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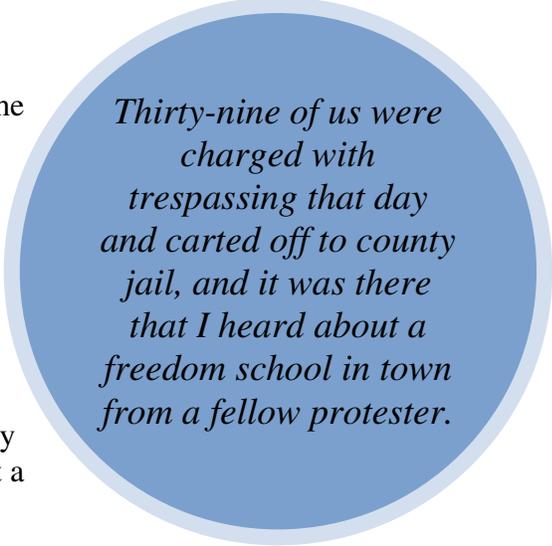
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# Reflections on a Life in Teaching

William Ayers

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I came to teaching from an odd angle beginning in 1965, and the circumstances were these: I was a student at the University of Michigan, caught up in the Black Freedom Movement and the early stirrings of anti-war sentiment on the campus. During the first International Days of Protest Against the War in Vietnam I committed an act of civil disobedience, borrowing both tactics and moral outrage from the Civil Rights struggle, sitting in at the offices of the local draft board and disrupting the calm functioning of sorting young men to kill and be killed. Thirty-nine of us were charged with trespassing that day and carted off to county jail, and it was there that I heard about a freedom school in town from a fellow protester.



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Intrigued by his description of the place I went to have a look as soon as I was released. What I found was enchanting and captivating, a little utopian dream called the Children's Community—"an experiment in freedom and integration"—housed in a shabby church basement. The promise of the place pushed the sluminess to the side, and all I saw was color and laughter and life. I was hooked—I'd walked out of jail and into my first teaching job, and from that day until this, teaching has been linked for me to the persistent longing for freedom, and the never-ending quest for justice.

I remember the buzz and hum of my first visit. There were dozens of separate things going on, nothing in lock-step, and it was impossible for me to take in more than impressions. There were books and paint and clay, posters of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman on the walls, photos of Andrew Goodman, James Cheney and Michael Schwerner, the three martyrs of Mississippi. Several kids danced near a record-player for a long time, and I remember two who seemed to do little more than run riot through the large room. And still I loved it.

The kids were sweet, of course, simply because kids are sweet, their wonder and vulnerability always combining to create a kind of special, spontaneous magic. And nothing shocked or even annoyed me—I carried inside of me my shaping experiences as the middle-child in a large family. I knew noise and motion and the jumble of a community of kids close up.

Most days were like that first one—pockets of calm, eclectic projects and fleeting efforts in every corner, laughter and tears and a current of wildness that could ignite in a heart beat, sending a rollicking handful of roughnecks harum-scarum around the room. I believed that most schools tried to break and control kids, enacting some cleaned up kind of Calvinism, beating the hell out of them for their own good. I embraced, then, whole-heartedly a contrary idea: kids are naturally good and will blossom beautifully if raised in freedom. A little Rousseau, a little Thoreau, a large dose of A.S. Neill and Summerhill School. I never figured out how to adequately handle the wildest kids in their fullest eruptions—it didn't fit in my scheme of things and I didn't know where to turn—so I mostly held on until the storm passed. I figured as always that eventually love itself would sort everything out.

We organized field trips to everywhere and anywhere: the bakery, the farmers' market, the Ford assembly line, Motown Records, the apple orchard. The Motown trip led to a book-making project based on our favorite singers, complete with song lyrics and autographed photos creating our own unique primers. The trip to the orchard led to a transformed school next day: now it was a busy little bakery creating apple fritters and apple sauce, apple pies and apple muffins.

Experience, experience, experience. We wanted the kids to think, to be bold and adventurous, and so we pushed each other to be bold and to think ourselves. Trips became a big-letter statement about the centrality of first-hand experience as adventure and investigation and learning. Whenever a kid expressed an interest in anything—the weird, the bizarre, the intriguing, the surprising—off we'd go to have a look. We went to the hospital to visit a mother who worked as a nurse's aid, and to the county jail to visit Tony's uncle who was doing a six-week bit. We went to a dairy and followed the milk to market, but then to a pork packing plant to trace the bacon—the strange little man in the bloody apron leading the tour was actually eating barbequed ribs. We went to the new-born nursery at the hospital, but then to a funeral home and the county morgue. We didn't know how to stop or where. Experience, experience, we said. Go further, we urged.

We had books in the Children's Community—children's stories in Spanish and basal readers, hand-me-downs from garage sales and whole sets recycled from public schools. When one of the kids saw a book with Black characters in it and remarked a little breathlessly that she hadn't known that there were books with Black people in them, someone started a crusade. We bought every book we could find that featured Black people—and this was a Renaissance time in publishing African American authors of children's books—and we set up a book-making/publishing area in the school.

We bought a large print primary typewriter for the kids, and used it to type stories the kids dictated, which they could illustrate themselves, or stories we made up about life in the school featuring photographs of the kids and their adventures. Someone wrote a whole series about Jingles, our rabbit, that came out in monthly installments for a year. We cut pictures from

newspapers and magazines and wrote stories around them. A favorite was *National Geographic*: Great pictures of kids and moms around which to spin mysteries and myths.

We had an ethic then of sacrifice and anarchy, and any contradictions to that ethic were largely ignored. The Children's Community paid room and board for all core staff, and our pay was twenty dollars a week. Of course we could afford it. We said that all kids were precious and innately good, and when some parents dropped really difficult kids with tough problems on us, we tended to gloss it all over and see it as a test of our commitment mainly. All we need is love, we said. The kids know everything, we said. I knew everything as a kid, but who cared? Pure myth, much of this, but we believed it whole-heartedly, and we tried to live it too.

The Children's Community drew inspiration from several sources, the Civil Rights and peace movements, the contemporary critics of traditional school practice—John Holt, Paul Goodman, Jonathan Kozol, Jay Featherstone, Herb Kohl—the experimentalists—Caroline Pratt, Sylvia Ashton-Warner—and the old wise man himself, A.S. Neill. Neill was a standard reference for us, and *Summerhill* a text to mine for insight and direction, much as Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care* (also heavily influenced by Freud and his followers) reassured generations of anxious parents to let their children be. Consult Spock on practically any issue and he begins: Relax, that's just the natural way of babies. And with Neill something similar: Every child is born a sincere creature, and only under freedom can the child grow in the natural way, the good way.

It's a useful starting point, so hopeful in its affirmation of the humanizing potential of education, and so right in its rejection of authoritarianism, cruelty, domination, or hierarchy in the domain of childhood. Sylvia Ashton-Warner, the renowned New Zealand teacher, argued that a person is like a volcano with two vents—open the creative vent and the destructive vent atrophies and disappears; but if the creative side has no space or air or possibility of expression, the destructive will grow rapidly to monstrous, explosive proportions. This remains a touch stone for me. The great Chicago poet Gwendolyn Brooks captures the same sentiment in two lines from her "Boy Breaking Glass": "I shall create! If not a note, a hole/If not an overture, a desecration." The link between happiness, confidence, fulfillment and a more balanced social order seems both obvious to me and at the same time much more complex than I knew as a young teacher. It's a good starting place—there simply is no convincing argument for cruelty or repression or exploitation in the lives of children—and still there is more to do. And as I said earlier, I draw from my first experience and my initial angle of regard—education at its best is linked to freedom and social justice.

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Later in that turbulent and propulsive decade I became an organizer for the East Side Community Union in the Lakeview section of Cleveland, Ohio. The Community Union was an extension of the Southern Civil Rights Movement into the North—a grass-roots effort to organize

disenfranchised and marginalized citizens of the ghetto into a powerful force capable of effectively fighting for their own needs and aspirations. Our buttons read, “Let the People Decide,” and, “Build an Interracial Movement of the Poor.” I and the other organizers believed then that legitimate and just social change should be led by those who had been pushed down and locked out, and that struggling in the interest of the most oppressed people in society held the key to fundamental transformations—internal and personal as well as social and collective—that would ultimately benefit everyone. We saw our political and educational work as also ethical work—organizing as righteousness.

Our first job was to become part of the community, to listen hard to what people told us, to be respectful neighbors. We knocked on doors, talked around kitchen tables, hung out on stoops, and went to barbecues in the park. We were identifiable outsiders, of course, and we lived here by choice and with a larger purpose, but we were mindful of the fact that our agenda meant nothing unless it could be realized in light of the particular agendas of the people of Lakeview. We knew, too, that we did not want a “career” here, that the point of our work was to somehow as we said at the time, “organize ourselves out of a job.” We could be catalysts for change, but we could never substitute for indigenous, community leadership. We could be community educators, but we had to be mindful of the fact that the authentic teaching gesture always involves listening and learning at its heart. We wanted to help create organizations of, by, and for the poor.

I remember the day we knocked on Dolores Hill’s door. “Oh, you’re the Civil Rights kids from down the block,” she exclaimed with a big welcoming smile. “I’ve been waiting for you. Come on in.” We talked into the night about kids, welfare, schools, crime, rent, gangs. We listened; she taught. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Dolores Hill was a born teacher. Perceptive and respected, she had grown up on the block and was now raising her own children here. Active in her church and PTA, she was a person others looked to for guidance and help. When a child was hit by a car on Lakeview Avenue, it was Dolores Hill who called a meeting in her living room to gather neighborhood insights and press the city to install a stop light; when a back-to-school welfare allowance was cut, Dolores Hill analyzed the situation and organized the protest; when a rat bit a youngster while she slept in her apartment, Dolores Hill thought up the rather dramatic tactic of taking a few rats with us downtown on the demonstration, as well as the memorable accompanying slogan: “Get the rats out of Lakeview and City Hall.” She was the first president of the Community Union.

Mrs. Hill opened meetings with a prayer. We would invariably sing a few songs—“Will the Circle Be Unbroken,” “This Little Light of Mine,” “Oh Freedom.” Singing brought us together as a group of people, helped remind us of our common purpose, and made us all feel a little stronger. When Dolores Hill began to set the agenda, she would usually interject her own words of wisdom as introduction and frame—“Tonight we’ll be talking about welfare rights. Now

remember, just because you're poor and on welfare doesn't mean you're not a citizen, and citizens have rights"; or, "Now we'll move on to figuring out about starting up this Community School. Our children are poor, true, but that doesn't mean they don't have fine minds. We have to think about how to stimulate those fine minds."

Within a couple of years the East Side Community Union had become a vital part of the neighborhood. There was a large, dynamic welfare rights project affiliated with a national organization; there was a housing and rent strike committee organizing building by building, demanding fair rents and reasonable upkeep and repairs; there was a community health project led by two young doctors; there was a store-front office where people could drop in for coffee and conversation; and there was a preschool operating out of a church basement. All of these projects were built on the energy and intelligence of the people of Lakeview—energy and intelligence that the larger society had largely ignored, locked up, and kept down. Dolores Hill never missed an opportunity to underline that point: "I'm poor because I haven't got any money. I'm not mentally ill! I'm not lazy! I'm not stupid!"

The Community Union lived for only a few years. It was founded shortly after Reverend Bruce Klinger was run over by an earth-mover and killed during a movement sit-in at the Lakeview Avenue construction site of what would become another segregated school. It was gone by the time Ahmed Evans and a group of young nationalists engaged in a deadly shoot-out with the Cleveland police in a Lakeview Avenue apartment. In between there was struggle, hope, possibility, occasional heroism, and one of the most loving attempts to change all that is glaringly wrong in our society.

In the midst of our efforts and in (some would say cynical) response to the massive upheaval among African-Americans, agents of the government-sponsored poverty programs began to appear. Their first efforts involved a "community needs assessment" in which they surveyed neighborhood people in an attempt to define problems and craft solutions. They used a "scientifically" developed instrument, a questionnaire that could be easily quantified and ranked. Instead of searching for the strengths and capacities in the community, they looked only at deficiencies; instead of focusing on problems as shared and social, they probed individual deficits; instead of uncovering root causes and targeting specific enemies, they stopped short of collective action. In short, while they applied the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, they shared none of its spirit or its larger educational, ethical, or political purposes.

Dolores Hill, in the eyes of the poverty program workers, was a vast collection of ills. She had dropped out of high school, become pregnant at nineteen, and was a single mother with three young children, one of whom needed expensive glasses. She had been arrested once as a teenager for shop-lifting, and had hung-out at that time with a group of Lakeview Avenue youngsters who called themselves the Street Demons. Now she was on welfare, and she occasionally worked cleaning white people's houses while her oldest boy watched the children.

She also took cash from the children's father, a long-distance truck driver who sometimes spent the night at her apartment. In other words Dolores Hill, by their account, represented the whole litany of behaviors that add up to a "culture of poverty" or a "prison of deprivations" or a "tangle of pathologies": welfare cheat, gang member, criminal, unwed mother, neglectful parent, teen pregnancy, high school drop-out, and on and on. They were fairly drooling over Dolores.

This kind of portrait was rather easily sketched of many people in Lakeview. It is, of course, a false picture—incomplete, negative, pretentious, self-fulfilling. It highlights certain isolated incidents in a life at the expense of other incidents. It attributes explanatory power to those incidents, which would never be applied to white or wealthy people. I (and many others I have known) could be tagged with at least three of these labels depending on where and how the observer looked, and yet I would never be tarred as representing a "culture of poverty"—the privilege of race and background that accrued to me by accident and chance. And, predictably, the labels conveniently lump a few selected incidents together that fit a pre-conceived, stereotyped view of poor African-Americans. Embraced by conservatives and liberals alike, this facile view holds that the social system and structure is either fundamentally fine or, at any rate, beyond scrutiny, that any problems related to race or class are relics of the past, and anyone should be able to do well now unless plagued by some complex, difficult to change, *internal* psychocultural effects. In other words we've done too much already (conservatives) or as much as we can (liberals) and we'll all hope for *those people* to get it together or somehow disappear.

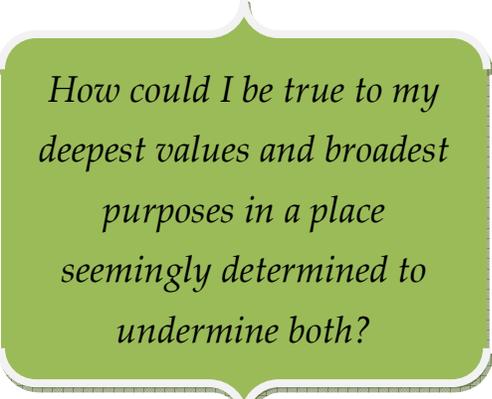
Not surprisingly, the programs proposed as a result of this kind of shoddy, suspect "research" tend to be unhelpful at best, often debilitating or even harmful. They offer services rather than solidarity. They turn people into clients rather than assisting them to become agents. They perpetuate dangerous generalities and degrading stereotypes about individuals, and they fail to identify or challenge any systemic problems that generate the problems in the first place—they find no enemies except those posited, presumed traits within poor people themselves.

Even the best of these programs were flawed in this way. Head Start, which conservatives attacked at its inception as a communist plot, the socializing of child-rearing, and a frontal assault on family values, has become sanctified as a symbol of doing something good for the poor (even as it is constantly and quietly eroded, menaced, and cut back). But it is worth remembering that liberals justified Head Start as a program that would create a "level playing field" for youngsters, that the meritocratic and hierarchic realities of schools and society were never questioned, and that once again the poor were blamed for their situations. The first brochures explaining Head Start to parents and staff described the poor as living in "islands of nothingness." It was from this nothingness that children were to be lifted up. This is not policy that loves or supports families or parents. It is not policy that understands or builds upon strengths. Rather this kind of policy makes the *cost* of participation acceptance of degradation and self-denial.

Good organizing is a lot like good teaching: one begins by seeing other people as fully human—people with their own dreams, agendas, experiences, aspirations, knowledge, needs, and know-how, just like yourself. One builds on the hopes and needs of others, not as clients but as fellow human beings, co-constructors of a common agenda. The goal is a sense of efficacy, agency, integrity, and power in others. Both schools and communities are porous places; they do not stand in isolation to one another.

Changing communities from places of despair to places of hope and action is parallel to efforts to improve schools. Each involves creating a sense that things could be otherwise, awakening aspirations, creating collective capacity, challenging old norms and expectations, and confronting structured relationships of power.

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*How could I be true to my deepest values and broadest purposes in a place seemingly determined to undermine both?*

My teaching story, like so many, is punctuated by crisis: How can I possibly succeed in a crowded and under-resourced classroom, a place with too many kids, too little time, and negligible support? How could I motivate a group of resistant students who seemed to hate the place? How could I be true to my deepest values and broadest purposes in a place seemingly determined to undermine both? How could I even survive?

Feeling completely inadequate and overwhelmed, guided by nothing more than intuition grounded in an unshakable belief in the incalculable value of every human being, I began to improvise. Since I couldn't get the children to move in the same direction at the same time, perhaps I could split the large group up—to everyone's advantage. Since I couldn't inspire everyone with a single text, I would bring in lots of books, lots of art supplies and quirky stuff, and let the students choose. Since I didn't like myself—or even recognize myself—as a tightly-wound task-master and petty dictator, I loosened up and slowed down and learned how to be with students in a more authentic way, more alive in my own enthusiasms and preferences and responses. My classroom became a home, my students, family, and the vehicle for teaching became stories.

And so we began: write about where you come from. Write about the neighborhood, the street characters, your family, your grandparents, your dreams, your experiences. Who in the world are you? This tentative strategy began to power every aspect of classroom life. Who are you—in the world? What are your chances, and your choices? Everyone was to become a dreamer of dreams, assumed to be an unruly spark of meaning-making energy on a voyage of discovery and surprise, a conqueror, a creator, an actor, an artist. Everyone in the classroom, simply by the act

of walking through the door, had the right, indeed the responsibility, to be all of these, and mostly, to tell his or her own story. The brute facts are never enough—disadvantaged or advantaged, poor or rich, victim or perpetrator—there’s more to say. And who has the right to tell your particular story? A powerful theme—an ethical pillar—is to trust your own story, and to never allow anyone else to tell your story for you.

A large contradiction that productively punctuates much of teaching is the tension of working in real classrooms in real schools and systems while fighting to hold on to and find ways to enact humane values and best thinking about learning and teaching. This is a contradiction I’ve never resolved in my own teaching, but one that I think must be acknowledged and addressed continually as a space of struggle, a place to live, a tension to teach into.

Teachers who easily put the tension to rest will find themselves less productive with students and ultimately dissatisfied with themselves. To say, “My job is to get kids ready for the real world, for society as it is,” or “My job is to water the little seedlings and watch them grow” is to misunderstand the contradiction and to reduce the complexity. The real world? Which one? When I was first teaching I had an argument with colleagues who thought that since the real world was vicious, tough, unfair, competitive, and mean, we should turn our Head Start center into a boot-camp for three-year-olds. How do we keep one foot in the mud and muck of the world as we find it, the world as it is, while the other foot strides hopefully toward a world that is not yet?

And on the other side, the watering-the-seeds side, I’ve known lots of teachers who wanted desperately to be kind and to be liked, and failed then to challenge kids to read. “I love these kids so much,” one would say, “and their lives are so hard, I just want to nurture them.” Failing to teach them to read is not exactly an act of love.

So the tension: teach them to read as an act of love; struggle to nourish and challenge in the same gesture; respect the people who walk through the door, embrace them as fellow human beings, and invite and push them toward deeper and wider ways of knowing.

All conscientious teachers need to ask themselves what they need to know in order to be successful with this kid and with this one and with this one. Surely knowledge of subject matter and the curriculum and the disciplines is an important part of the answer, and, of course, knowledge about the school and its expectations. And don’t forget knowledge of yourself. But no less important is knowledge about the child, and more: knowledge about the contexts and circumstances of his or her life—family, community, culture, and on and on—knowledge of the society and the world we’re initiating youngsters into. This is not only vast, but it’s also dynamic and swirling and expanding and changing.

All children need to develop a sense of the unique capacity of human beings to shape and create reality in concert with conscious purposes and plans. This means that our schools need to be transformed to provide children ongoing opportunities to exercise their resourcefulness, to solve the real problems of their communities. Like all human beings, children and young people need to be of use--- they cannot productively be treated as “objects” to be taught “subjects.” Their cognitive juices will begin to flow if and when their hearts, heads and hands are engaged in improving their daily lives and their surroundings.

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Just imagine how much safer and livelier and more peaceful our neighborhoods and communities would become if we reorganized education in a fundamental way—instead of trying to keep children isolated in classrooms, envision engaging them in community-building activities with the same audacity and vision with which the Black Freedom Movement engaged them in desegregation work 45 years ago: planting community gardens, recycling waste, creating alternative transportation and work sites, naming and protesting injustices around them, organizing neighborhood arts and health festivals, rehabbing houses, painting public murals. By giving children and young people a reason to learn beyond the individualistic goal of getting a job and making more money, by encouraging them to exercise their minds and their hearts and their soul power, we would tap into the deep well of human values that gives life a richer shape and meaning.

Instead of trying to bully young people to remain in classrooms isolated from the community and structured only to prepare them for a distant and quickly disappearing and hostile job market, we might recognize that the reason so many young people drop out from schools is because they are voting with their feet against an educational system which sorts, tracks, tests, and rejects or certifies them like products in a factory. They are crying out for an experience that values them as human beings.

Teaching is values-based; it is generous and deeply grounded in the cherishing happiness, respecting reason, and—fundamentally—in honoring each human life as sacred and induplicable. Clarity about classrooms cannot be based on being able to answer every dilemma or challenge or conundrum that presents itself, but flows rather from encouraging us to see classroom life as a work-in-progress—contingent, dynamic, in-the-making, unfinished, always reaching for something more. The ethical core of teaching is about creating hope in students. Because the future is unknown, optimism is simply dreaming, pessimism merely a dreary turn of mind. Hopefulness, on the other hand, is a political and moral choice based on the fact that history is still in-the-making, each of us necessarily a work-in-progress, and the future entirely unknown and unknowable. Hope beckons us to get busy.

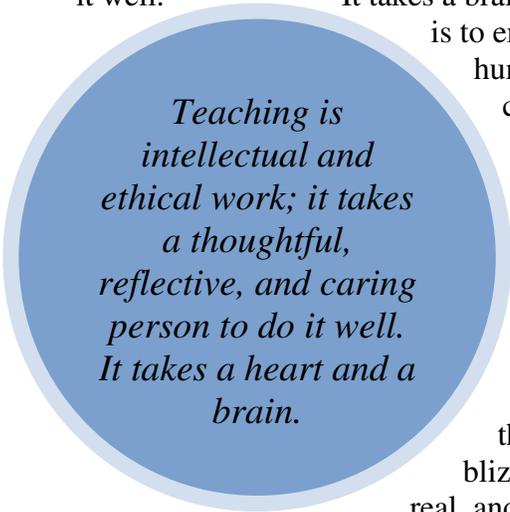
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“If I only had a brain... a heart... the nerve...” And of course, a home.

The four hopeful seekers, skipping together down the yellow brick road toward Oz, sing their desires to one another and to the heavens. Each has diagnosed a deficiency, identified a lack and recognized a need. Each has become painfully conscious of something missing, a hole in need of repair. Each is stirred to action against an obstacle to his or her fullness, and each gathers momentum and power from the others, from intimate relationship forged through collective struggle.

This is not a bad start for teachers seeking a vocabulary of basic qualities in their quest for wholeness and for goodness in teaching—a home, a heart, a brain, the nerve. There is more, to be sure, but these can send you skipping down your own yellow brick roads into the wide, wide world beyond.

Teaching is intellectual and ethical work; it takes a thoughtful, reflective, and caring person to do it well.



*Teaching is intellectual and ethical work; it takes a thoughtful, reflective, and caring person to do it well. It takes a heart and a brain.*

It takes a brain and a heart. The first and fundamental challenge for teachers is to embrace students as three-dimensional creatures, as distinct human beings with hearts and minds and skills and dreams and capacities of their own, as whole people much like ourselves.

This embrace is initially an act of faith—we must assume capacity even when it is not immediately apparent or visible, we must hew to “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen”—because we work most often in schools where aggregating and grouping kids on the flimsiest of evidence is the reigning common-sense, where the toxic habit of labeling youngsters on the basis of their deficits is common place. A teacher needs a brain to break through the cotton wool smothering the mind, to see beyond the blizzard of labels to this specific child, trembling and whole and real, and to this one, and then to this. And a teacher needs a heart to fully grasp the importance of that gesture, to recognize in the deepest core of your being that every child is precious, each induplicable, the one and only who will ever trod this earth, deserving of the best a teacher can give—respect, awe, reverence, commitment.

A teacher who takes up this fundamental challenge is a teacher working against the grain—you’ve got to have the nerve. All the pressures of schooling push teachers to act as clerks and functionaries—interchangeable parts in a vast and gleaming and highly rationalized production line. To teach with a heart and a brain—to see education as a deeply humanizing enterprise, to

teach toward opening infinite possibilities for your students—requires courage. Courage is a quality nurtured in solidarity with others—it is an achievement of people coming together freely to choose something better. In order to teach with thought and care and courage, you really need a home.

The four seekers lurching toward Oz remind us that the obstacles to our fullness as teachers will change as we develop, that there will always be more to know, always more to become, and that in our quest we must reach out for allies and friends to give us strength and power and courage to move on. And we can now know in advance that there is no wizard at the end of the road, no higher power with a magic wand to solve our all-too-human-problems. Recognizing that the people with the problems are also the people with the solutions, and that waiting for the law-makers, the system, or the union to “get it right” before we get it right is to wait a lifetime. We can look inside ourselves, then, summon strengths we never knew we had, connect up with other seekers—teachers and parents and kids—to create the schools and classrooms we deserve—thoughtful places of decency, sites of peace and freedom and justice. We are on the way, then, to our own real Emerald Cities.

*Currently, William Ayers, PhD is Professor and Engaged Scholar in the Curriculum and Instruction Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He holds the titles of Distinguished Professor of Education and Senior University Scholar. Ayers is an accomplished author, writing numerous works on education, some of his better known books include *The Good Preschool Teacher: Six Teachers Reflect on Their Lives* (1989), *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher* (1993), *To Become a Teacher: Making a Difference in Children’s Lives* (1995), *A Kind and Just Parent* (1997), *Teaching for Social Justice: A Democracy and Education Reader* (1998), *On the Side of the Child: Summerhill Revisited* (2003), and *Teaching Toward Freedom* (2004).*

