

**Comments by Gill Maimon,
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I'm not the best person to be telling this story. I'm not even the best person in the room to be telling it. But if we are focusing today on the idea of making and remaking schools, we must really think about what telling and retelling involves. In retelling a story down the generations, surely something will be lost; surely there will be origins that have escaped me. That I'm the teller this morning testifies to the "Still Here." Powel will be remade this morning in what I make of it.

The Samuel Powel School is a public school in the School District of Philadelphia. It was founded more than 40 years ago by a group of activist parents in a neighborhood of Philadelphia called Powelton. It was founded purposefully by these parents, who wanted their children to go to a school in a racially diverse setting. It was founded to be a small place where people could think about living together.

It's a small school, about 270 children, kindergarten through grade 4. In the beginning there were two tracks, the Traditional track and an Open Classroom track. The way that this all played out was that most of the white children were enrolled in the Open Classroom track and mostly African-American children made up the Traditional track. That wasn't the intention, that there would be this parallel experience, in the same

building but not necessarily together.

The idea of legacy is a complicated one. It feels hopeful; we attach a lot of family pride around it. Legacy is also about hurt. A few snapshots: first, the legacy of hope.

I was walking in the hallway last January. One of my former students was holding a book in her hand. She was walking down the hall with her eyes closed. I demanded, "What are you doing?" Then I looked at the book. It was a biography of Helen Keller! I knew enough about legacy to know what that means, how important that was. Every year, for years and years, children at Powel School in third and fourth grade have done this wonderful biography project. They write up reports but they also do these amazing character portrayals. We were talking about this in our small group yesterday. If you want a good illustration of how learning doesn't result in something that you HAVE but in something you ARE, something you become, just look at that kid walking, with her eyes closed, down the hallway. This comes from a longstanding willingness of teachers to share ideas and materials with each other. You should see our biography collection! It's also a longstanding tradition of planning together. There are landmarks in the year that we just know are going to cause us to get together and do some thinking all together about how the project will go this year.

Another great example of a landmark project is the thematic units that we do every year, rotating among the countries of Greece and China and the continent of Africa. This project is built around folktales, lots of origin stories from those various cultures. It's a beautifully envisioned project where over the course of the five years that a child could spend at Powel School (K-4) it's possible you would get to study two of the countries twice and one, once. There's this beautiful way that it all comes back around for the children, but there's also this beautiful way that it all comes back around for the staff. I know where the project comes from. Rhoda Kanevsky has told me. It comes from a grant written decades ago by teachers who wanted an opportunity just like this for staff to come together. This grant was written not just so materials would come into the classrooms of teachers who were already on board, but so that every classroom in the school could be enriched. That's what helped to start this conversation. It's so deeply rooted, now, that I believe it will go on no matter who is there. That's pretty amazing, when what matters can really take off on its own. There's real hope in that.

A snapshot of hurt (and I'll say from the beginning, that it doesn't hurt so bad that we don't show up every morning): There is a longstanding Powel history of creative subversion of some of the stupider processes put in place by the District as a whole. For many years, the way that you would get a job at a school

in Philadelphia is that you would get given a number and go down to this cattle call. You wouldn't know anything about any of these schools. They'd call your number and you'd go up and take a leap of faith. Understandably, Powel teachers didn't want new people coming in who didn't know where they were coming to. There are ways to work behind the scenes to get like-minded people inside. In a school as varied philosophically as it is ethnically and racially, that didn't sit well in certain circles. Out of this unofficial practice among certain factions of teachers of establishing backdoor entry-points, there grew a lot of suspicion, fear and mistrust. We didn't talk about it, but it was there.

Flash forward a few years: enlightenment comes to the School District of Philadelphia in the form of Site Selection, the opportunity to actually speak with a person before you hired the person. Schools needed to vote each year for or against this hiring option, and, for the first few years, our staff opted for Site Selection. We hired some interesting people, who at least knew a little bit about us and we knew a little bit about them. Then last year, when we voted, Site Selection was voted down. Old suspicions, dating back to the days of backdoor subversion, suddenly flared up. Mistrust that had lain dormant for years became suddenly, paralytically, active. That was devastating. It was an event that felt like a harbinger of doom. But in order to keep going on, in order to keep remaking places that

matter, you have to keep yourself from making Beginning of the End pronouncements.

It goes on purposefully but it goes on precariously. Two years ago within a six-week period we lost two giants, sentries in our schoolyard. First, this huge tree fell in a windstorm. That tree was there because parents wheeled their baby carriages into that schoolyard forty years ago and said, "You're not going to cut these trees down." Then about six weeks later we lost a man named Mr. Buck, a father and grandfather connected to generations of children at Powel School. This was a guy who would volunteer every morning before school to play kickball with the kids. Not just with the big-boy fourth graders, but with all of the kids. What I miss most of all, in Mr. Buck's absence, is the egalitarianism he established on the kickball court. In these post-Mr. Buck days, it's not so much the girls, and it's not so much the little kids who get to play. We've got to figure out what to do about that.

We're more prone to the elements, in the absence of that tree; we're prone to deeper dangers, in the absence of Mr. Buck. But we have a stump now, and I know the story of the stump, and I tell the story when I remember to. When you're a first-grade teacher it's amazing how quickly eras come to an end. None of my current students have any memory of Mr. Buck. A couple years ago, some of the older students created a mural with Mr. Buck's face and name on it. Last

week, when we were walking in from recess, one of my students asked, "Who's Mr. Buck?" That's a relief! Even when I forget to tell the stories, the children ask the questions.

I've spoken of what's come before, I'll end with what's still possible: On Thursday Rhoda and I took my students on a two-hour walk in a garden nearby. We went on a treasure hunt. One of the things we brought back with us to school was this milkweed pod. You know how kids like to make wishes on these seeds and let them fly away. At the end of the day, the children were all leaving and we were giving everyone a milkweed seed to make a wish. Richard looked at this thing and said, "Am I supposed to talk to it or am I supposed to let it go?" I said, "Richard, you're supposed to do both."

There is something in that, something that is so down deep in the idea of making and remaking schools. It's about talking and letting go.

Thank you.