

TEACHING WITH CONSCIENCE  
IN AN IMPERFECT WORLD



*an invitation*

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# ONE



***Imagine*** a world that could be, or a world that should be, but isn't apparent or available to us just yet. Dream a little—what would a better world look like? Now imagine coming together with others and trying to create or build that possible or conceivable world. It's work to be sure—sometimes really, really hard work—this imagination business, but it's also an enduring heritage, a distinctly human quality that “ignites the slow fuse of possibility,” as Emily Dickinson wrote.

Engaging the imagination involves mapping the world as it really is, and then purposely stepping outside the known and the established in order to lean toward a world that *could be*, but is not yet. This is the dynamic work of lighting that fuse: rejecting the fixed and the stable and the predictable, and reaching toward an alternative, stretching toward the possible. This is where we search for something better, and where we nourish our freedom dreams. This is when the imagination blows up.

The magnificent Chicago poet Gwendolyn Brooks begins her “Dedication to Picasso,” an homage to the great man and the huge sculpture that he gave to our city, asking whether “man” does indeed love art. Her answer is that we visit art but flinch and draw back. The reason is, she explains, that art hurts—it “urges voyages.”

The voyages demanded by art lie at the very heart of our humanness: journeys in search of new solutions to old problems, explorations of spirit spaces and emotional landscapes, trips into the hidden meanings and elaborate schemes we construct to make our lives understandable and endurable, flights hooked on metaphor and analogy, wobbly rambles away from the cold reality we now inhabit toward an indistinct but beckoning world beyond. These are the voyages that foreground the capacities and features that mark us as uniquely *human* beings: invention, aspiration, self-consciousness,

projection, desire, ingenuity, moral reflection and ethical action, courage and compassion and commitment. All of these and more are the vital harvests of our imaginations.

But it's also true that those speculative rambles can hurt. The capacity to see the world as if it could be otherwise unleashes yearning and liberates desire—we are freed (or condemned) to run riot. Our lively imaginations can be rowdy, tending toward disruption and subversion; opening up alternatives always calls the status quo into question. Suddenly the taken-for-granted becomes a choice and not an echo, an option and no longer a habit or a life (death) sentence. The seeds of discontent are sown.

How do we see our schools right here, right now? How do we make sense generally of the educational system today? Are we conscientiously and systematically teaching free people to participate fully in a free society? In what ways? Could we do a better job of encouraging young people to interrogate the world fully, to ask deeper questions and to pursue those questions to their furthest limits? Do we intentionally and openly help children and youth develop minds of their own? And do we simultaneously offer students opportunities to be responsible and participating members of their communities? What can we imagine our schools being or becoming that they are not yet? How might we get there?

Perhaps even more important, how can we live purposefully in the schools as they are while we stretch toward something new and dramatically better—schools that are more joyful and more just, more hopeful and more loving? And how can we build within ourselves the capacity and the courage, the thoughtfulness and compassion to dive into the wreckage on a mission of repair?

In 1897, after months of illness and suicidal despair, the tormented French painter Paul Gauguin produced a sprawling panorama on a huge piece of coarse jute sacking, an image of unfathomable figures amid scenery that might be the twisted groves of a tropical island or a marvelously wild Garden of Eden. There are worshipers and gods, cats, birds, and a quiet goat, a great idol with a peaceful expression and uplifted hands, a central figure plucking fruit, and a depiction of what must be Eve—not as a voluptuous

innocent like most of Gauguin's women, but as a shrunken hag with an intense eye.

Gauguin scrawled the title of his creation in bold over the image; translated into English it reads: "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" These questions were troubling and terrifying for Gauguin, struggling with his sanity in the whirlwind of modernity. For us, though, these questions may prove indispensable—our provocative and propulsive little accomplices. They provide the frame for what follows.



Imagine if you and I were elected to be part of a large planning commission charged with envisioning and designing a contemporary school system for children and their families in a wildly diverse, newly formed community—not a single school but an entire system of schools, from kindergarten through high school. We are asked to bring an open mind to the task in the spirit of the original call: We're willing to learn and to share, we'd pledged, before we were elected, to investigate and study, to speak with the possibility of being heard and to listen with the possibility of being changed. Our approach would be dialogue not monologue, a quest not a conquest, and so we would seek consensus wherever possible and compromise whenever necessary.

Each of us would bring our unique histories, experiences, and distinct perspectives to the process, of course, but we would also encourage ourselves to bracket our preconceptions, to dream large and to create something from the bottom up, beyond habit and familiarity, beyond the easy assumption that the way things are is simply "*the way it's sposed to be,*" something entirely natural and somehow inevitable. Where should we start? Think big. What would you propose first? And then what? It's a wide-open space, you know, a huge and empty canvas, so think even bigger.

I've asked students from urban public high schools to small rural boarding schools to take a moment, breathe in and breathe out, relax, and go a little starry-eyed with me: "If you had the power to

upend and reform anything in your school,” I would say, “anything at all, what would you change?” This, it turns out, is a tougher question to wrap our minds around than you might think at first. A few irreverent students get easy laughs from their comrades with a quick response: “I’d fire Ms. Truslow,” or “I’d ditch the National Anthem and have kids hookup a new mixtape onto the PA every morning to get things started right.”

More typical responses include things like better food in the lunch room, longer passing periods between classes, or more holidays and a school schedule that begins at, say, 10 A.M. These reform suggestions, sound and satisfactory on their face, strike me as fatally stuck in the mud. I’d said, “Storm the Heavens!” “Change anything!” and the responses tended toward better baloney in the cafeteria. How puny. How bloodless.

I’m not blaming the students at all—the frame of their experiences sets the initial horizon of their thinking, and that’s true for all of us. In this case the basic anatomy of “school” is a fixed idea in most of our minds, a structure and skeleton entirely predictable and fundamentally immutable, a shadow that hovers and then envelops most of the available space. Asked to alter anything at all, our imaginations stall and then shut down, and our ideas amount to a rearranging-the-deck-chairs-on-the-Titanic type of reform. We have a tough time escaping the prison of received wisdom and conventional thinking. There may be better ways to ask the question or more robust prompts to prod all of us toward rethinking and reforming schools—and much of that is the focus of what follows—but to begin, it’s worth noting that school is, well, *school* after all—it will always be, we assume, as it’s always been. We’re inclined to shrug our shoulders, palms up in surrender.

I recently served on an architectural jury charged with selecting the winning proposals in a national school-design competition. Architects, who are part artists, part engineers, and part philosophers rolled into one, typically exercise their imaginations more than most of us as part of their everyday professional activities, and there were several breathtakingly beautiful designs in the hundred-plus submissions, a few that were daring and innovative:

a nature trail through an urban high school, an outdoor theater space on an oddly shaped rooftop. In discussion with the other jurors, mostly architects, I learned a lot about “universal design,” environmental standards, and green and sustainable structures. But I also witnessed once again the crippling weight of conformity whenever the talk turned to *school* itself.

There were continual references in the design write-ups asserting that the space under consideration had been conceived and fashioned to engage the “whole person” and to teach “critical thinking,” and each design team claimed that their creation offered a uniquely “student-centered” environment. But for all the familiar rhetoric, there was a depressingly backward-looking sameness when it came to considering alternatives to the way typical schools have been hatched and managed for more than a century. In the hands of these otherwise creative and boundary-breaking architects, “student-centered,” to take one hot example, simply meant developing a curriculum that could be downloaded onto laptops and completed at a pace and in a place of the student’s choosing. There was no real palpable sense of tapping into the experiences, glory, or stubborn agency of youth, and so we were offered student-centeredness in strictly mechanical and technocratic terms.

The so-called choice was so anemic and narrow—go fast or go slow, sit in the classroom or stand on your head in the hallway, but the curriculum is already planned by wise and benevolent people, and you must run the course as it is—that from the perspective of the student it was pure illusion amounting to no choice at all; it was a distinction without a difference. In this “student-centered” universe there was no consulting on content, no accounting for the plans and desires of youth, no sense of the wisdom or energy they might be willing to unleash and share in the classroom or the community. These schools looked a lot like occupying colonial powers delivering civilization itself into the assumed empty territory of students’ minds.

Returning to the community planning commission, imagine if I kicked off the conversation at our first meeting by proposing that school funding be vastly uneven, and that one school should

be offered a new state-of-the-art campus, generous resources, and fantastic materials, while another school just down the street would be housed in an abandoned warehouse with broken windows and a busted furnace, and receive but a pittance. The commission members might begin looking at one another uneasily, shaking their heads in mild disbelief. “Wait! There’s more!” I’d cry, hurriedly elaborating my plan: In the first school, class size would be limited to 15, while in the other it would be allowed to balloon up to 40 or more students per teacher. What? And, I’d go on to explain, the schools would be strictly segregated by class and race and family income—the wealthy school overwhelmingly White, the under-resourced school mostly Black or Latino/a. Commission members are moving steadily away from me now, and I can’t figure out why—these are, after all, the schools I’ve known my whole life, the system as it actually is in my hometown. I continue a little desperately: “Come back! You haven’t heard the best parts yet, the bits about how students of the privileged get a curriculum of question-asking and problem-posing, while the others are monitored obsessively and disciplined with a high-tech electronic management app, and how compliance is guaranteed—any deviation from the rules or procedures and the misfits will be immediately forced out of school. And about how we will measure inputs and outputs and cognitive growth at the end of each day. Why are you all leaving?”

Bertrand Russell once said that every person “is encompassed by a cloud of comforting convictions, which move with him [or her] like flies on a summer day.” The comforting convictions about schools include the bells and the public address system, of course, the classes and the schedules and the elaborate management schemes, but most important, the conviction that there is—and *must be*—a rigid hierarchy of teachers and learners in place. This evokes Paulo Freire’s vivid metaphor of the “banking model” of education, and we picture a child’s mind as a fat but empty piggy bank: The teacher deposits knowledge into the little slot on top, and the students are filled up over time; the teacher acts and the students are acted upon; the teacher knows everything and the students know



little or nothing; the teacher teaches and the students are taught; the teacher thinks and the students are thought about; the teacher talks and the students listen; the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined; the teacher is a subject with a will and a mind and a sense of agency, while the students are mere objects. These beliefs and premises constitute an inflexible and insistent common sense: They *are* that cloud of summer flies. And this is exactly the problem: The cloud of flies asks no questions, seeks no evidence, demands no reasons or arguments, and invites no dialogue. They simply buzz around incessantly.

Swatting the flies away and dreaming big is clearly no simple assignment—we are entangled and weighed down by the heavy chains of uniformity and conformity, silenced by the rigid authoritative voice of convention. Because we live day by day immersed in what *is*—the world as such—imagining a landscape much different from what's immediately before us requires a combination of some-things: seeds, surely; desire, yes; effort, of course, always effort; idealism and romance, maybe; necessity and desperation at times; and a vision of possibility at other times. Occasionally what's required is the willful enthusiasm to dance out on a limb.

That's what this little book is about. It's a provocation to stretch and to reach, and an invitation to enthusiastically dance out on that limb. It's an incitement to participate in collectively unleashing our unruly imaginations, outlining a vision of what schools should be and perhaps could be. And it's a come-on: hold hands, close your eyes, go wild, and get utopian.