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CHAPTER 1

Can You See the Stars at Night?

It was not what I expected. The structure looked like a run-down apartment building but it could have passed for an old factory. There were bars on the lower-floor windows, some of which had broken glass. The building was situated on a street with row houses on both sides. There was no greenery—not a tree in sight. The edifice wasn't more than six floors high. It seemed oddly placed, in the middle of a block. No visible athletic facilities. No parking lot. No signage. No street number.

I was visiting a small public high school in Brooklyn, New York, a place where we wanted to identify high school seniors who could succeed at a private 4-year career-launching liberal arts college in Bennington, Vermont. That day I was meeting with five students, preselected by their principal as individuals whom she and her staff believed could succeed in higher education in a rural environment despite their low SAT scores and equally low grades. Actually, they had more than low scores and poor grades; they had the cumulative burden of a lifetime of adversity, and they were breaking away.¹

My term for these students, who have accumulated negative experiences and curdled childhoods (the full impact of which are frequently better understood years later), is *breakaway students*. Rather than continuing to name such individuals *vulnerable students*, which I had for many years, I wanted a new term that reflects two ideas: These students have many strengths (often ignored and untapped and even undermined by educators) and are not weak; and the students are breaking away from the lives they have led and the people whom they love regardless of the quality of that attachment by taking steps toward their future, including through educational advancement. What makes one a breakaway student, then, is not necessarily “just” being the first in one’s family to attend postsecondary education or living in poverty. It is a term that describes students who in their short lives have experienced toxic stress and abuse, as is more fully

explained later. Breakaway students are moving (actually often wrenching themselves) away from where they were to where they can be. Some succeed. Others do not.

At the time when I was visiting this high school, I was a relatively new college president, and I wanted to change radically the college admissions paradigm. My unusual (some might say intrusive) involvement in collegiate admissions grew out of my frustration and dissatisfaction with our 1st- to 2nd-year retention rate of 42%; the number bothered me every time I repeated it on campus to faculty, staff, and coaches and to trustees, donors, accreditors, and community members. We lost more students than we kept between Year 1 and Year 2. We even lost some accepted and deposited students before the academic year began. Obviously, if you cannot keep students in this early period, there is no reason to expect high graduation rates. As the national conversation boiled over about getting more breakaway students to graduate from college, it seemed that we were missing the mark. It makes little sense to focus on the end point—graduation and graduation rates—if you can't get the beginning right.

Despite the fact that our retention rate was in line with retention figures at other open-access 2- and 4-year public institutions with many first-generation, Pell grant-eligible college students, we had to do better. How hard could it be to lift the retention rates of our students? How hard could it be to help these breakaway students succeed at a small college? Oh, how naive I was back then.

Here was the idea: Suppose we got the high schools to identify which of their low-income, Pell-eligible students they thought could succeed in higher education. Switch around the traditional admissions system and let high schools make the selection of who is admitted, since we do not seem to be doing such a good job distinguishing between those first-generation Pell-eligible minority students who could succeed and those who could not. Elite boarding schools had selected students for elite colleges decades ago with considerable success and little fuss; let's just flip it around, letting inner-city high schools and after-school programs select students for a non-elite college. Worth trying it as a pilot, I thought. Let's see if 10% of the college's student body can be selected by someone other than us and demonstrate improved success rates through this process.

At the Brooklyn school, I was greeted by an armed security guard, who asked where I was headed. I mentioned the name of the high school's principal. The guard shrugged and pointed me to an enclosed office area where the glass of both the interior and exterior windows was embedded with wire mesh. The space resembled a prison holding pen. "There?" I

pointed. Once within that wire-windowed cage, I introduced myself and said I was looking for the principal. I was quickly informed that there were several schools in the building and thus several principals, and I wanted the high school principal on the fifth floor. They called upstairs, got permission for me to proceed, and sent me on my way to the stairwell. “No elevators,” they announced.

I started walking up five flights of wide concrete steps. I saw middle school-aged kids in uniforms, some running but others in tightly formed lines. On each landing, there was an armed security guard; some were pacing, and some were leaning against the wall. The cement walls were bare; one floor looked like another. What if you broke your leg or were disabled? How exactly would a student, older parent, grandparent, or teacher actually get to the fifth floor? There had to be accidents on the cement steps, especially if it was raining or snowing out. Or if there was pushing. The experience of the place was messaging.

When I reached the fifth floor, the security guard there let me into the high school wing. No one greeted me, so I meandered through the halls, lined with cubbies meant for kindergarteners, until I happened upon the principal’s office. A group of five diverse female students and a female school counselor were waiting for me, eating their lunch around a long plastic rectangular table. I said hello and explained who I was. They explained that it was lunchtime and there was no cafeteria, so they brought their own bagged lunches. There were chips and water on the table for me. The image of bread and water in the desert popped into my head.

I looked around at the students, each remarkably different from the others. One wore a hijab. Another was covered in tattoos, one of which, visible at the top of her shirt, read “Daddy.” (I later learned he was in prison.) Another had an Afro. Yet another was a Latina student. Yet another had short-cropped hair and sported piercings everywhere visible (and I am sure some were in less visible places too).

Following introductions, I shared with the students that they had been chosen by their principal as candidates for admission to the college I led. I expressed how honored I was to meet them and that I wanted to describe some things about the college to prepare them for their first visit to our campus. I explained that we wanted them to see the school, ideally with a family member or two; they could meet professors, eat in the dining hall with enrolled students, stay in the residential hall (parents/guardians in a local motel), and attend an athletic event. Then they could decide if we were the right place for them. I explained that the costs of this visit would be entirely absorbed by the college. All they had to do was keep an open mind on the 2-day trip to our campus in Vermont.

After offering a few more details about the visit (the length of the bus ride to campus, the stay in the residential hall for students with already enrolled students, the individual motel for parents or guardians, the transportation to and from and around campus, the length of the various drives, the food options), I asked if there were any questions. I said, as I always do, that I would answer anything—as long as it was within the bounds of decency. Not even a chuckle. Nothing but silence. I waited. Nothing. No questions about the professors, the dorm rooms, the food, the academic support services, the required courses. I should have known that they would have few expectations; they had no sense that they even had a right to expectations. So I myself started asking a few questions: “How many of you have traveled?” A few hands went up. “Where have you gone?” “To New York City,” a few replied. (Remember they lived in Brooklyn.) Another answered, “The Bronx.” I should have known better; how presumptuous to assume folks had the time and money to travel. Work, illness, and living paycheck to paycheck were serious impediments to trips to close and faraway places, let alone different parts of one’s homeland (safety concerns aside).

One student focused on her cellphone, tuning me out. “What interests do you have outside of school?” I asked. “Music.” “Hanging with friends.” “Music.” We weren’t getting very far. Clearly, I was not someone with whom they were comfortable. I mentioned that I looked forward to welcoming them to my home the first evening they arrived—signaling breaking bread together as a positive. They didn’t seem to react as if this was such a favorable event to which to look forward. I got “the rich White lady welcoming us to her home” look, with smiles only because they knew that smile was what they were supposed to do. They understood “passing” and could do so if required, but I was hardly making them feel comfortable.

To be sure, these students had no clue that my childhood was not vastly different from theirs in many respects, despite my being White and coming from educated parents with money. They didn’t know I had experienced toxic stress and abuse. They didn’t know I was a “breakaway” kid too. Surely I did not look on the outside like someone to whom they could relate.

So I switched topics and asked what they thought would be the differences between their current school and a college outside the city. Answers: “My little sister won’t be there to annoy me.” “There will be bugs and snakes.” “It won’t be safe to walk around campus after dark, because there are no lights in the woods and bears will come out.” “There aren’t any places to eat on the street corners.” “There will be nothing to do at

night except sit.” “I won’t be able to go home for months.” “I won’t see my friends.” Not exactly the answers I would have anticipated; the challenges were coming into sharper focus.

In these interactions (they hardly qualified as conversation), there was no mention of academics. Nothing about majors. Nothing about the cost of college. Nothing about the future—at least not in a positive sense. Nothing about college readiness. Nothing about grades. Nothing about careers. The elephant-in-the-room questions—Will I fit in? Will I succeed?—went unmentioned.

As I listened, it started to sink in—in a different way—how difficult it would be to go from this brick-and-cement school building without greenery to a 360-acre campus on a mountainside in Vermont; from a community where people lived together in small spaces to a place where there were few boundaries, other than those one created by oneself; from a place with acknowledged diversity to a state with little diversity of any kind; from a place of no expectations (or of expectations thwarted) to a place of limitless expectations, both personal and institutional.

Then one student, who had not previously raised her hand, quietly said she had a question that she wanted to ask. I nodded for her to go ahead. She asked, “Can you see the stars at night?”

I was stunned, flabbergasted. Of all the questions I had ever been asked or thought about, this was not one. It was a remarkably telling question on many levels. It had never dawned on me that in an urban environment, the stars are often obscured by pollution and city lights and buildings. I had never thought about this reality, of knowing that there are stars, the symbol of the possible, but never seeing them. I thought about how the Vermont sky lights up so brightly, even with no moon; I thought about how you can see the constellations and count the stars; on some nights, you can even see the space station. Really. Hard to know something exists—something so ordinary in one sense and extraordinary in another—if you cannot see it.

How do you answer that question and do it justice?

A simple yes didn’t seem enough. I was sure that later, as I drove back to Vermont, I would come up with a wise answer, perhaps a line of poetry or some image to share. That’s how it usually is; the wisdom or the right retort comes later. I could disclose that I, too, had lived in the city and had then adjusted to a rural environment, but that perhaps wasn’t helpful: Where I lived in New York City, some stars still shone. And where I was raised, stars abounded in the sky.

That simple seven-word question revealed the distance between these students’ lives in Brooklyn and their prospective experiences in Vermont.