning disabilities or just lacked motivation. The director of education intervened and informed us forcefully that lack of motivation, if it prevented a student from learning, was obviously a disabling condition for the student. It was real and had to be attended to.

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16

Playboy Meets the Buddha

There were days when we ran out of things to do, or we could see that the kids or the teachers needed a break. Those days, we'd make sandwiches from the stuff we had in the kitchen, crowd into the van, and take trips to museums, a movie, or a part of town to explore.

Other trips were better planned. We went to places in L.A. that would flesh out ideas. Since we had been covering history and world religions, I contacted Buddhist monasteries, Jewish synagogues, Greek Orthodox churches, and Indian museums, and made an itinerary.

Pirate decided to skip the trip and go home. He was in a horrid mood. He could be a pain, so I wasn't going to push it. He was verbal and bright and could have performed decently in a public school, except he was always angry, wouldn't work, and was stoned most the time. His parents had brought him to El Santo Niño. They were involved in the community and had heard about the school. They warned me he would be stubborn. The first few weeks, he mostly came to class and went to sleep on the benches that lined the auditorium's walls, taking part in a discussion now and then by raising his head and arguing a point for a minute. We allowed it, as pushing him had only frustrated everyone else in his life.

You would think that allowing Pirate to get away with this would have set off a rebellion—and, in fact, one kid tried to mimic him and sleep on the wall. But he wasn't serious; he got a quick "don't even try it" talk. Kids are smart. They could see that Pirate had a problem and that this was why he received different treatment. Kids know the difference between unfair and special situations.

So Pirate did his routine for a few weeks. When we didn't fight with him or put him down, he got so bored that he gradually participated in more of the school day, began to find it rewarding, and eventually was participating like everyone else. But today, he was in one of those moods, and I wasn't going to beg him.

Sharky compulsively drew on things, including my van if I didn't watch him. He was always apologetic and willing to scrub it off; but prevention was better, so I made him empty his pockets before getting in. At UCLA, the placaso he drew on the parking lot cost us \$50. "Sorry Homes," he said, "My hand just starts making the neighborhood."

Our first stop was the beautiful Greek Orthodox cathedral, St. Sophia, with its huge dome from which Mary looks down from a Byzantine sky. The kids were reverent enough and understood that this was similar to a Catholic church but with a different pope. They could find Greece on a map but were probably a little fuzzy on the difference between ancient Rome and the state of Italy. The long-bearded priest saying, "Hello," to them left an image to which they could attach the word *Greek*. The Virgin Mary painted across the dome was impressive to them as the biggest mural they had ever seen.

At a small synagogue in the Fairfax district, a rabbi discussed the Holocaust with them. A group of Orthodox men came in with their long coats and beards, which fascinated them, and helped the rabbi with the presentation. The one question they really wanted to ask, though—about their dress

* "Making the neighborhood" is gang lingo for doing graffiti. To the gang kids, placasos and graffiti symbols are synonymous with the neighborhood. The act of graffiti "makes" or extends the neighborhood.

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and appearance—they held back on. Usually, they might have been willing to be a bit rude and stir things up a little, but after the Holocaust lecture, all the kids were a little sensitized.

We had lunch at Canter's deli down the street. I ordered the least expensive thing on the menu, a round of matzo ball soup for the group. Here, they asked me immediately, "So why did those guys all dress like Abraham Lincoln?" I really had no idea, but we all thought it was pretty cool looking. The soup filled us up, even though each bowl had just one big meatball in it.

For the Buddhist experience, we stopped at an old, two-story house in East Hollywood that served as a monastery. Thomas, an American convert, met us in the parking lot and told us that the priest would meet us in the meditation room upstairs. In the large atrium, we sat on mats in a circle, our backs against the wall.

"You think Homeboy's going to do kung fu?" Casper wondered out loud.

Trying to get comfortable, Thomas asked, "You all come from the same school?"

"Yeah," Joker said. "From Gangster High."

"Have some *respeto* [respect], fool," Casper shot back. To Thomas, he said, "*Dispense*,[†] he don't know how to act."

They were used to talking to each other that way, so it didn't escalate.

Thomas continued, ignoring them, "Master Ong is a Buddhist monk. Do you have ideas about what that might be?"

"It's like from China," Sad Eyes offered.

Sharky added, "They believe in reincarnation, or something like that, Homey."

"Like when you come back as animals 'cause you're bad," Goofy extended, "and you pray to the Buddha man."

Thomas smiled, satisfied with their answers. "That's all correct. It looks like you've been studying."

I felt pretty good. They were giving a decent account of themselves.

[†] Pardon, forgive, or excuse.

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The Master appeared in a black robe with something like meditation or rosary beads at his waist. He was Chinese, short, probably in his 50s, with a shaved head, and he walked with a cane. He bowed to the kids, some of whom sort of bowed backed from their seats. Thomas introduced him, "This is Master Ong. He is the monk who leads this monastery."

Playboy made a crack, and the monk immediately responded, "You speak again no permission and I hit your back 40 times." He was obviously aware of the popularity of the television show *Kung Fu* and that the students would associate him with it. The threat was enough to calm them down. He had a good sense of humor.

"Master Ong can see an object coming from behind," Thomas explained. "He reacts in a moment because he is always in the present."

The monk cut him off. "I teach you Buddhism. What is this?" He tapped on the floor with his cane.

"It's the floor," the group mumbled, knowing something was up.

"No, that's its name. What is it?"

Playboy decided to engage him. "It's wood."

"That's the material it is made from. What is it?"

"You walk on it," Playboy answered with more energy.

"That is its function. What is it?" He tapped with his cane on the floor several times.

"It's whatever you think it is," Lonely came back.

"So what is it?" Psycho was losing patience.

"It is," responded the monk, tapping again on the floor.

"The sound?" several students asked at once.

"No. It only is."

"I get it," said Playboy. "It just is."

Master Ong regarded him. "If you understand, you will be happy." With that the monk stood, excused himself, and bowed again to us.

Thomas walked us back outside after showing us some artifacts and explaining their use. "This is a good thing for peace you're doing," he told me.

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A Homeboy Is Never Far From Home

Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
they have to take you in.

Robert Frost

The brown paper bag, the spray can, and the rag were Shadow's trademarks. Even on public transportation, Shadow got high. He always went straight to the bench seat at the back of the bus. There, he would shake the can concealed in a paper bag, rattling the little ball inside, and pump a thick, close-range spray into the rag he always carried in his pocket. He then pressed the wet rag to his face and inhaled deeply. The result was a silver-faced boy in a stupor. I often saw him staggering off the bus in this state.

In class, he learned very slowly, and I couldn't tell if he had always been this way or if the glues and paints had degenerated his abilities. Much of the time, he just stared at me, and unless the work I gave him had a visible repetitive structure, he couldn't do it.

When Shadow disappeared one morning, Juan took a drive at lunch to look for him. He found him wandering the neighborhood, incoherent and smelling of paint. Juan called me from a pay phone outside the corner store on Maple and 30th. "Arturo, guess what I found? I got Shadow in the car. What should I do with him?"

"Is he pretty messed up?"

"He's just sitting and twitching his face. I pulled up next to him, and he just got in the car. He's in a good mood, but he's stuttering so bad he can't talk."

"I think we need to do something while he still has some brain left."

"I'll take him home," Juan offered.

"Meet me at that restaurant in Hollenbeck after you drop him off. We'll have a burrito and think about this."

I called his probation officer later that afternoon and said I would testify that Shadow was out getting stoned and was not attending school as his probation demanded. I didn't have to do much convincing. The PO asked me what I thought he needed, and I said lots of structure and a safe place to be sober for a few months.

So Shadow was picked up and taken to juvenile hall.

The kids knew I had something to do with this, and yet no one, not even his little brother Sharky, expressed anger over it. Even gang members like to see their friends alive and healthy, and all of us knew that Shadow's time on earth would be short if he continued anesthetizing himself in solvents all day. But their acceptance also relied on the knowledge that Shadow remained one of us.

I visited Shadow once a month, and the kids sent him letters. I asked his teacher at juvenile hall to keep abreast of his progress and to let him know of my continued interest. I sent notes with his mother wishing him well and letting him know I was looking forward to having him back.

Several months later, he returned, 20 pounds heavier, and praising the juvenile hall school. "They're strict there, and you have to go to school every day or you can't leave your room. I learned a lot in there."

And so he came back, and we went on with him. I tried to create a structure for him that was easier to follow, closer to what he enjoyed at the hall, and I tried to find support for sobriety in a therapist intern who visited us twice a week from the local university.

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For the time being, the combined effects of incarceration and our efforts helped keep him steady. If he had required it, I would have sent him away again. Had the school lasted longer, I am sure another relapse would have occurred. That is the nature of addiction—it has to be expected and planned for. At that point, I would have looked for some place, maybe juvenile hall again, that could have protected and helped him with resources that neither his school, neighborhood, or family could provide. In time, the periods between relapses would have become longer, and eventually the addiction would have turned into a threat he could manage. That, too, is the nature of addiction. This is true especially when the addict is a teenager and the adult response is both strong and consistent.

Shadow knew that incarceration remained at ready disposal in terms of keeping him straight. But there is all the difference in the world between being sent away and being abandoned. His school, his PO, and his family used the former as tool in a joint struggle to raise a struggling youth. But we claimed him as our own. Our eyes would be on him, and the adult community to which he belonged would always welcome him.

That's what being a homeboy is all about.

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18

I Lean on Casper and Sharky

El Santo Niño called to kids who simply went into overload in the public schools. In our school, there was no failure, and there were no “good kids” to have to compete with. The exaggerated, the rigid, is always a way to compensate, a way to divert attention and harm from a more fragile part of ourselves. In this place, though, nothing was attacking them, and they didn’t need to be tough.

When students were belligerent, it was usually because I had lost sight of this. When that happened, the kids knew they were being pinned and asked to do what they could not.

Casper started school like all of them—illiterate and full of attitude. Like many of these boys, you didn’t feed him fastballs. You gave him big, fat slow balls and let him get some wood on them. By our taking it slow, repeating things, and being patient, Casper began to experience the feel of learning and the pleasure of discovering he could get a handle on this world. By December, he was swinging for the fences and enjoying the tests—a polite, wonderful student.

Playboy had found a job through his brother at a Kentucky Fried Chicken in Beverly Hills. The owner liked his work, so when Playboy brought Casper in for an interview, the owner hired him immediately. By end of the month, gang members were frying chicken, working the register, cleaning the bathrooms, and politely asking if people wanted biscuits or coleslaw.

The last one hired was Happy. It was his first job, and the day of the interview he sat in class petrified all morning and afternoon. He was even worse the first day of work. But he caught on.

The boys watched each other and made sure no one stole anything. Since Playboy was an assistant manager, he kept the others in line. The owner, who I never met, knew they were all gang members, and it was a very good thing he was doing with them.

In February, Happy quit. He came to class one day and said that it was too many hours and he had to concentrate on his education. He was a hefty boy, with a thin mustache that made him look like a Greek fisherman. He had often told me that when he got high, he just started running and sometimes went for a mile or two, and that it felt free. He had an innocence that didn't match his size, and my heart was warmed to hear him walk in with his pressed T-shirt and talk about the importance of an education over a part-time job.

Casper was also working long hours, sometimes closing during the week and getting home at 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. He started missing school, but it was obvious the money was helping him and his family. I had been so happy with his previous work that I leaned on him about missing school, told him he had to be on time or he couldn't come at all. It was stupid of me. We had developed a mutual admiration, and now there was this adversarial quality to our relationship. He got an attitude because I got an attitude.

He opted for the job and decided to skip the school; but he kept coming around occasionally, trying to sit in, saying he could pass our tests, wanting his grades. It wasn't a clean break.

What I should have done was work around the fact that he was coming home late and therefore getting up late. I could have assigned him extra take-home work; given him partial but important credit for a partial day; or tailored the curriculum, using the experience as a lesson in problem solving, choices, endurance, and managing competing concerns. It could have been a rite of passage, if I had been able to mentor this smartly.

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Instead, I took it personally rather than as one more turn with which a mentor needed to accompany him. I didn't need to box him in.

A kid doesn't mind rigidity when you're mentoring and not fighting him. When Sharky didn't show for several days, his classmates took me to where he was staying. It was early in the morning, and I walked into a living room where he was sleeping with a woman 10 years older than him. Her brothers were sleeping in the same room. I was mad and told Sharky, "You better get outside unless you want me to get someone in this room for statutory rape."

He was startled and for a few seconds was caught between pulling up his pants and making that forward jerk with the arms and shoulders that means, "Come on, do something about it." It looked like a mime dance. He came outside, acted mad for a few seconds, then took his tongue lashing and admitted he should have come by and discussed this. He was apologetic.

I was wrong about the woman. He was 14, and she was 24 and had two children; but 15 years later they were still together, and he was making a decent father.

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~~See~~ See this also



1

If You Build It . . .

Not only did the gang kids gravitate to the school quickly and naturally, but so did people in the community who wanted to help.

Therapist interns from Cal State L.A. appeared at our door one morning asking if they could volunteer some hours. At 22, I had never met anyone who had been to therapy, so I wasn't sure what occurred in therapy. But I assumed it to be salubrious. They set up in my office for a few hours twice a week, and the kids could choose to go in and talk to them. Happy came out of the room on one occasion, pulled me aside, and told me in a low tone, "The lady says I can talk about anything. I said, 'Even about you and me making . . . making sex?' And she didn't get mad. She said we could even talk about that! Homeboy, I never talked to no lady like this."

At the least, the interns let them know that seeing a therapist might be a pleasant experience and didn't mean you were crazy. It was one more place to get help.

The student teachers from USC worked out great, and the kids loved them. One student teacher was very interested in the kids, so she gave them a lot of time. She was also very voluptuous. Several had crushes on her. They couldn't understand why I wasn't making a move. "Art's afraid of that stuff," they liked to chorus after she would leave.

Help came from many quarters. Officers from the Newton Division of the L.A. Police Department patrolled the local area

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and knew our gang members. The officers stopped by often and complimented the kids on their progress. The cholos felt good being talked to this way by police officers. It contrasted with their usual conversations, in which the boys would stand in a row at Trinity Park with their heads down, an officer in front of them asking questions, and the gang members all repeating, "I don't know anything, I didn't see anything," a mutual, ritualistic ordeal played out daily between the cholos and the police. Being complimented by the police and having a chance to be nice kids admired by important adults—well, this was new and enjoyable.

Interestingly, most of the gang kids wanted to be police officers when they grew up. They knew that, with their records, this was an impossible wish, but it was a wish nonetheless. Police work represented goodness, strength, and respect, qualities for which all people have some yearning. Understandably, this yearning prevailed in kids who knew they had been a real letdown to their parents and community.

The police also sponsored a Police Explorers group—a type of scout troop, except they received a police-issued Explorer uniform. Explorers took field trips, helped out at the station, and worked crowd control at sporting events. A couple of the gang members joined the group, and it made a strong impact on them.

Other organizations helped as well. The local Catholic school gave us some used eighth-grade desks and a stack of report cards so we could send grades home. The local elementary school offered the use of its new photocopier. This gift edged along the law in terms of a public school allowing free use of its equipment to our private school, but the principal was generous and community-minded. The Sugar Ray Robinson Youth Foundation waived its rule about funding only public schools and sponsored a soccer team at our little cholo academy.

Al Rendon, the community affairs director at L.A. Trade Tech, the local junior college, gave us the use of their soccer field for the Sugar Ray team. He also paid us a visit and talked to the kids about junior college. Yogi, who was old enough, went to see

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him and signed up for the mechanics training program. Yogi took Ramon, a older gang member not in our school but with fantastic drawing ability, to the junior college with him on his second visit. Ramon took a picture of a mural he had completed for the neighborhood butcher, and Mr. Rendon helped him enroll in the commercial design program.

Sister Duran from Catholic Charities took on Smiley and Droopy, who didn't qualify for work through the CETA program because of probation or something, and told them that if they wanted to work, she'd figure something out. They worked for two months without knowing if they were going to get any money, but she managed to pull a couple hundred dollars out of petty cash and her own pocket for them. It was their first job.

And, of course, KFC hired several of our students. Serving the hungry of Beverly Hills and the West Side, the restaurant wasn't in our neighborhood, so driving to work took 30 minutes. But the kids gave each other rides, and parents pitched in when needed.

The Child Guidance Center accepted Goofy for a short time and did a wonderful job with him. Woody came in one day and said he had just seen Goofy at the park. "He was just laying there looking up. He wasn't even high. That's the first time I've seen him like that."

Father Fitzpatrick sent one of his volunteers to help us form our own chapter of *Los Hermanos Unidos* [The Brothers United]. The Father had started these clubs for gang members at several churches. The kids got special jackets and insignia in exchange for vowing to work for unity instead of violence. They took field trips, met with other clubs, attended retreats, held dances, worked toward sobriety, and generally tried to provide an alternative peer group to gang members.

Even Mayor Tom Bradley offered help. His "Task Force on Youth" encouraged several of my students to think seriously about politics. The task force consisted of young people who met on one of the top floors of city hall late on Wednesday nights and advised one of the mayor's deputies on issues related to youth. We rode the elevator with the mayor on a few occasions, and for

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meetings we got to sit in big chairs around a huge, polished table. There were no field trips or uniforms, but it made the gang members who participated feel important.

Beyond organizations and benefactors, of top importance was the help that came in the form of relationships with judges and probation officers. As they got to know me, we were able to work together so that the gang kids understood we were, in fact, a community looking out for them and not just a bunch of fragmented adults they could keep dodging. Our students knew that I spoke to both their parents and their probation officers, that all of us discussed their progress. On top of that, if court dates became necessary, the students knew that the judges would talk to their probation officers and me in the judges' chambers and decide on sentencing influenced by our conversations. Judges who knew me usually asked what I thought was best and often took my advice.

Cooperative parents and willing community members were not difficult to find. All we had to do was take a disparate group of adults and put them in touch with each other such that they functioned as a community. The employers, the judges, the parents, the educators, the researchers, the ministers, the police officers, the coaches: We became a village to each other, with a sense of common purpose.

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Lonely and Playboy Nearly Take the Town

One of my favorite memories from El Santo Niño was an annual speech competition for junior high students in the public schools, sponsored by the Optimist Oratorical Society. Participants compete for local, regional, state, and national titles in an eliminatory series. I had been in this as a kid and called to see if we could enter. Once I explained the nature of our school, they were excited to have us. I asked Playboy and Lonely to compete in the men's and women's divisions. They were both cocky and verbal and had dreams of becoming lawyers or executives in the fuzzy way that 15-year-olds think of these things.

We worked and reworked their speeches, timed them, and rehearsed them for weeks. The day of the contest, I put on my suit and drove to the school. Lonely had on an elegant, dark dress. It was time to leave, and Playboy came huffing in his suit saying that he couldn't go, that there was going to be a fight and he had to be there, that the fight was important and he couldn't let the gang down.

Of course, there was no big fight. He was just scared, as I remembered being when I had been in the contest. One thing about this kind of exceptional gang member: They're arrogant but insecure. You have to push them, support them, and take no nonsense. I told him he had better cut out the bullshit and take care of the business at hand.

We got to the competition. It was in a rented room in a nice hotel. Of course, the other kids competing were the best the public schools had to offer—student body presidents, leadership types. The judges knew this, and when they introduced Lonely and Playboy, they did so with interest and a certain nice deference, knowing this was a very difficult thing for them.

The other orators were excellent, as they had to be.

Playboy's turn came first. I pressed his shoulder, and Sad Eyes, who had come along to be supportive, whispered, "You'll be all right."

He was amazing. He started stiff-shouldered and speaking too fast, but he caught himself, and from midpoint on, he was animated and only looked at his notes to guide himself, not getting stuck on them as I had feared. The audience loved him as he delivered his speech, "I Am a Gang Member." He walked back looking like he'd made it through a minefield. I was so glad I had forced him to go through with this.

"How was I, Homeboy?"

"Everybody loved it. You've got a good chance."

Lonely was the last of the women's division, and the last of the evening, so she was plenty nervous. She followed a demure girl from Bethune Junior High who gave a polished, well-choreographed speech. You could tell she was comfortable in these settings. Lonely, who was a big girl, and even in a dress looked tough, squeezed my hand as she got up. "Wish me luck, Arturo." Her speech was just as good as the girl's before her, and she knew it. She was a woman victorious when she came back to her seat.

The limit was three minutes; unfortunately, both Lonely and Playboy went over by 10 or 15 seconds, and that cost them points. But they each took second in their divisions and received great applause and the acknowledgment that they might have taken first if not for the time. I wished I had asked their parents to come. They collected their trophies and certificates, and we left the auditorium, after some handshakes and congratulations, into a fine March evening.

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Playboy said, "Let's go somewhere good for dinner, a nice place. What about it Art?"

"If everyone wants to."

"I'll treat everyone," he offered.

"How about me and you treat," I countered.

"That's cool, Homeboy."

So the four of us went to a restaurant in Pasadena and enjoyed a late dinner and good conversation. We drove home feeling fed and finished.

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When Woody Left the Gang (and No One Noticed)

How hard was it to leave the gang? Like I said before, gang kids are not from Mars. They have the same troubles in their relationships that we all have. When a young person is ready to leave a set of friends, to end those relationships, it's because that child has changed so much that those friends no longer meet a need and that child has replaced those friends with a new set of people who do. This takes time—as anyone knows who has gone through the kind of changes where you gradually find you want a new mate, new friends, or new relations with family.

The reason why the myth about gangs being hard to leave is popular is because people listen to kids who say, "I want to leave, but they won't let me," just as they listen to friends who say, "I want to break up, but she or he won't let me." We know that the "won't let" is in the heart, not in the other person. Most gang kids never get the sustained adult support necessary to make a real, deep-seated change, such that they find they no longer really relate to their old friends. When they do, the relationship ends the same way that other relationships end: Both parties leave each other, with a bit of nostalgia and regret.

One of the boys at El Santo Niño was tall and muscular for his age. He was a bit of a bad ass in the gang. Woody didn't show up for the first three weeks at my school because a rival gang had jumped him and left him for dead. When he came in, his arm was still in a cast and his jaws were wired shut so that he had to talk through his teeth.

This event began a transformation for him. Being that near death, turning 16, and going through that pain made him momentarily reflective and started him questioning his vulnerability and whether he wanted to be in that kind of life. This introspection would have gone nowhere, however, without the school. With no path other than the one he knew, he would have eventually returned to the familiar. This happens to all of us when we have big experiences but no immediate avenues that allow us to roll the experiences into long-term changes.

With the school there, however, and with his openness to something else, he learned quickly. As were most of the students, Woody was nearly illiterate, unable to write except in an unpunctuated ramble, and he knew little of the outside world. But he learned very quickly. Soon, he was writing essays, which he really enjoyed. It had never occurred to him that "writing had an order that made sense," as he put it. He loved learning about the world; science; and countries, languages, religions, and customs.

At midyear, he had a beautiful, hardworking girlfriend who wasn't in the gang. His braces came off and, deciding he wanted to go to a regular high school, he transferred to Jefferson. Two weeks later, he came back and asked if he could rejoin the class. He said there were too many gang members at the high school and that trouble would be easy to fall into.

Again, without the school at El Santo Niño, without a place to go and make contact with an adult community that had a direction for him, he would have lost what he had gained after only a short time back in the old environment—like people who regain weight if they leave their diet programs without transition periods.

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I enjoyed having him back, because I missed him. Later that year, my brother and several friends gave a mountain religious retreat that most of the gang attended, along with the kids at St. Vincent's. It was strange retreat, a lot of highs and lows; and on Saturday night, after affirmations and confessions, two of the gang kids went off and broke windows, turned over beds, and went a little nuts. Silent started it—I knew he would. I was not ready for him, my gut told me to not take him, but I did so anyway. He and I discussed this retreat months later and both came to that conclusion.

The next morning, I found that Woody had swept up most of the glass and put things back together. He told me his father had a janitorial service that he helped in, and he knew how to do this quickly. He and I and several members of the team sat around and talked for a while. He was embarrassed for the gang, and it was obvious that he did not consider himself part of their activity. It was also obvious, as we all stood there, that he was making a transition.

By June, his clothing had changed to a kind of shirt and pants that were still khaki-like, but did not look cholo. He hung out with his girlfriend, was helping his father more, had bought a car, and was getting his driver's license that summer by going to summer school. Gang members drive without licenses because they don't go to school enough to take the state-required training course.

Once, while I was teaching, he looked at me and said, "I know what you're trying to do with us," like he knew something the rest didn't. At the end of the school year, and the last time I saw him, he said, "I think I have mainly one thing I can thank you for, and that was the retreat." He didn't tell me what about the retreat he wanted to thank me for. Then he said, "I know only one thing, and that's to work. That's all my father taught me, and that's what I know."

He was now back in the stream, on to a different life. Sharky told me a couple of years later, while he was studying bookkeeping at the Job Corps, that Woody had made a business with his

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dad and they cleaned factories and buildings downtown, and that he and Lulu had a baby.

None of the other gang members really noticed his departure—it was so gradual, as these things have to be—and they had their own lives to take care of.

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22 ***'The Best School I Ever Been To'***

At report card time, we had our only weapons incident, which consisted of Sleepy waving a gun at my head behind my back. I only found out about it later, after school, when Sad Eyes and Lonely told me. "Arturo, didn't you notice everyone was laughing when you were in the office?"

"Yeah, sort of. Why, what was happening?"

"You can't get mad or we won't say it."

"Okay, what?"

"You know when Sleepy was behind you at the desk? He was waving a gun at your head, pretending he was going to shoot you, 'cause you wouldn't give him his report card."

"God damn. He could have killed me!"

"I know, Arturo," Sad Eyes said, laughing. "But it was pretty funny."

Like I said, that was our only weapons incident. I didn't make much of it.

There's a story behind why I wouldn't give Sleepy his report card. At the beginning of that week, we had all gone to Hollywood to see Luis Valdez's movie, *Zoot Suit*. We were the entire audience during the matinee. Afterward, I asked the students to write me a five-paragraph essay on the points that the movie tried to convey.

Sleepy still owed me that paper, and I had told him not to count on getting credit for the year until I received his essay. Apparently, he decided against shooting me in the head and instead wrote a respectable paper. Sleepy even mentioned the symbolism of the beaten Pachuco momentarily transformed into an Aztec warrior and then fading into black.

In my storyteller's mind, that scene in the movie was symbolic for me as well. Our little grant had been spent, and no one had promised new funds. The kids knew I had been trying to raise money and find a new location to continue the school, but by May it was obvious that the effort had failed. At 22, I had the energy to initiate, but lacked the experience to sustain and build. I had known going in this might be the case, and the kids had suspected it as well.

We took a lot of field trips in our last weeks, some educational and others just to enjoy the waning days of our little group. In one of our last excursions, we drove to the Huntington Gardens, which surround a mansion that contains art pieces, books, and famous letters and documents. Tourists visit the museum and then stroll the extensive, cultivated grounds. But since it was late May in Los Angeles, an unexpected light rain sent everyone back to the cars. Happy, Droopy, and Joker asked me to keep walking with them—they wanted to talk to me. I gave my keys to Sad Girl so the students could wait in the van, then set down a trail with the three boys.

We sat on some rocks in the Japanese section of the garden, in a light drizzle, and Happy asked me pointedly, "When are you going to start your life, Homeboy?"

"This is my life," I told him.

"No, Homeboy, a real life. Get married, have money. This ain't shit."

Droopy countered, "No, if he gets married, he won't have time for us."

"Don't be selfish," Joker shot back, looking straight at him as he zipped up his black windbreaker. "We all gotta take care of business." But Droopy was only 14 and of a different perspective from Joker and Happy.

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"I hope you guys turn out okay," I said. "I worry about it."

"Where you going?" Joker asked me.

"Compton. I'll be working for a church."

Joker continued, "Does it pay pretty good?"

"No. I might be a priest. I don't know."

Happy teased me over that one. "I knew Homeboy was afraid of that stuff. That's why he never made a *movida* [a move] on that lady from USC."

"There you go again," Joker chided me. "Man, they got some dangerous hoodlums in Compton. You're gonna get jacked. Can't you go do anything like a normal person?"

"So what's gonna to happen to us?" Droopy asked.

"We have to find new schools for you guys."

But Droopy objected, "I'm not going to go. I'll just get kicked out."

"Just don't be so damn crazy, fool," Joker advised him.

"I can't help it. I'm psycho. Arturo knows how I am. But at Jefferson, I'll kill someone."

Joker brought it back to his own life. "I'm going to Jefferson and finish school, get a job, get married. No more messing around. Take care of my *jefecita* [mom]. That's what it's all about."

It was hard to argue with that.

The drizzle had turned to drops, so we started walking back to the van, still talking, but broaching brisker topics: cars, girls, movies, the weekend, getting shot at, finding a job, adventures while drunk. Happy told us that he and Joker got high one evening. "We just started running. I didn't even feel tired. We just ran and ran, all the way into the Harpys' territory, way past the freeway. I felt free, Homeboy."

The rain lightly filtered through the trees overarching the walkway. But the talking stopped when we came to the desert gardens. There were no trees for cover, just every shape of cactus. We booked the last hundred yards back to the van.

We spent the last days before the school closed figuring out where everyone was going to end up. Sid Thompson, who oversaw our section of the public school district, made sure our

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kids got credit for their year at El Santo Niño when they reenrolled in the public school system. Pirate and Playboy decided to continue at a private Catholic school, where one of the priests told me, "We don't kick out, we kick ass." Pirate actually made it onto the basketball team.

We did one more school lesson. Smiley and I went to a laboratory supply store and spent the last of our grant money for 20 preserved fetal pigs for dissection. I just hoped I could avoid a flying pig fight. But the kids were good about the whole thing. We laid the little guys three to a table, and the kids dissected them as I called out steps from a handbook. This capped our investigation into the organs of the body, and school was officially over.

On the last day, everyone got report cards. I gave them all my new phone number in Compton, we talked into the afternoon, and then everyone gradually started off for wherever they were going. Smiley and Sharky hung around. Smiley said he was going to get a car and wanted "to just be able to go to Hollywood and have fun, mess around with girls. Why does there always have to be trouble."

Smiley left, and Sharky and I talked a bit more. We locked up, made sure we left it clean. The auditorium was empty.

"Doesn't look like our school anymore," he said. "This is the best school I ever been to, Homey."

"Me too. It felt like home here with you guys."

We walked out the side door. I put my arm up, and he leaned into me. There was no one else around, so I put my arm around him as we walked, gave him a strong hug, and kissed his forehead.

"Be careful, all right."

"Don't worry, Homey. I know what's up."

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