ose par-
he pro-
of the

nd it is
, of ne-

MIKE ROSE, WHY SCHOOL? (NY: NEW PRESS, 2009).

TWELVE

A Language of Hope

NOTICE: THIS MATERIAL MAY BE
PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT
LAW (TITLE 17 U.S. CODE)

ABOUT HALFWAY BETWEEN the first President Bush's convocation of the nation's governors at Charlottesville—the 1989 education summit—and the passage of Bill Clinton's Goals 2000, I began a journey through our nation's public schools to document good work, visiting classrooms judged to be effective and decent places by those closest to them (parents, principals, teachers, students), places that embody the hope for a free and educated society that has, at its best, driven this extraordinary American experiment from the beginning. As I traveled, I took side roads, stayed overnight with people, consulted historical societies, visited both roadside attractions and major monuments. I stayed with the teachers I observed—a spare bedroom, a converted den—or in motels close to their schools. All this sparked thought about schooling in our country, about classrooms and my own long history in them, about the

way we have come to talk about this institution that commands so much of our personal and collective lives.

I had studied schools and taught for many years; I knew the damage poor schooling can wreak. But our national talk about education had begun to shift beyond critique. It was moving toward despair. A dangerous hopelessness. Dismissive. Cynical. A number of people of all political persuasions were withdrawing from engagement in the public sphere. It was a time of economic and moral cocooning. The question for me—framed in terms of public schools, our preeminent public institution—was how to generate a hopeful vision in a time of bitterness and lost faith.

I visited a one-room schoolhouse in western Montana's Grasshopper Valley, a neat frame building through which generations of valley residents passed, vibrant with student work on display: large crayon maps of the valley, bar and pie charts, collaborative poems ("Foxes hide fast in the red, dead trees"), rock sculpture, hand-bound books, watercolors of the landscape. I saw many classrooms like this, and as they accumulated in the journey, an imagery of possibility began to shape itself, an imagery at odds with our typical representations of schooling.

In Calexico, a California-Mexico border town, I listened while third-graders gave reports in Spanish and

English on current events, following the journalist's central questions—who, what, why—and elaborating on the significance of the depleted ozone layer, of Haitian boat people's repatriation, of smog in nearby industrial Mexicali, of changes in the local school board.

In Chicago, I sat in while twelfth-graders read *As I Lay Dying*, trying to make sense of the characters' varied perspectives. The students offered provisional explanations of key events, posed and revised central themes, gained a sense of the power of wading into the uncertain, of speculation, of putting forth something that may be half-right in order to forward inquiry.

And in a series of small towns along the Mississippi Delta, I followed children as they walked through, and then drew pictorial representations of, fundamental algebraic operations. This activity was part of civil rights activist Bob Moses's Algebra Project, a curriculum as well as a social movement that helps prepare children, regardless of academic background, for algebra, which Moses defines as a key pathway to opportunity.

On a radio show in central California, the host asked me to reconcile these examples of effective schooling with the widely published claims that by most any measure public schools are doing a bad job. It's a question I would continue to be asked. For me,

it's a complicated one. There are many students who, historically, have been ill served by our schools. And our schools are bedeviled by a host of ongoing problems, from funding to curricular faddism. But it is also true that some of the reports of failure rely on flawed studies, or inappropriate generalizations, or statistics taken out of context. These errors and misrepresentations have been well documented by researchers at places like RAND and the Sandia National Laboratories, hardly bastions of softheartedness. It is important to examine the problems with public education. Absolutely. But it is equally important to discuss the limitations with assessing our schools through a few reductive or inaccurate measures. We need to think in more comprehensive ways about what we want from our schools and how we judge them.

After I said this on the radio, four calls followed. One was from a teacher who supported my argument. But the three other callers weren't buying it. The disagreement wasn't surprising, but what did catch me was the vehemence of the response. It was angry, disbelieving, assured and articulate, and terribly upset. One male caller was furious. He dismissed RAND as being utterly without credibility. He said it was "patently absurd" to say the schools were doing any-

thing right. He claimed that he "didn't know one seventeen-year-old who could make correct change."

What stayed with me from that call—for it was instructive—was the quality of the anger, the rush and the snap of it, and its sweep. It had a tremendous energy to it—it felt assaultive, a bludgeon—and it did not, in any way, invite engagement, or mutual analysis, or thinking through a problem together. For all its passion, it was somehow sealed off from life outside of it. It was different, for example, from the anger of community people I've known seeking to improve a local school gone to seed, an anger fueled by human connection and a vision of possibility.

Education scholars David Cohen and Barbara Neufeld have observed that "schools are a great theater in which we play out [the] conflicts of the culture." The anger of these callers was focused on schools, but also, I kept thinking, on more than the schools: on a generation, perhaps; on public institutions, maybe; on the direction of the country. To ask for a reconsideration of its premises or architecture—of the test scores or images of schooling that comprised it—was to ask for the destabilizing of a view of the world. And that, I realized as those calls unfolded, would be harder than I thought to change.

There are many dangers in the language that emerges from such anger. It blinds us to the complex lives lived out in the classroom. It preempts careful analysis of one of the nation's most significant democratic projects. And it engenders a mood of cynicism and retrenchment, preparing the public mind for extreme responses: increased layers of testing and control, denial of new resources, and the curative effects of free market forces via vouchers and privatization.

I am not trying to ignore the obvious misery in our schools or the limitations of too many of those who teach in and manage them. This is not a call to abandon the critical perspective a citizenry should have when it surveys its institutions. What I am suggesting is that we lack a public critical language adequate to the task. We need a different kind of critique, one that does not minimize the inadequacies of curriculum and instruction, the rigidity of school structure, or the "savage inequalities" of funding but that simultaneously opens discursive space for inspired teaching, for courage, for achievement against odds, for successful struggle, for the insight and connection that occur continually in public school classrooms around the country. Without a multiplicity of such moments, criticism becomes one-dimensional, misses too much, is harsh, brittle, the humanity drained from it. The re-

sult is a divisive and demonizing public discourse that is a civic dead end.

As I sat in good classrooms across America, a richer vocabulary of schooling began to shape itself. To be sure, parents and teachers were concerned about the economy and attempted to prepare students for it. But I also heard talk of safety and respect. A commitment to create a safe environment and a respectful regard for the backgrounds and capabilities of the people in it. I saw the effect of high expectations: teachers taking students seriously as intellectual and social beings. I saw what happens when teachers distribute responsibility through a classroom, create opportunities for students to venture opinion, follow a hunch, make something new. I saw the power of bringing students together around common problems and projects—the intellectual and social energy that results, generating vital public space.

And I saw what happens to young people, first-graders through twelfth, when they come to feel that those who represent an institution have students' best interests at heart.

Safety, respect, expectation, opportunity, vitality, the intersection of heart and mind, the creation of civic space—this should be our vocabulary of public schooling, indeed for many, if not all, of our public in-

stitutions. If we are a nation divided, we are also a nation yearning for new ways to frame old issues, for a robust language of schooling and civic life. Public education demands a capacious critique, one that encourages both dissent and invention, anger and hope. We need an expanded vocabulary, adequate to both the daily joy and the daily sorrow of our public schools. And we are in desperate need of rich, detailed images of possibility.

THIRTEEN

Finding the Public Good Through the Details of Classroom Life

IN THE MIDST of the culture wars that swirl around schools; the fractious, intractable school politics; the conservative assault on public institutions; and the testing, testing, testing—in the midst of all this, it is easy to lose sight of the broader purpose and grand vision of the common public school. For me, that vision is manifest in the everyday detail of classrooms, the words and gestures of a good teacher, the looks on the faces of students thinking their way through a problem.

We have so little of such detail in our national discussion of teaching, learning, or the very notion of public education itself. It has all become a contentious abstraction. But detail gives us the sense of a place, something that can get lost in policy discussions about our schools—or, for that matter, in so much of our national discussion about ourselves. Too often, we deal

in broad brushstrokes about regions, about politics and economics, about racial, linguistic, and other social characteristics. Witness the red state–blue state distinction, one that, yes, tells us something quick and consequential about averages, but misses so much about local social and political dynamics, the lived civic variability within.

The details of classroom life convey, in a specific and physical way, the intellectual work being done day to day across the nation—the feel and clatter of teaching and learning. I'm thinking right now of a moment from a chemistry class in Pasadena, California, that I observed. The students had been conducting experiments to determine the polarity of various materials. Some were washing test tubes, holding them up to the windows for the glint of sunlight, checking for a bad rinse. Some were mixing salt and water to prepare one of their polar materials. Some were cautiously filling droppers with hydrochloric acid or carbon tetrachloride. And some were stirring solutions with glass rods, squinting to see the results. There was lots of chatter and lots of questions for the teacher, who walked from student to student, asking what they were doing and why, and what they were finding out.

The students were learning about the important concept of polarity. They were also learning to be sys-

tematic and methodical. And moving through the room was the teacher, asking questions, responding, fostering a scientific cast of mind. This sort of classroom scene is not rare. And collectively, such moments give a palpable sense of what it means to have, distributed across a nation, available by law to all, a public educational system to provide the opportunity for such intellectual development.

Citizens in a democracy must continually assess the performance of their public institutions. But the quality and language of that evaluation matter. Before we can evaluate, we need to be clear about what it is we're evaluating, what the nature of the thing is: its components and intricacies, its goals and purpose. We should also ask why we're evaluating. To what end?

Neither the sweeping rhetoric of public school failure nor the narrow focus on test scores helps us here. Both exclude the important, challenging work done daily in schools across the country, thereby limiting the educational vocabulary and imagery available to us. This way of talking about schools constrains the way we frame problems and blinkers our imagination. "We can all agree," wrote a contributing editor for the *Weekly Standard* not long ago, "that American public schools are a joke." Such a statement doesn't even leave us with a problem to solve.

There have been times in our history when the idea of "the public" has been invested with great agency and hope. Such is not the case now. An entire generation has come of age amid disillusionment with public institutions and public life, disillusionment born of high-profile government scandal and institutional inefficiency, but, even more, from a skillful advocacy by conservative policy makers and pundits of the broad virtues of free markets and individual enterprise.

Clearly, there are domains of public life that benefit from market forces, and individual enterprise is a powerful force for both personal advancement and public benefit. Moreover, the very notion of "public" is a fluid one; it changes historically, exists in varied relationships to the private sector, and, on occasion, fuses with that sector in creative ways. And, as I have noted, we must not simply accept our public institutions as they are, but be vigilantly engaged with them.

Our reigning orthodoxy on the public sphere, however, is much less nuanced. Until the financial chaos of late 2008, many have been celebrating the market and private initiative as cure-alls to our social and civic obligations. This orthodoxy downplays, often dismisses, the many ways that markets need to be modified to protect common people and the common

good against market excesses—for markets are relentlessly opportunistic and dollar driven.

The orthodoxy operates with a heavy dose of social amnesia, erasing the history of horrible market failure and of private greed that led to curbs on markets and the creation of robust public institutions and protections. The free-market believers' infatuation slides quickly to blithe arrogance about all things public. A guy is being interviewed on National Public Radio. "The post office," he says, "is the worst-run business in America." This was within the same week as the opening of the trial of Enron's Jeffrey Skilling and Kenneth Lay, within recent memory of Tyco, WorldCom, and Arthur Andersen.

The easy dismissiveness of the public sector also has its ugly side, characterizing anything public as inferior . . . or worse. I remember a Los Angeles talk-show host who called the children enrolled in the Los Angeles school district "garbage." And, in a comment both telling and sad, the kids I meet in schools have said on several occasions that they know people think of them as "debris" or "trash."

We have to do better than this. We have to develop a revitalized sense of public life and public education. One tangible resource for such a revitalization comes

for me out of the thousands of small, daily events of classroom life I have witnessed.

This sense of the possible emerges when a child learns to take another child seriously, learns to think something through with other children, learns about perspective and the range of human experience and talent. It comes when, over time, a child arrives at an understanding of number, or acquires skill in rendering an idea in written language. It is there when a group of students crowd around a lab table trying to figure o[illegible]y a predicted reaction fizzled. When a local even[illegible] or regional dialect or familiar tall tale becomes a creative resource for visual art or spoken word. When a developing athlete plants the pole squarely in the box and vaults skyward. When a student says that his teacher "coaxes our thinking along." When a teacher, thinking back on it all, muses on the power of "watching your students at such an important time in their lives encounter the world."

It is in such moments—moments in public school classrooms—that something of immense promise for the nation is being confirmed.

There is, of course, nothing inherently public or private about such activities. They occur daily in private schools, in church organizations, in backyards. But there is something compelling, I think, about raising

one's gaze outward, beyond the immediate doorway or fence, to the biology lesson at the forest's edge or the novel crammed into the hip pocket in the center of the city. The public school gives rise to these moments in a common space, supports them, commits to them as a public good, affirms the capacity of all of us, contributes to what the post–Revolutionary War writer Samuel Harrison Smith called the "general diffusion of knowledge" across the republic. Such a mass public endeavor creates a citizenry.

As our notion of the public shrinks, the full meaning of public education, the cognitive and social luxuriance of it, fades. Achievement is still possible, but loses its civic heart.

CONCLUSION

The Journey Back and Forward

THERE WERE FOUR WIDE BOARDS nailed to the front wall of the Little Greenbrier Schoolhouse, an empty one-room school off Highway 321, between Townsend and Greeneville, Tennessee. The boards were painted black, a chalkboard. The desks were separated into four columns, seven rows deep; there was a long bench in front. I imagined the youngest children sitting there. Then, arranged by age, the others, probably through eighth grade, found their desks. It was dark but for the glow of daylight that filled the open door and window; thin streaks of sunlight pierced through the gaps in the walls. I walked to the last row—the floor creaking—and sat down, picturing a column of numbers on the blackboard, hearing the rough tap of chalk.

I found the Greenbrier School during one of my trips across the United States trying to gain, in one irregular arc, some sense of the sweep and scope of this country. Schools were much on my mind, education

everywhere in the landscape. Schools are nested in place—for all their regularity, they reflect local history, language, and cultural practices. Before long, classrooms and terrain began to play off each other. A science lesson led to the creek beyond the window; a sonnet broke its line to the honking of horns. The often-maligned intelligence of the nation seemed at these moments as rich and layered as its variegated landscape.

I visited one-room schoolhouses at more than a few points in the journey. Some were abandoned. And some were still in full operation. The empty ones, though, caught my fancy, and got me to thinking about their origins, and the origins of the common school.

Depending on era and region, the schoolhouses were built of sod, adobe, or logs, stone or clapboard. By and large, they were harsh, uncomfortable places. School life met the demands of the farm calendar, with some schools open for seven or eight months, some for three or four. A plaque on the Greenbrier Schoolhouse noted that some children went for six weeks. The one-room school typically included first through eighth grades; ages and attendance varied widely, and class size ranged from half a dozen to forty or more. For all their variety, and given the

minimal centralized regulation—they epitomized local control—they were surprisingly uniform in their organization (young children in front, older in back), pedagogy (heavy on memorization, drill, and recitation), and curriculum: reading, writing (grammar, spelling, penmanship), arithmetic, U.S. history, physiology, geography.

Standing alone before one of these empty schools, I would wonder about the children who once gathered there. The teacher walks to the door, about to call them in for the morning. She's young, works for one-third less pay than a man, most likely has a high school education or less, perhaps barely out of country school herself. If she's not local, she boards with one of the families of her pupils or lives in a small, minimally appointed teacherage, open to the scrutiny of the community. Her letters may well reflect what many from the time reflect: the loneliness and vulnerability, the frustration over discipline and inadequate supplies, the challenge of so many lessons, all those kids. Still, the work offered one of the few avenues to independence and authority. It was a chance, as one young woman put it, to "try myself alone and find out what I am."

At the turn of the twentieth century, there were

more than 200,000 functioning one-room schoolhouses in the United States; now there are about 800 spread throughout the states, with the largest numbers located in Alaska, California, Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, Wyoming, and the Dakotas. Population shifts and continued pressure toward consolidation led to the closing of the one-room school. Now, we look back on them with a mix of nostalgia and curiosity, surprised, perhaps, that some still exist.

Those old schools could be violent and stultifying places; the writer Hamlin Garland called the one he attended "a barren temple of the arts." And teaching in them was tough duty. Yet it is also true—and we are not good at tolerating the ambiguity—that this wildly uneven array of schools contributed profoundly to the literacy and numeracy of the nation. Out of local effort and varied conditions emerged the common good.

I look at these old schoolhouses, so distant, yet what they represent is very much with us, topics that are woven throughout *Why School?*: how to educate a vast population, how to bring schooling to all, what to teach and how to teach it, who will do it, what the work will mean to them—what we can help make it mean to them.

We still ask these questions because we haven't satisfactorily answered them. We have such a troubled his-

tory, for example, educating children of the working class. But we ask the questions as well because a neat and final answer is not possible or desirable in an open society. We honor these questions best by revisiting them. And the way we answer them says a lot about who we are—and what we want to become.

From the beginning we have invested great hope in the common school—consider Jefferson's vision of it as central to democratic life. And from the beginning we have expected our schools to teach more than skills and subject matter, notably a sense of civic duty and moral behavior. These extrascholastic expectations have increased dramatically. I found in one schoolhouse documents from the early twentieth century recording that instruction was given on "the effects of alcoholic drinks and narcotics" and on "the prevention of communicable diseases."

Throughout the twentieth century and into our time, the public as well as school administrators and reformers have turned to the public school, especially the high school, to address the many needs of young people that may once have been met by families, churches, employers, and volunteer groups: from hygiene to job preparation. We also resort to the public schools to solve the broad social and economic problems that we cannot or will not adequately address

by other means. One of the purposes of school desegregation, for example, was to disrupt residential patterns resulting from racism, demographic shifts, and housing policy. And we continue to look to the schools to address the effects of deindustrialization, immigration, chronic poverty—and now an increasingly globalized economy.

It is entirely reasonable that a society will turn to its basic institutions to solve pressing needs. My concern, evident throughout this book, is that the economic motive and the attendant machinery of standardized testing has overwhelmed all the other reasons we historically have sent our children to school. Hand in glove, this motive and machinery narrow our sense of what school can be. We hear much talk about achievement, the achievement gap, about equity, about increasing effort and expectations, but it is primarily technical and organizational talk, thin on the ethical, social, and imaginative dimensions of human experience.

If we abstract out of education policy a profile of the American student during the first decade of the twenty-first century it would be this: a young person being prepared for the world of work, measured regularly, trained to demonstrate on a particular kind of test a particular kind of knowledge. This is not Jeffer-

son's citizen-in-the-making. And in my experience most parents of a wide range of backgrounds and political persuasions, though they want their children to develop basic skills and be prepared for work, want much more.

In *Democracy and Education* John Dewey offers this celebratory snapshot of a child's mind in action:

> The child of three who discovers what can be done with blocks, or of six who finds out what he can make by putting five cents and five cents together, is really a discoverer, even though everybody else in the world knows it.

There is a rendering of cognitive growth here that is familiar to primary school teachers and is cherished by parents, yet we'd be hard pressed to find this sort of wonder in contemporary education policy. Think, too, how little we hear about the majesty of intelligence—and this in an age of astounding feats of mind, from the landing of a robotic explorer on Mars to the probing of human consciousness itself. As for creativity, it rarely makes an appearance in lists of core competencies. If this state of affairs is true for policy involving K–12, it is doubly true for postsecondary and adult education.

There is little talk of the power of teaching, of this remarkable kind of human relationship, honored in all cultures. In our time, teaching is acknowledged as important but is often defined as a knowledge-delivery system. Yet teaching carries with it the obligation to understand the people in one's charge, to teach subject matter and skills, but also to inquire, to nurture, to have a sense of who a student is. Parents mention these qualities all the time, and they are often what draw students to the intellectual content of science, literature, or history, and to the very idea of school as a good place to be.

Our major policy documents contain little mention of the obligations of government to its citizens, of protections against inequality, of a comprehensive notion of educational opportunity. No surprise, then, that we do not find a robust discussion of the notion of the public or of the democratic citizen—that portrayal of the citizen not just as an economic being, but as a deliberative, civic, moral being as well. We are a society with a system of mass education, but to what degree do we define ourselves as an educated society?

How we think about and voice the purpose of school matters. It affects what we put in or take out of the curriculum and how we teach that curriculum.

It affects the way we think about students—all students—about intelligence, achievement, human development, teaching and learning, opportunity and obligation. And all of this affects the way we think about each other and who we are as a nation.