

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: ATTENDING TO STORIES OF HIGH SCHOOL
DISPLACEMENT: THE LIVED HIGH SCHOOL
EXPERIENCE OF GED® COLLEGE GRADUATES

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Doctor of Philosophy, 2009

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This hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry is called by the question, “**What is the lived high school experience of GED college graduates?**” GED college graduates are people who have dropped out of high school, used the GED Tests to earn their jurisdiction’s high school diploma, then graduated from a four-year institution. If these individuals have the intellectual acumen and personal commitment to earn a bachelor’s degree, then why did they drop out of high school? Conversations with seven GED college graduates uncover the displacement that drove them out of a traditional high school program.

The hermeneutic phenomenological methodology is grounded in the philosophical work of Heidegger, especially as developed by Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, which elicits an awareness of our embodied being’s struggle to embrace Being and the moral necessity of responding to that presence. Van Manen’s work guides the “doing” of this philosophy as human science research in education.

The stories of the lived high school experiences of the seven GED college graduates reveal the disquiet of their displacement. They each felt that they did not fit the

mold that high school wanted: they felt they were different, outcasts, not part of the “in crowd.” They felt the inequitable treatment and bodily discomfort caused by this difference. They report only a nominal, caring presence at school, and this disregard further alienated them. School was disappointed in their lack of commitment and enthusiasm for traditional coursework, and the students, in turn, were disappointed that school cared so little for their needs. Dropping out protected them from the pain of further displacement.

Attending to these stories of displacement may help educators imagine a different way of creating high school. Smaller high schools might make each student a more significant part of the student body, better known to teachers, and more likely to feel implaced. Additionally, alternate programs might allow students to deviate from the traditional K-12 timeline into work experiences, to follow compelling interests, or to gather into community around similar questions about their world. Teacher preparation programs that offer multiple visions for high school could be instrumental in making such change a reality.

ATTENDING TO STORIES OF HIGH SCHOOL DISPLACEMENT:
THE LIVED HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE OF GED® COLLEGE GRADUATES

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2009

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Dedication

To all high school students who struggle to find their place.

Acknowledgements

My dream to capture high school's living feel
 Is borne by those who shared their desperate flight;
 The seven who re-membered stories sealed,
 Give me the heart to champion their fight.
 And ever by me, love one cannot earn:
 My family's care supports and shepherds me;
 They even set themselves the task to learn
 To say, "Hermeneutic Phenomenology."
 My deepest, heartfelt thanks must go to she
 Who read the words but heard the song therein;
 The caring net she wove so seamlessly
 Drew forth what light and sight might lie within.
 Just one remains to thank with pleasure rare:
 The husband who is loved beyond compare.

I am also deeply indebted to my dissertation committee whose fortitude in reading such a long document as well as their meticulous, caring response has been remarkable. Many extended family members, friends, coworkers, fellow graduate students, and my own graduate students have often stepped into the breach of my flagging spirit to offer just the right word of encouragement. "No man [or woman!] is an island," and whatever I have accomplished here is not my achievement alone.

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CHAPTER ONE: CALLED BY THE STORIES OF GED COLLEGE GRADUATES

The poet Rumi offers this reflection. “I can’t really explain what it’s like where I live, but someday, I’ll take you there” (2004, p. 193). One evening, three GED (General Educational Development) college students took me to the place where they live, and it changed my life’s work.

GED college graduates are high school dropouts who have earned their high school credential by passing the GED Tests, and they use this certification to continue their education in college. Although I had taught high school for 25 years and written dozens of letters of recommendation for promising young people to college admissions officers, I never saw the alternate world of high school dropouts who were also on this path.

After retiring from classroom teaching, my husband and I were reflecting on how we might continue our work in the field of education. He accepted a position with the GED Testing Service (GEDTS) to create the GED Mathematics Test; I was exploring the tact of teaching with new and veteran teachers in teacher-formation classes. At his invitation, I attended the 2000 GED Administrators’ Conference. I thought I was going to San Diego; I actually visited a place far more unfamiliar.

One of the most delightful parts of the GEDTS annual conference is the Graduates’ Dinner. GEDTS donates three college scholarships, and the state hosting the conference awards them to young people who are GED college students. They attend a formal dinner where they tell their stories to the gathering of test-makers, test administrators, adult education teachers, family, and friends. Kleenex is the most

plentiful dish served at these dinners, and this veteran teacher was called by the graduates' stories to re-examine my understanding of the high school experience.

Hearing Their Stories

The students spoke simply and sincerely with tremulous voices and trembling hands. Without a trace of self-pity, they laid out before me their clear achievements in the face of lives of such stark deprivation that I became ashamed of my shallow understanding of their high school world. I am drawn to their stories because of who I have been, who I have become, and what they draw me to see as a teacher.

Mother to Son

Well, son, I'll tell you:
 Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
 It's had tacks in it,
 And splinters,
 And boards torn up,
 And places with no carpet on the floor—
 Bare.
 But all the time
 I've been a-climbin' on,
 And reachin' landin's,
 And turnin' corners,
 And sometimes goin' in the dark
 Where there ain't been no light.
 So, boy, don't you turn back.
 Don't you set down on the steps
 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
 Don't you fall now—
 For I've still goin', honey,
 I've still climbin',
 And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
 (Hughes, 1922/1999, p. 24)

“Mother” both chides and cheers her “son” to persevere in life despite the challenges that he surely will find. Hughes’s dreamy metaphor had always engaged my intellect; these young people’s stories made me reel with a powerful but nascent

understanding. I was so moved by this experience, that when I was offered the opportunity to work on the tests, I accepted. Since that evening nine years ago when these three GED college students touched my heart, I have continued to ask myself,

“What is the lived high school experience of GED college graduates?”

GED college students seem much like their peers, perhaps a bit more focused and serious about life and its challenges because “They've had to go through special steps to achieve what they've achieved.” Their typical graduation is “a subdued, generous event, with none of the beach balls or airhorns that punctuate conventional . . . commencements” (Smeltz, 2006, p. 1). Jamie Nolan, once a high school dropout, is now a 28-year-old GED graduate in her senior year at Smith College.

When Ms. Nolan was ready to focus, there were places willing to offer her a second chance. . . . [She told reporters,] “Just because your child can’t focus on their future when you want them to doesn’t mean they can’t far surpass your expectations when they really do focus.” (Berger, 2006, p. 1)

The following stories of the three GED-credentialed college students who gripped my imagination exemplify this fire and focus.

Katie

She walks so confidently up to the podium that I check my program to be sure that this is our first GED graduate, not another adult to talk “about” the GED program. She has her notes; she has on her little black dress and heels; and she carries a halo of courage. I am soon to know why. In high school, she became pregnant. Her parents, she tells us, “Threw her out of the house.” (I am lost for a moment, filled with startling questions. Why? What about their grandchild, to say nothing of their child? Surely she is exaggerating for effect; they probably sent her somewhere. I tune back in.) She was living on the streets. After her baby was born, she was discharged from the hospital to

the streets. (I am reeling. Had that happened to me, both of us would have died.) She speaks matter-of-factly of having a few diapers and a couple of bottles of formula the hospital had given her. (I am indignant! Where is the boy who looks after the sheep? He's under the haystack fast asleep!) She realizes that, for her child's sake, she must find her way out of this muddle. She gets herself to the welfare office, gets food stamps, and a place to live. She gets a part-time job, arranges for childcare, and enrolls in adult education classes to get her GED diploma. She goes to college; she borrows money and wins scholarships; she gets into law school. (Her speech leaves me breathless so swelled am I by her inspiration.) She thanks her adult education teachers who helped her, acknowledges her husband and daughter who sit in the audience, nods her head to the tumultuous applause, and sits down.

How did a young woman with such obvious courage, perseverance, and intelligence become a high school dropout? What might I learn from the story behind this success story? Could I uncover an insight that might lead to a better understanding of why some high school students end up on such a difficult road to college?

Charles

Before I can even begin to process Katie's story, Charles is at the podium nervously shifting from foot to foot. He is a different story. He is the only man in the room without a jacket, but the bright white shirt and tie are a beacon of pride. He says simply that while he was still in high school, "He became a father." (No further mention is made of the child's mother. Where is she? Why is she missing?) He dropped out of high school to provide a home for his daughter. He nods to the table where he had been sitting, and a head of massed curls is tumbling in and out of her chair, oblivious to being

the heart of this story. He earned his GED diploma through night classes at the adult education center, and then he got a job as a special education teacher's aide. He is halfway through his evening undergraduate program to become a special education teacher. (I am a teacher. How different and alike we are! His story sends me spiraling into a comparison that is not always flattering but quite illuminating.) He goes back to his table and the curly head flings herself into his arms.

What meaning resides in the story of such a responsible and capable young man who drops out of high school? Would this father and college student tell me about his high school experience to help me understand his circumstances? Can I, as a high school teacher, gain some insight into our shared world through the story behind this story?

Tanya

I know I should have been ready, but I was not. Tanya ambushes me, too. She is in a glittering cocktail dress and impossibly high heels. She's the youngest and the most nervous. She ducks her head and compresses her lips compulsively. Her speech is on lined notebook paper that she has rolled so tightly it will continually race away from her flittering hands as she speaks. She is another story of such courage and strength that I am dwarfed by her monumental achievements. She dropped out of high school because she was failing and "no one cared." (NO ONE CARED! Perhaps several people did but could not effectively communicate with her? Please make this possible, if not true. Someone in the school *had* to have cared, right? Was she really all alone?) She worked for a while, saw she was headed down a dead-end road, enrolled in GED classes, got her high school diploma, and has been accepted at the local community college for a business degree. She seems to gather strength when she gets to the end of her speech. She glares

into the audience and directly addresses her brother. “I keep telling my brother that he has to do this, too.”

Was it simple immaturity that lured Tanya away from her studies to enter the workforce? If she has the perspicacity to realize that she was headed down a dead-end path, what circumstances led her to drop out in the first place? Could I reach a better understanding of the lived high school experience of GED college graduates if I uncover stories like hers?

Like Hughes’s mother, these young people challenge me to go on. I am a veteran teacher who could easily “set down on the steps,” retire, and continue my love affair with poetry in the silence of my soul; but I teach at Johns Hopkins University in their graduate teacher-preparation program, and if I do not keep “reachin' landin's, / And turnin' corners,” then I will have nothing but guttering candles to offer those who “must keep goin’ in the dark / Where there ain’t . . . no light” in today’s public schools. And if I want my support of the GED testing program to contribute ultimately to the improvement of high school and, ideally, the elimination of a need for the GED Tests, then I must embrace their stories and ask the questions that insure that I will “still [be] climbin’” toward a more meaningful understanding of high school. **What is the lived high school experience of GED college graduates?** How can I trouble my understanding of high school by learning to see it from their perspective?

Comparing Our Stories

My understanding of high school is founded on my personal experiences: who I have been and who I have become. As a student and a teacher, I have woven a tapestry of understanding about the high school experience that is now unraveling around the

edges as students like Katie, Charles, and Tanya pick at the threads at the limits of my picture.

Who I Have Been

I should be ashamed to complain ever again about a single imperfection in my life after hearing the stories of Katie, Charles, and Tanya. Each person believes that her/his staircase of life has had “places with no carpet on the floor,” but these young people had trod on “bare” boards for much of their lives. Bare, naked, unprotected, uncushioned—ultimately un-cared-for, these young people had survived and achieved success in their world while I was being wrapped in the bunting of middle-class, white privilege.

Both the parents and the dropouts are often from society’s socioeconomic underclass or from a racial or ethnic group. The families typically live in poverty or close to it, usually obtain their income from low-skill jobs or government sources and are increasingly headed by single parents. Many of the parents are dropouts themselves. These and other home factors influence the child’s ability to profit from school. (DeRidder, 2001, p. 488)

What is the nature of my privilege compared to this picture of the dropout’s world? What can be learned from a comparison of the two stories? What do their stories illuminate about my childhood privilege? What effect do these new understandings have on my future work?

Before this GED Graduates’ Dinner, I had always been proud of my parents, proud of my educational record, proud of the life they and I had constructed together. I had been cared for, protected, supported, and loved throughout. In my sheltered life, school was valued, and the support for my achievement and my development was unwavering. The path from high school through college had been privileged: modeled, mentored and monitored for me. “Being in synch with the standards of school officials . . . provide[s] important, and largely invisible, benefits to the middle-class parents and

children that the working class and poor parents and children [do] not gain” (Lareau, 2003, p. 164). I never thought about my advantages. I never thought about how the privilege of being white meant that I was half as likely as Black students and one quarter as likely as Hispanic students to drop out of high school (Child Trends, 2007). Now I am forced to think.

Until the Graduates’ Dinner, I had never felt the depth of this privilege. Katie’s simple statement that her parents had “thrown her out of the house” when she became pregnant stung me. It was not indignation at her parents (certainly I felt that) or astonishment at her courage and resourcefulness (although I felt that, too). It was my complacency. Suddenly unreeling in front of me were the countless, small guidelines that my parents had drawn to keep me safe. The depth of their dedication became starkly apparent in contrast to her parents’ rejection of her. What is the experience of negotiating your teenage years without parental care, guidance and love? Under what burdens of personal hardship or social injustice do parents labor that might contribute to their inability to care for their children? What life force has placed us in such disparate life circumstances?

Who I Have Become

I am a teacher. This is all I have ever wanted to be. My privileged childhood allowed me to fulfill this dream. The happiest years of my teaching career were teaching Advanced Placement (AP) English to twelfth graders. I accepted the assignment knowing that I was unprepared to teach the course; but I had twenty years of experience by then, and I had learned enough to know that the students would show me the way if I was patient and faithful to them.

I am proud of what my students and I accomplished when I was teaching that course, but I am equally proud of the vision we implemented. Gatekeepers in more prestigious schools proudly announced that all of their AP students passed the end-of-course test; in my school we had only an 85% passing rate, but we had more students and more minority students enrolled in AP English than any other school. This was important to me. My interest was not in gate-keeping; my interest was in opening the door to opportunity.

I was excited about what I had learned, and I turned to helping new teachers negotiate their visions. Charles gave me another way to think. What does it mean to be a teacher? How do we come to be teachers? Does our path to teacher-hood affect the teachers we become? Do my eyes shine the way his do when I talk about teaching?

Parker Palmer's work (1998) has given me a way to parse this question for myself and for my new teachers. "Teaching," he maintains, "is endless meeting" (p. 16). To keep my eyes shining and to keep Charles's eyes—and the eyes of all new teachers I touch—shining, I must corral my practical advice about teaching and free us all to imagine and create this meeting between teacher and students that creates a community for learning.

In this community, the process of truth-knowing and truth-telling is neither dictatorial nor anarchic. Instead, it is a complex and eternal dance of intimacy and distance, of speaking and listening, of knowing and not knowing, that makes collaborators and co-conspirators of the knowers and the known. (Palmer, 1998, p. 106)

I believe with Palmer that our open hearts, sustained with our integrated intellect, emotion, and spirit, will carry us forward to re-create our schools. Part of this re-

creation for me will be an intentional encountering of the lived high school experience of GED college graduates.

What They Have Drawn Me to See

Tanya hurt me more than the others. School must first be a place where we do no harm, to paraphrase the Hippocratic Oath. Based on the story she told, no one at home or school actively or intentionally hurt her. It is the monumental indifference to her as a person that damns us all. Her light is indomitable. She grabbed the opportunity of her speech to spur on her brother *in spite of* this malignant neglect by school and home. I wonder to myself, which is more hurtful? Is it more disgraceful that parents allow their children to drop out or that the school does? Why do I say “school” instead of “teachers” or even “me”? How must her story change me? What do I know and what must I learn about high school dropouts that will complete the picture of their challenges? What insights can I glean from the recollections of GED college graduates about their high school experience to guide my reflections?

Uncovering the High School Dropout Story

Who are these high school dropouts who take the GED diploma route to college?
What is the path they take?

Where Did He Go?

The bell rings;
The class settles into their seats,
Tucking away their backpacks and their hearts.
Third row, last seat, the chair is empty.
I have my grade book in my hand,
The Book of the Dead, the record of their compliance.
“Where’s Yu-Joe?” I say.
They glance at each other and stare their silence back at me.
They cannot make me understand the depths of his absence.
(Mary Grace Snyder, 2008)

“According to the 2000 Census, more than 39 million adults in the United States, aged 16 or older, or 18 percent of the entire U.S. adult population within this age range, did not complete their high school education, are not enrolled in high school, and do not have a high school diploma” (GEDTS, 2006, p. 9). What details humanize this alarming statistic?

Student success in school is a vastly complex issue. Numbers and analyses tell part of the story. The Institute of Educational Sciences (2006) identifies six, non-school factors that affect student success:

These six nonschool factors can be categorized into two distinct groups: the first three factors (parents’ educational level, parents’ occupational status, and number of books in the home) are used to represent students’ *socioeconomic status (SES) characteristics*; the last three factors (students’ language at home, students’ immigrant status, and students’ family structure) represent students’ *family characteristics*. (p. 2)

Katie, Charles, and Tanya are represented in there somewhere. But their stories are far more complex. “High school dropouts were far more likely to say they left school because they were unmotivated, not challenged enough, or overwhelmed by troubles outside of school than because they were failing academically” (Gewertz, 2006, p. 1). Behind these comments about school itself are other life issues that interfere with school: “having to work, becoming a parent, or having to care for family members” (p. 2). And perhaps most significant, especially for me as an English teacher, is the literacy issue.

Bob Wise, the former West Virginia governor who is now the president of the Washington-based Alliance for Excellent Education, which has studied the dropout problem, said he believes the complaints about boring classes mask the real issue: the need for work on teenagers’ reading comprehension. “Underneath the frustration of a lot of these kids is an adolescent-literacy issue,” he said. “Of course, class isn’t interesting if you can’t understand it.” (Gewertz, 2006, p. 2)

The picture is further detailed by race/ethnicity and gender issues since some scholars estimate that “Only about half of African-American and Latino students graduate on time”; and “The national graduation rate for girls is 72 percent, compared with 65 percent for boys” (Viadero, 2006, p. 2), with the gender gap larger among African American and Hispanic students. And still, human beings are hidden in these statistics. The individual, lived experiences of each person are unique. What is the high school experience for dropouts? Is the high school experience designed to meet their needs or to fulfill a role society has pre-defined for them? Are young people dropping out of high school because of problems they encounter there or because of pressures outside of school for which the traditional high school program offers no understanding or guidance? Are these young people encouraged to drop out of high school by an embedded cultural message whispering, “High school is not for the likes of you”?

Modeling the Theory of the High School Experience

What is the world of high school? Is it a societal good, an economic good, or a personal good? If school exists for society, then should school teach children how to be good citizens? Gutman (1987) describes this role as the responsibility to teach children critical thinking, history, and verbal and numerical literacy skills to enable them to participate in a democracy actively and responsibly. In this model, a specific level of achievement is established for all children, and resources are allocated according to children’s needs. Everyone is expected to achieve the minimum level of competency for democratic participation. Is this what society wants? If society is reacting as a whole or speaking for the cameras, it probably does. But this altruism does not persist when

parents begin to speak of their own children and the allocation of funds for other people's children.

For other people's children, school can be just adequate or even downright horrible based on Kozol's (1991) revelations. Those who see school as an economic good ask schools only to "train the ghetto children to be good employees" (p. 82). The focus is on the child cum adult as a cog in the economic machine that supports the existence of most and the wealth of the few (Abate, 2006). These schools reinforce the racial and class segregation Kozol describes so poignantly. But when it comes to middle-class children, education becomes a personal good. Now education is expected to provide my daughter/son or me with the skills to succeed, to lead others, to make money, to achieve the American "dream" of success—in whatever form this may take.

Perhaps a high school experience fulfills a social good unintended by people such as former Princeton president Gutman. Perhaps it has taught children like Katie, Charles, and Tanya, exactly what society does think of them: that they are expendable, not worth the effort, and ultimately on their own. None of these young people spoke of anyone in the high school who offered to care for them. None of them criticized the public education that acknowledged the empty seat in the classroom with no more than a sterile stroke in the record book. They left; they dropped out; they would fend for themselves. What is happening in high school that might contribute a subplot to the dropouts' stories?

Withdrawing From School

The stories told by GED college students at the national conferences are not often about high school. Usually, the students admit to their poor choices and leave it at that.

Their focus is on the successes that their GED diploma has allowed them to achieve.

What is the untold high school story?

When students drop out of high school, educational officialdom will “withdraw” them from their rosters. But who or what has been “withdrawn”? In the 17th century a “draw” came to mean a match or a battle that was undecided, and in the following century it acquired a sense of being “disemboweled.”¹ The horror of the latter image burns in my teacher brain, but I must face it. Has high school somehow disemboweled these students, taken something vital away from them? Has their embodied experience of school been a violent sundering of their insides?

What *should* the high school experience be? What causes one student to win the battle and another to “withdraw”? Merleau-Ponty describes how “Our own body is in the world” and “keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive; it breathes life into it . . . and with it forms a system” (1945/2006, p. 235). Together, then, the body and the world in which it exists create a system of reality, create what is real. What kind of reality do young people create for themselves when the world, their co-creator, withdraws from them? What is the result of this withdrawal? How do these young people feel?

In personal conversations with GED graduates, I have heard regrets about missing “the experience of prom,” and hiding the dropout stigma by putting “high school diploma” instead of “GED” on employment applications, but ultimately, the high school experience was a battle that came to a draw: GED students withdraw from the field

¹ All etymological meanings are from the *Online Etymological Dictionary* unless otherwise noted. It is the work of Douglas Harper, historian, author, journalist and lecturer, and is compiled from various etymological sources.

bloodied, but not defeated. How do these students muster the courage, determination, and perseverance that critics claim high school dropouts lack (Greene, 2002, p. 1)? If high school did not “form a system” of support and care for them, how could they persevere? How important is this sort of caring in their lives?

Noddings (2005a) divides caring into two separate strands: caring as a virtue and caring as a relationship. Most parents and teachers “care” in the sense that they provide for the child according to their specific roles: most parents feed, clothe, and house their children and see that they go to school, receive at least minimal health care, and benefit from some degree of supervision. Many parents go far beyond these basic needs and extend themselves and their resources to benefit their children as *they* judge the child’s needs. Teachers, likewise, usually care for their students by providing a safe learning environment where instruction is *delivered* in an efficient, responsible, perhaps even creative manner. But as long as the focus of the parent or teacher remains on himself or herself, i.e., what the *caregiver* believes to be important, the caring for the child lacks the integrity of a truly caring relationship. “Relations in which a virtuous carer is so dedicated to his [*sic*] own view of what the cared-for should be and do often lack this integrity” (Noddings, 2005a, p. 4).

In contrast, Noddings (2005a) suggests that parents and teachers who establish a truly caring relationship open themselves to “motivational displacement” (p. 2).

When I care, my motive energy begins to flow toward the ends and wants of the cared-for. This does not mean that I will always approve of what the other wants, nor does it mean that I will never try to lead him or her to a better set of values, but I must take into account the feelings and desires that are actually there and respond as positively as my values and capacities allow. (pp. 2-3)

The etymology of the word care reflects and reinforces Noddings' categories. The Old English noun "*caru*" or "*cearu*" means "sorrow, anxiety, grief" or "serious mental attention" corresponding to the virtue of caring. The Old English verb "*carian*, *cearian*" means "to feel concern or interest" corresponding to Noddings' definition of the relation of caring. Perhaps it is the difference between the noun and the verb: offering *something* to a child in contrast to offering *yourself* to a child. When parents or teachers possess the virtue of caring, then things (nouns) are provided; when parents or teachers are in a caring relationship, they are engaged (verb) in a relationship with the child. GED college students' high schools "withdraw" from them, offering only the things of education, not the relationships on which an education might be based. "The great privilege enjoyed by some children is that they have become participants in an on-going conversation with caring, knowledgeable adults" (Noddings, 2005b, p. 5). What are high school relationships like for GED college students? Are their college relationships different? Is this difference important to their perseverance in college?

Comparing the Caring Relationships of GED Students in High School and College

We learned earlier from Tanya that "she was failing" in high school and "no one cared." Other GED college students have told me that no one seemed to care about their ideas, plans, or dreams, or they simply stopped coming to school and no one cared enough to find out why (Kim, personal communication, March 24, 2006).

One GED college student, Elizabeth, says of her high school, "It just wasn't me."

I didn't like the people. I didn't like how they were concentrating on only sports and they weren't really concentrating on the academics. It's a major, like, football high school, so everything was football, and it just wasn't me. And then I got in a fight with my counselor. (Elizabeth, personal communication, April 3, 2006)

Obviously, Elizabeth was not forming relationships with her peers. She describes them as “in groups, cliques” of which she was not a part. She calls herself a “voluntary exile,” and this term certainly works for all the students who find no place for themselves in school. But I wonder just how “voluntary” their exiles are? “Voluntary” comes from the Latin word *voluntas* which means “will, free will;” this, in turn, comes from *velle* which means “to wish.” Are these young people wishing to be withdrawn? Or are they really wishing for the caring relationships with knowledgeable adults that form the core of the formal experience of high school? An exile is a banished person, denied the very society or world that would provide “dialogic relations with particular others” that “have the capacity to help me enable my interests and my possibilities” (Anton, 2001, p. 158). To be an exile, according to Noddings (1992), is “a terrible punishment” (p. 8) because it denies one access to home, to society, to love, to care. The very word Elizabeth uses to describe her high school experience, “exile,” indicates that she felt that school *should* have been a caring experience for her.

The fact of exile, whether voluntary or imposed, slices into a human’s most profound need: the society of others. The society of high school is most certainly structured in many ways by the adolescents themselves, but the teachers and the administration establish the atmosphere in which the adolescents undertake their relationships. Much as a family is a reflection of the parents/guardians, a high school mirrors the atmosphere breathed into the school by the adults, and the “student-teacher relationships in U. S. schools are saturated with relationships of domination, of *power over*” (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 153). Twenty-five university students who entered college with a GED were asked to describe their high school experience in an effort to

understand why they dropped out. They cited “organizational constraints” related to restrictions around course-taking and flexible hours; “teacher stories” of no support or caring from their high school teachers; and “guidance counselor stories” about obstructive counselors whose caring for students did not extend to creative and supportive plans for accommodating student needs (Golden, Kist, Trehan, & Padak, 2005).

GED college students report different experiences in college. Their comments about the teachers in college are in direct contrast to their memories of high school. Elizabeth, identified earlier, says directly that the “teachers” in college are “more willing to help the students” (personal communication, April 3, 2006). Another student says, “They treat you more like an individual, an adult” (Kim, personal communication, March 29, 2006). Kreisberg (1992) describes this approach to education as *power with*:

There is another dimension, or form, or experience of power that is distinctly different from pervasive conceptions. The ignored dimension is characterized by collaboration, sharing, and mutuality. We can call this alternative concept *power with*. (p. 61)

Kreisberg’s analysis of power in education finds that K-12 education is characterized by *power over* because “The fear that *power with* instills in teachers [is] that the students may run wild, or they may do nothing” (p. 180). It seems that, for GED college students, the *power with* of college has been more encouraging than the *power over* relationships of high school.

Another piece of the puzzle seems to be the organization and structure of college that allows students more autonomy, more ability to control their own schedules. Why was one student, Kim, able to get up in the morning to go to work and attend computer-training classes when she wasn’t able to get to high school? She allows that she “still

missed too many days” (Kim, personal communication, March 29, 2006) at Computer Learning Center, but she was not withdrawn! Being treated as an adult seems to have elicited more responsibility from these young women. The college atmosphere is empowering, suggesting a *power with*: “The empowering setting is the one in which *power with* relationships are maximized” (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 144).

What is most striking about the stories of GED college students is the responsibility they take for their choices. High school dropouts, as pointed out earlier, often are accused of lacking this sort of maturity. In spite of the fact that high school cared so little for them, they point no fingers, make no accusations, and criticize no one. This hurts my teacher’s soul more than anything else. These students should have been offered so much more care. Do we not have an obligation as a society, as professional educators, to care for all the children? What is the role of the GED Tests in this caring process?

Writing the GED Tests into the High School Dropout Story

When I attended that GED Graduates’ Dinner, I was not employed by the GEDTS, and I admit to some disdain for the program before I joined it. Most high school teachers are mildly insulted by the GED Tests but know little about them. High school teachers are invested in the belief that everyone should graduate from high school in a traditional program. The GED diploma alternative is criticized, dismissed, and a bit feared for its perceived undermining of a high school education. When I present my GED research at the national convention of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), I always start by telling my audience that the GEDTS would like, more than anything else, to be put out of business. I always get a strong, nonverbal response when I

say this: heads nod throughout the audience. But when I add that although the number of GED test-takers approaches 700,000 annually, the actual number of adults without a high school diploma in the U.S. continues to rise every year, I see an array of reactions: “Too bad,” “Can’t be helped,” “Not my problem,” “What are we going to do!” I take great pleasure in the whispered confidences I sometimes receive after these NCTE presentations when someone will share that the GED Tests propelled them or someone they love into college. Why are these confidences usually whispered? Why did my sister’s boss, a millionaire, self-made businessman, refuse to acknowledge that he is a GED graduate? He confessed to my sister that, in his business dealings, the fact of his GED diploma would put him at a disadvantage. Is this personal fear founded on experience or an outgrowth of the disregard he felt in high school that propelled him into the GED Tests as an alternative? What do we fear about the GED Tests?

One of the fears associated with the GED Tests is that it undermines the traditional high school education by offering students a way to short cut this experience. Today, larger numbers of students fail to graduate from high school because they have not passed state exit exams or have not earned the increasingly rigorous number of required content course credits. Educators fear that this “might spark parents to have their children take the [GED] to get an equivalency diploma” (Kossan, 2006, p.1). Does this credential ultimately help them?

The GED Tests, like any other institution, has its supporters and detractors. The individual success stories abound (McReynolds, 2006; Nufer, 2006), including a former governor of Delaware and a Surgeon General of the United States. The detractors (Greene, 2002) usually cite statistics that show that GED graduates earn less money, drop

out of college in higher numbers, and are less successful on the job than their high school graduate counterparts. I wonder why this surprises anyone. The GED-based diploma is *not* the same as a high school education. Karen Liersch, who directs the Arizona GED program, advises high school students to “stick it out” even “if it takes another summer or another year” to earn a high school diploma. Why? “Employers and universities want to know a young person has the self-discipline, teamwork, and coping skills it takes to successfully survive four, even five, years of high school” (Kossan, 2006, p. 1). An alarming number, however, continue to find the endurance test of high school impossible: “Five out of every 100 students enrolled in high school in October 2000 left school before October 2001 without successfully completing a high school program” (NCES, 2004, p. 4).

Sixty-two percent of those who pass the GED Tests cite plans for further study as their reason for taking the test; however, “Almost three-quarters of GED holders who enroll in community colleges *fail* to finish their degrees, compared with 44 percent of high school graduates. . . . In a four-year college, 95 percent of GED holders don’t finish, compared with 25 percent of high school grads” (Greene, 2002, p. 1). It seems obvious that comparing the success of GED graduates who entered four-year colleges to all the high school graduates who represent all of the best students in the country who enter four-year colleges is absurd. *None* of those former dropouts would have had a *chance* to go to college without the GED Tests. Can we applaud those five percent who would never have earned a degree at all without the GED Tests?

Heidegger (1967/1993d) points out in “On the Essence of Truth” that our project of scientific understanding conceals being from us. “Precisely in the leveling and

planning of this omniscience, this mere knowing, the openedness of beings get flattened out into the apparent nothingness of what is no longer even a matter of indifference, but rather is simply forgotten” (p. 129). In other words, in the positivistic revealing of the successes of many students through their grades, tests, and performance measures, the experience of the GED students is concealed. All we can see is that they do not succeed. In the successes of many students, the appropriateness of the traditional high school program is revealed, but this revealing also conceals the inappropriateness of the traditional program for some students. What is the high school experience for these students? Do they short cut one of society’s obstacles, or do they cut short an experience that has become unbearable? Can the reflections of GED college graduates on their high school experience reveal this concealment? Can we learn to *listen* to the GED students in order to understand the meaning of their high school years?

The process of listening can be, for both sides, a sense-constituting, thought-forming, need-forming, need-interpreting movement. . . . When listening really echoes and resonates, when it allows the communication to reverberate between the communicants, and to constitute, there, a space free of pressure and constraint, it actively contributes . . . to the intersubjective constellation of new meanings [and] mutual understanding. (Levin, 1989, p. 181)

What understandings about high school might we mutually constitute if we care enough to listen to the lived high school experience of GED college graduates?

Caring About High School Dropouts

Why is it important to explore the lived high school experience of college graduates with GED diplomas? Perhaps the question really is: why should we care? Self-serving economic and global competition reasons may be important, but do we have a moral issue to confront? The word moral traces back to the Latin word “*moralis* ‘proper behavior of a person in society,’ literally ‘pertaining to manners,’ as coined by

Cicero. . . . The word is connected to the Greek word ‘ethics.’ The meaning ‘goodness’ is attested from 1592.” What is interesting about the word and relevant to this discussion is that the words “moral” and “ethics” originally meant simply the “proper” behavior of a person, and only later came to be associated with the “good” behavior of a person. Is “moral” behavior still associated with “good” behavior? Do we, as educators, believe we are acting morally regarding our high school dropouts?

William Ayers (1998) writes about the themes of Maxine Greene’s teaching, and one seems terribly relevant here. He says that for Greene, “The opposite of ‘moral’ in our lives is not ‘immoral,’ but is, more typically, ‘indifferent,’ ‘thoughtless,’ or ‘careless’” (p. 7). I chose the words “terribly relevant” to focus on the terrible consequences for high school dropouts if our indifference, thoughtlessness or carelessness does not compel us to examine their experiences *in relation to our own*. How could our indifference be considered immoral? What might poets and philosophers contribute to our understanding of this question?

Is Indifference Immoral?

Rilke’s lover/speaker in “Love Song” faces the wondrous truth of an overpowering love. Although the gender of the speaker is never implied, for the sake of creating further tension, I attribute the speaker’s voice to a man since I feel the sentiments expressed here are more often attributed to a female. Perhaps it will open a space for a larger interpretation of the poem if we intentionally stretch the poem right from the start.

Love Song

How shall I hold my soul that it may not
Be touching yours? How shall I lift it then
Above you to where other things are waiting?
Ah, gladly would I lodge it, all forgot,

With some lost thing the dark is isolating
 On some remote and silent spot that, when
 Your depths vibrate, is not itself vibrating.
 You and me—all that lights upon us, though,
 Brings us together like a fiddle-bow
 Drawing one voice from two strings it glides along.
 Across what instrument have we been spanned?
 And what violinist holds us in his hand?
 O sweetest song.
 (Rilke, 2008, p. 1)

The speaker wonders aloud how he “shall hold [his] soul that it may not / Be touching” the beloved’s. This question takes the reader off guard since lovers are usually trying to find paths that lead closer to one another, not methods for creating space between them. The lover thinks that if he could find a way “to lift it then / Above [the beloved] to where other things are waiting,” he might find some peace. He wonders if he can possibly find a place to lodge his soul “with some lost thing the dark is isolating / On some remote and silent spot.”

But the lovers are caught up together. In their attachment, when her “depths vibrate,” his do, too. “All that lights upon” them “brings [them] together like a fiddle-bow / Drawing one voice from two strings.” The union expressed in this thrumming image captures the tense synchronization of the lovers. The speaker yearns for space for his own expression, perhaps a bit of peace or a momentary solo of his own choosing. It is useless. Although he cannot discern “across what instrument [they] have been spanned,” he knows they are strung together. And the deeper question of purpose emerges as the image enlarges to question, “What violinist holds [them] in his hand?” This “sweetest song” of love is at once the lover’s life and heartache, for he can never again be separate or separated from his love.

If we lift Rilke's poem to an allegorical level, it is possible to see the speaker as a representative of society: educators, parents, politicians, policy makers, or others in a pedagogical relationship to the young. These "lovers" sometimes try to distance themselves from a relationship with high school dropouts that they feel is too burdensome. For whatever reason, these students have not been successful in the traditional high school program that the "lovers" have so carefully and generously provided. The "lovers" would prefer to "lift" their eyes "above" these creatures, but our mutual presence in society ties us all together like lovers. The thorough interpenetration of the poem's lovers is paralleled by the interwoven lives of society. One part of society cannot hold itself "above" another part; eventually, all of society "vibrates" to the demands, needs, illnesses, crime, and loss of dignity of the Other. Like Rilke's lover, we must wonder not only across what instrument we all have been drawn in the immediacy of today, but also what transcendent violinist "holds us in his hands." If we are all part of a transcendent reality, then what claim does the Other have on us? If we are all ultimately held in the same hands, as intricately connected as a single melody drawn from a single musical instrument, then what moral obligations do we have to each other?

Levinas (1961/2007) suggests that our interconnectedness places a moral burden upon each of us. The basis for his thinking lies in his inversion of Husserl's description of communication: whereas Husserl does not believe that communication is required for signification—"It expresses something and the same thing whether we address it to anyone or not" (Husserl, 1901/1999, p. 301), Levinas (1961/2007) proposes that language *creates* the interconnectedness that is the basis for our mutual moral obligation:

Language is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things which are mine to the Other. To speak is to make

the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundations for a possession in common. . . . It is what I give. (p. 76)

In other words, our meaning is created through our response to the Other. “Levinas claims that the self-other relation is not reciprocal, but rather that there is a priority of the Other over the self” (Moran, 2003, p. 346). Rilke’s speaker certainly sees himself in a reciprocal relationship with the lover since they “vibrate” as one, but Levinas (1961/2007) takes this relationship a step further: the Other has *priority*. “Goodness is transcendence itself. Transcendence is the transcendence of an I. Only an I can respond to the injunction of a face” (p. 305). I have a responsibility to understand this other who creates meaning with me. The Other does not remain separate but “provokes a response from me and my *response* is at the same time my *responsibility*; Levinas never tires of emphasizing the close connection between these two terms” (Moran, 2003, p. 349). Further, Levinas emphasizes that “The nature of the ethical is to provide the *appropriate* response” (p. 349). Although Levinas is not clear about just what *appropriate* responses might be in different situations, he offers a framework to use to think about the demands the Other might place upon us as we negotiate the world together. If we have a moral obligation to respond to the Other, what effect does our choice of response have?

Anton (2001) proposes that “Others must not be reduced to entities which are there at-hand for me” which “can be taken up to serve my concernful interests or not” (p. 156). “Man sustains Da-sein in that he takes the *Da*, the clearing of Being, into ‘care’” (Heidegger, 1947/1993c, p. 231). Da-sein, then, is sustained in part through our authentic care of others, and authentic care focuses on the Other, not the what of the other. It is a focus that frees the Other to create itself; it does not create the Other “as an expression of

my originality” (Anton, 2001, p. 157). Anton concludes that the creation of an authentic self is based on concerned attention for others: “We accomplish selfhood in caring for world and concerning ourselves with others, even when these are not tied back to ‘self-interests’” (p. 153). What is the importance of this last phrase regarding self-interests?

Nell Noddings (1998) points out that as long as we can see people in need as the Other, we see ourselves as “safe,” as “not like them.” As long as they are not us, we can construct a box around them and effectively eliminate them from our daily concerns. We can live our lives as if they do not require the response from us proposed by Levinas, and as if our indifference does not affect the authenticity of our very selves as explained by Heidegger and Anton. We can comfortably live a life of privilege while ignoring, or even denying, the enhanced opportunities bestowed by this privilege.

John Skretta (2000) attacks this attitude when he dissects the nature of his white privilege. He sees and shares his new-found awareness of the chance that puts one person in a position of power and privilege and another in the opposite position. Through no effort or fault of our own, we are either gifted with privilege that opens the world or burdened with difficulties that close the world to us. But “When we look at a scene of suffering and see *both* possibilities for *ourselves*, then a new horror is aroused, and that horror provides a starting point for real moral growth” (Noddings, 1998, p. 168). “O sweetest song” if ever we could find our way to this perch of understanding.

Schelling posits that “The angst of life drives creatures away from their center” (as cited in Gadamer, 2004, p. 141). The pain expressed in Rilke’s poem, whether it is interpreted as pouring from the heart of a lover or from the hearts of a moral society, drives both away from their centering morality and humanity. Love, like morality, makes

demands; the lover, to be a lover, has no choice but to vibrate to the beloved's song. Indifferent, thoughtless, and care-less behavior is improper behavior; it is immoral. Although Rilke's speaker and society would like to pull away, perhaps even deny their love and connectedness to establish an illusory distance from the demands of the Other, they cannot.

Rilke's lover swoons into the sweet, but somewhat unwilling, embrace of this "sweetest song" of life. Society holds together with the same tension. Both lovers must write a score for their lives that integrates their independence and their unity, allowing both the single voices and the harmony they create together to be heard. How can the different voices make a unique but harmonized contribution to the whole composition? How can the stories of GED college graduates contribute to society's understanding of the high school dropout crisis?

Discovering a Path from Indifference to Care

As Ayers (1998) quotes Greene, "I believe that it is only when you have a vision of a better social order that you find an existing set of deficiencies 'unendurable.' Finding them 'unendurable,' you then may act to heal, to repair. It is a matter of recognizing the space between what is and what could be" (p. 157). How can we behave in this space to move from indifference to care?

Gadamer (2004) suggests, "Our survival depend[s] on our behavior" (p. 140). He agrees with Heidegger that "What's important . . . is that we now arrive at a new direction—that humanity achieve a new kind of solidarity" (p. 140). Gadamer proposes initiating and persevering in a global conversation. He describes a process of communication among the various religions of the world that would result in mutual

understanding, tolerance, and acceptance. In a similar vein but on a smaller scale, a conversation with high school dropouts who have earned their GED diplomas and entered college might yield insights for programs and policies to change high school to respond to the needs of these “other” students.

Some people may reject the assertion that our indifference is immoral or that the plight of high school dropouts and GED college goers can be equated with issues of global conflict. In Ibsen’s drama *A Doll’s House* when Nora is trying to explain to her husband why she is unhappy, she declares that he’s “never understood her . . . never loved [her].” He responds, “This is fantastic!” Nora’s response answers her husband and the critics: “Perhaps. But it’s true all the same” (1879/1988, p. 920).

In the lived high school experience of GED college graduates lies a mystery. Why did these intelligent, motivated students drop out? Did the traditional high school program fail to meet their needs? What was high school like for them? Can I, as a former high school teacher, come to understand their experience deeply enough to learn from their stories? I am compelled by their inspirational stories of perseverance, hope, and imagination to continue to ask, **“What is the lived high school experience of GED college graduates?”**

Heeding the Call of Phenomenology

How will I *listen* to the stories of the lived experience of GED college graduates? How can I listen, as Levin (1989) suggests, ontologically? How can I become more willing and able to discern the relationship with Being in their stories and uncover the mystery that is the lived high school experience of GED college graduates?

At the same time as I was called to become part of the life-world of GED college graduates, I was called to phenomenology. Working at the GEDTS gave my husband, Kenn, and me an education benefit that allowed us to take three college courses a year. Kenn was the initiator, excited by the prospect of earning his Ph.D. in statistics. I followed with far less alacrity. Retrospectively, I see an eerie repetition of the call I received at the GED Graduates' Dinner. When it came time to register for our first class, I merely flipped through the catalog, looking for a course that met on the same day as the course Kenn wanted to take; Dr. Hultgren's curriculum course seduced me. As I listened to her talk about curriculum, I felt an opening, a relaxation of my spirit. Her description of phenomenology as a methodology so enticed me, so fulfilled me, so opened me to description, reflection, and interpretation that I felt I had come home, rescued from a desert of piecemeal information *about* pedagogy to an oasis of integrated understanding *of* pedagogy that could be grounded in the classroom, not in a laboratory. Phenomenology describes a way of understanding the world that makes sense to me.

Phenomenology, as conceived by Edmund Husserl as an effort to discover how our consciousness perceives the world and developed by Martin Heidegger into an understanding of our being-in-the world, provides a philosophical methodology suited to the "possibility of plausible insights that bring [me] in more direct contact with the world" (van Manen, 1997, p. 9) of the GED college graduate. Phenomenology allows me to "open [myself] to being attuned by Being. It is possible . . . that from out of this attunement, [I] shall learn some new ways to respond" (Levin, 1989, p. 208).

Hermeneutic phenomenological human science research begins in the heart. As I have shared at the beginning of this chapter, the stories of the GED college students

picked me, not the reverse. I feel compelled by the honesty and sincerity of their stories to devote myself, as a teacher, to exploring and understanding their lived experience of high school. My effort will be to allow their stories to take me where they will.

Investigating the lived high school experience of GED college graduates means collecting their personal, life-stories, “anecdotes, stories, experiences, incidents” (van Manen, 1997, p. 67) about high school and “borrow’[ing their] experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of [this] aspect of human experience” (p. 62).

Interviewing GED college graduates, stimulating them to recall and describe their experiences of high school, inspires both of us to develop a deeper understanding of their seminal experience.

The understandings and insights I develop are structured from the fabric of the stories they tell, not by a theoretical structure applied from without. As I listen to and then reflect on the essential themes of their stories, my task is to listen to

The sounds of human life, a song of mortal existence, gathering all sounds, without exception, without passing judgment. . . . [a] gathering that take place only by virtue of a guardian awareness and an ontological understanding, relating the gathering to the song of Being as such. (Levin, 1989, p. 257)

How do I *interpret* the stories I hear? “Phenomenology is . . . description of meaning *of the expressions* [emphasis in the original] of lived experience” (van Manen, 1997, p. 25). The stories of the GED college graduates’ lived high school experiences yield a text with which I engage in a hermeneutic, dialogic relation as described by Gadamer (1960/2006):

Texts are “enduringly fixed expressions of life” that are to be understood; and that means that one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter. Only through him [*sic*] are the

written marks changed back into meaning. . . . It is like a real conversation in that the common subject matter is what binds the two partners, the text and the interpreter, to each other. . . . It is indispensable that the interpreter participate in its meaning. Thus it is perfectly legitimate to speak of a *hermeneutical conversation* [emphasis in the original]. (p. 389)

My participants write and speak of their experiences in language, and this text is the material of my “reflective determination and explication” of what their lived experience of high school is, which is the “difficult task of phenomenological reflection” (van Manen, 1997, p. 77). The themes I uncover will “only serve[s] to point at, to allude to, or to hint at, aspect[s] of” (p. 92) their experience, but they may also provide a structure for coming into more direct contact “with the experience as lived” (p. 78).

The hermeneutic phenomenological writing contained herein is a product of a “dialogic process of constructing a text (a body of knowledge) and thus learning what [I] am capable of saying” (van Manen, 1997, p. 127). One of my new teachers was trying to grasp the essential difference between pedagogical approaches that talk *at* students and those that talked *with* students, and she wrote, “You can’t pass out worksheets and expect miracles” (personal communication, April, 2008). In much the same way, you cannot approach phenomenological writing from a technical perspective of analysis, but rather from a mystical or ontological sensitivity that almost expresses itself through the writer as s/he reflects on the lived experiences that have been shared. “To write is to measure our thoughtfulness” (van Manen, 1997, p. 127) because “Language is the clearing-concealing advent of Being itself” (Heidegger, 1947 /1993c, p. 230).

Van Manen (2003) envisions the flow of phenomenological writing through six, somewhat concurrent, methodological processes:

- turning to the nature of lived experience;
- investigating experience as we live it;

- reflecting on essential themes;
- the art of writing and rewriting;
- maintaining a strong and oriented relation; [and]
- balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.
(pp. 31-33)

In the beginning, a phenomenon grasps the investigator, momentarily or insidiously, and requests, perhaps demands, a “turning to the nature of [its] lived experience” (p. 31).

“We never come to thoughts. They come / to us” (Heidegger, 1971/2001, p. 6). Next, the investigator chooses to examine the phenomenon in the fullness of its lived experience: to use a “vision that sees things big [which] brings us in close contact with details and with particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even to the measurable” (Greene, 1995, p. 10). Now the investigator reflects on the essential themes of the lived experience, concerned to uncover “What it is that constitutes the nature of this lived experience” (van Manen, 2003, p. 32). This reflection is a recursive process, alternating with the writing and rewriting that flows from it. Phenomenological reflection is “always a *bringing to speech* [italics in the original] of something” (p. 32), so the reflection and the writing/rewriting tumble through thought’s halls together, their flashing forms alternating, as one feeds the energy of the other. At all times, the investigator must maintain “a strong and oriented relation” to the phenomenon, refusing to allow the simpler, easier answer to obscure the unique, perhaps unwieldy, description. Equally, the investigator must keep in mind the overall purpose of the research: “to construct a text which in its dialogical structure and argumentative organization aims at a certain effect” (p. 32): the powerful revelation of the fullness of a lived experience.

Throughout my writing and rewriting, my focus is to learn from the GED college graduates, not to apply preconceived notions or preexisting paradigms to their

experiences. To be faithful to the trust they place in me by sharing their intimate thoughts, I maintain a rigorous devotion to the courage of their revealing that demands a speaking of their unique truth. At the same time, I pursue the insights I glimpse like a poet, capturing only those gleaming metaphors that light up the meaning of their lived experience and not falling thrall to brilliant diction that enchants without contributing to “the total textual structure” (van Manen, 1997, p. 33).

Structuring My Work

In this chapter I have shared my calling to reflect on the American high school experience from the point of view of the GED college graduate. In Chapter Two, I continue to reflect on the American high school experience as it unfolds from my personal memories, literature, poetry, history, educational philosophy, and social justice perspectives. Chapter Three describes the hermeneutic phenomenological method I have embraced as well as my experience interviewing GED college graduates to listen to their stories of high school. Chapter Four contains the themes developed from our recorded conversations, and the final chapter explores the insights I have drawn from these conversations. And in the end, I hope I uncover some understanding of GED college graduates’ lived experience of high school and open the door to further reflection.

You knock at the door of reality,
shake your thought-wings, loosen
your shoulders,
and open.
(Rumi, 2004, p. 200)

Come with me while I “shake [my] thought-wings” free and “loosen [my] shoulders” to open the door that leads into the world of the GED college graduates’ lived experience of high school.

CHAPTER TWO: RELINQUISHING THE STRUGGLE AGAINST DIS-PLACEMENT: DROPPING OUT

The bell rings; the halls bulge with movement and sound. Locker doors pop open up and down the hall like the stops on a giant organ playing the accompaniment to the cacophony of voices. The music swells to a crescendo as teachers and students collide in a fugue of conflicting melodies: teachers chide students to hurry; students chatter with their friends. It is a midmorning passing between classes in the halls of an American, comprehensive high school.

A quick look down the panorama of the hall reveals only a mass of teenaged humanity dotted with guardian postures of teachers that cause irregular eddies in the mass; but a more experienced eye discerns patterns in the mix. Goth-darkened figures skulk along beside bubbling cheerleaders; morose, rumped waifs bump unaware into dreamy-eyed scientists and focused mathematicians. Muscled athletes tread forcefully through giggling freshmen and manicured juniors. Seniors are marked by that expectant look that painfully infuses expectation with fear. Each adolescent strives at once to be unique and to fit in, defining the exquisitely precarious *implacement*² challenge of high school. Somewhere in the flow move the students who will drop out. Some of these dropouts will earn their GED credential, and a small number of these students will actually graduate from a four-year college or university program. Where are they? Can we pick them out? Can we discern them from the other students in the crowded halls?

The word “hall” has a revealing derivation. It comes from the Middle English *halle*, which comes from the Old English word *heall*, which literally means “that which is

² Because Edward S. Casey, one of the primary philosophers I use for this study, uses “implacement” rather than the more usual “emplacement,” I will do the same.

covered” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 1980, p. 630). This English word comes from the “Indo-European base *kel*, to cover, whence the Latin *celare* to conceal” (p. 630). The crowded, noisy halls of a comprehensive high school may cover or conceal the complex experiences of those unique individuals who make up the student body. Once again, diction reveals the concealing that takes place in school policy when the individuals who people the halls are treated as one “student body.” Can I trouble this inclusive narrative to reveal more individual stories? Why do some students drop out of high school? Are they called away, pushed out, or just lost along the way as they run afoul of high school’s purpose?

Exposing the Historical Purpose of High School

What is the underlying purpose of high school? The academic purpose is the surface; what subtler societal purposes might linger in the ancient grout of the tiled halls? “The culture that characterizes and shapes a given place is a shared culture, not merely superimposed upon that place but part of its very facticity” (Casey, 1993, p. 31). Is the culture of school a culture that embraces all students? Are all students equally provided a place in school “to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence” (Heidegger, 1954/1993b, p. 351); or are our high schools designed to foster emplacement only for the privileged?

From the beginning, high school “reformers hoped to instill the values of ambition, hard work, delayed gratification, and earnestness in youth, trained to become sober, law-abiding, and respectable adults” (Reese, 1995, p. 57). High schools’ political economy textbooks taught that “laziness, immorality, drinking, bearing too many children: these were the major causes of poverty” (p. 120). Textbooks controlled

knowledge, and particular textbooks dominated the market and offered “a remarkably uniform worldview” (p. 106) that legitimized republican politics. As late as 1941, George William Hunter’s popular biology textbook advocated eugenical themes arguing directly for the inevitability of biology.

The political message embedded in [his] conclusion is direct. Social theorists who were arguing for a welfare state were wasting their time and would waste the resources of the nation. The inevitability of biology, as presented in almost three decades of Hunter’s textbooks, made such a policy irrational. (Selden, 1999, p. 75)

From the beginning, the purpose of American high schools was to “promote republican values, reward talent, and thus secure social order and democratic progress” (Reese, 1995, p. 80).

Today, high school organization can be judged to incorporate these republican values through the required course of studies. The hegemony of the established liberal arts curriculum is “a process of domination” that “functions to privilege certain sets and orders of knowledge over others” (Pinar, 2000, pp. 250-251), and this “hidden curriculum” (p. 250) places poor and minority students within a curriculum unrelated to their real-life experiences. This becomes an imposition of white, middle-class values on these students in order for them to succeed. As long as access to college, to the world of business, to investment capital, and to employment is, to a large extent, guarded by those who use this tool of classism as an entrance requirement, changing the high school curriculum may be problematic. If you fail in this “college-prep” course of studies, then you take a “vocational” or “business” course of less demanding “academic” rigor since “One type of man [*sic*] is needed to plan ahead and an entirely different type to execute the work” (Tyler, as cited in Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 86). Or you drop out.

Additionally, “everyone knew” in the 1800s, “that only a small percentage of the student body ever entered a four-year high school, never mind graduated” (Reese, 1995, p. 236.). “Only a few advanced to junior and senior year” (p. 241), and our current dropout pattern shows the same pattern (NCES, 2007). “High school was for the talented few” (Reese, 1995, p. 258), and today’s hegemonic curriculum seems to reflect this classism.

Nel Noddings (2005b) argues against this “one-size-fits-all” approach to education. She expands Mortimer Adler’s argument for equal education for all citizens in a democracy to mean more than “a formal legal right to education,” to include equal access to “decent schools, adequate coaching, encouragement, and advice” (p. 29). But she goes even further to attack this notion of the cultural inculcation of the high school curriculum. “As a result of its association with power and privilege, liberal education has become a form of privileged knowledge” (p. 31), and remains the expectation for all students. Everyone must attempt this standard, and those who fail must turn to other areas of expertise that are considered “less than,” both by those who find themselves drawn to their cultivation and by those who have passed the endurance test and look down on those who have “failed.” “Children are led to believe that only one form of education is valuable and that only one set of occupations is worth aiming at” (p. 40).

American public education may be a victim of its own ambition. Rallying around the notion that every child should be prepared for higher education, schools follow a general-education model that marches students through an increasingly uniform curriculum, with admission to college as the goal. But what happens when a 17-year-old decides, rightly or wrongly, that her road in life doesn't pass through college? Then the college-prep exercise becomes a charade. (Thornburgh, 2006, p. 5)

“It is high time,” Noddings says, “that we stopped regarding liberal education as the highest form of education, next to which all others seem inferior” (p. 30). Is learning your place in society, this sorting process whereby the book-smart people are granted status, access to college, and the deference of their peers, the true purpose of high school? Is high school really about the cultural inculcation of privileged place or mastery of knowledge and skills?

Describing the Challenges to Implacement in High School

Walking down those high school halls successfully may have more to do with feelings of implacement than academic or social skills. “Most dropouts are students who could have, and believe they could have, succeeded in school” (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006, p. iii). If so, why did they leave? Heidegger suggests that “The way in which I am and you are, the manner in which we humans *are* on earth, is *baun*, dwelling” (1954/1993b, p. 349). In order to dwell, we build. The word “build” traces from the “Old English word *byldan* ‘construct a house,’” which, in turn, comes “from the Proto-Indo-European base *bhu-* ‘dwell.’” To be sure, every building is not a dwelling nor is a building a prerequisite for dwelling, but a building creates a space for dwelling. “Building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things” (p. 350). Do school buildings cultivate the growing beings that enter there? Do they provide spaces where teachers and students can grow together? “When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become a place” (Casey, 1993, p. 28). When students as young as eight or nine begin a pattern of absenteeism that eventually leads to dropping out (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989), do they feel implaced in school? If students feel that their classes are not connected to their lives, do they feel part of the creation of the school

culture? Do students who cannot learn to read feel that the school space has become a place for them?

Would students leave if they felt firmly implaced in school? What was really lacking in their high school experience? When we calculate drop out rates, are we measuring symptoms that actually point to a fundamental sense of feeling out of place? Examining our understanding of dropping out may yield insights we can use to shape a fuller understanding of this phenomenon.

Flunking Out: The Original Stereotype

The first image that comes to mind when the term “drop out” is used is the stereotype of the non-academic student captured in Updike’s poem.

Ex-Basketball Player

Pearl Avenue runs past the high school lot,
Bends with the trolley tracks, and stops, cut off
Before it has a chance to go two blocks,
At Colonel McComsky Plaza. Berth’s garage
Is on the corner facing west, and there,
Most days, you’ll find Flick Webb, who helps Berth out.

Flick stands tall among the idiot pumps—
Five on a side, the old bubble-head style,
Their rubber elbows hanging loose and low.

...

Once Flick played for the high school team, the Wizards.
He was good: in fact, the best. In ’46
He bucketed three hundred ninety points,
A county record still. The ball loved Flick.

...

He never learned a trade; he just sells gas,
Checks oil, and changes flats. Once in a while,
As a gag, he dribbles an inner tube,
But most of us remember anyway.
His hands are fine and nervous on the lug wrench.
It makes no difference to the lug wrench, though.

Off work, he hangs around Mae's luncheonette.
Grease-gray and kind of coiled, he plays pinball,
Smokes those thin cigars, nurses lemon phosphates.

Flick seldom says a word to Mae, just nods
Beyond her face toward bright applauding tiers
Of Necco Wafers and Juju Beads.
(Updike, 1988, p. 809)

The stereotype of Updike's dropout is people labeled "idiot" who "never learned a trade" and "just" give a desultory effort to whatever minimum-wage job they can find. Proficiencies they may have displayed in high school, such as playing basketball, bring them no success in adult life. Society assumes that if these students had had the academic capability, they would have stayed in school; society often assumes these students flunked out.

"Flunking out" is the pejorative, colloquial phrase often applied to dropouts. It comes from American and English college slang, "flunk," which means to "back out, give up, fail." Does Updike suggest that his "Ex-Basketball Player" may have been manipulated by external forces into "backing out" or "giving up" rather than "failing" through his own lack of effort? After all, the poem opens with an image of Flick's workplace that parallels his life. Flick's life barely runs "past the high school lot" before it "bends," "stops" and is "cut off / Before it has a chance to go two blocks" toward any productive, fulfilling future.

Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, and Hawkins, (2000) report that their empirical study of five different models for explaining dropping out of high school before completing 10th grade shows that "Poor academic achievement is the strongest predictor" but "A comprehensive model of social development that considers influence from multiple sources such as family, school, community, and peers would

better explain the process of early high school dropout” (p. 579). On the surface, then, poor academic achievement plays a large role in dropping out; however, the influence of additional personal and social factors suggests a far more complex and individual portrait of a dropout than that of “Flick.” Additionally, Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) report that “Dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but a gradual process of disengagement” (p. 8). How do students become disengaged? Can they tell us how this happens? Can we learn to interpret their stories of disengagement, loss of implacement, and gradual loss of faith in themselves and their expectations to understand why students drop out of high school?

Recognizing the Power of Implacement

In the halls of the large, comprehensive high schools, the individual student can be overshadowed by the broad opportunities for arts, sports, advanced academic courses, and technical specialties so lauded by large-school proponents. “Some people really do struggle in school, not necessarily academically but they may struggle being in a big high school” (Whitson, 2006, p. 2). In fact, many students *do* profit from the opportunities provided by large high schools, and some even base life-long achievement on the solid start they receive in any of these areas. One of my former students captures her sense of implacement in a dedication she wrote for me at the end of her senior year.

Lifelessons

As each of us stumbled into Rm. 215, as young people often stumble through life, we were unaware of the adventure that lay ahead. We became travelers on a long and somewhat dangerous journey, Ms. Snyder our fearless captain. She sailed us across seas of metaphors, oceans of hidden meaning, our only compass; our thoughts, our minds, our hearts, to guide us. We discovered lands of answers and in them more questions.

Rm. 215 became the place where the athlete, the homecoming nominee,

the beauty, the writer, the actor, the shy one, the bold one all overlapped, filling in the gaps that existed in the hallways, as we saw each other walk by, but never really looked. English became more than a class, it became a link. We had all begun to appreciate what the purpose of the English language was. And it was not grammatical. It was saddening, exciting, inspiring, revealing. (Carrie, 1992)

Carrie describes how she felt empowered in my classroom to search for “lands of answers and in them more questions.” Her implacement allowed her to forge a “link” between the “English language” she studied and the “saddening, inspiring, revealing” world around her. She felt that her English class became a place where divergent student identities found a dwelling place: a space where they could learn about each other while they wrestled with their shared academic challenge.

Many, not all, students felt, as Carrie did, that they were successful in my classroom. For some, it was a powerful place we created together.

The power a place such as a mere room possesses determines not only *where* I am in the limited sense of cartographic location but *how* I am together with others (i.e., how I commingle and communicate with them) and even *who* we shall become together. The “how” and the “who” are intimately tied to the “where” which gives to them a specific content and a coloration not available from any other source. Place bestows upon them “a local habitation and a name” by establishing a concrete situatedness in the common world. The implacement is as social as it is personal. The idiolocal is not merely idiosyncratic or individual; it is also collective in character. (Casey, 1993, p. 23)

The collective nature of the power of place means that in a large high school, the successful implacement of most students affects the implacement of all. If many can be successful in this stimulating, fast-paced environment, how does that make those less successful feel? Do the students who thrive on the smorgasbord create a social atmosphere of lively involvement that makes the picky eater feel left out and unconnected? Does the large comprehensive high school, brimming with action and

excitement for many students, create disengagement and result in dis-placement for others?

For Carrie, English class became the link that brought her into place, but we know that not all the students felt the same magic in my class or any class. What happens if students cannot find a place to “become travelers on a long and somewhat dangerous journey”? What happens if they cannot “fill in the gaps” as they encounter others and are encountered in return? What happens if they are not valued, or at least recognized, for who they are? How important is implacement in high school? Perhaps, as Casey (1993) points out, “We have exchanged place for a mess of spatial and temporal pottage” (p. 38) by creating large, comprehensive high schools.

Finding a Place in High School

High school, as it has always been conceived, valorizes content and measurable achievement. “Widespread use of standardized achievement and ability tests for admissions and educational evaluation are premised on the belief that the skills that can be tested are essential for success in schooling” (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001, p. 145). The *NCLB* federal legislation’s emphasis on measurable achievement in reading and mathematics “forces communities to focus more on raising test scores than on raising kids” (McKenna & Haselkorn, 2005, p. 1). Academic success gives some students a sense of belonging, a sense of implacement. Can high school students find a sense of implacement outside of academic success?

“As soon as freshmen arrive, counselors encourage them to join school-sponsored groups, whether it is varsity football or the award-winning literary magazine” (Wilson & Mishra, 1999, p. A1). Students who have a group also have a place to be: the athletes in

the gyms or on the athletic fields, the musicians in the music rooms, the academics in the media center, the journalists in the newspaper office, and so on. Even being in line for a place offers sanctuary as freshmen and sophomore “groupies” recognize that, as the years pass by, they will take over the envied leadership positions of power and comfort in these circles. Students who demonstrate a skill in one of these areas usually can construct a cloak of social protection that offers them a safe *place* in the seething social milieu. They “fit in”; they find friends; they create a safe *place* to be.

The students, however, always have their own, more vicious way of finding a place to be.

Cliques and clubs have defined school days for decades, providing a framework for friendships and prom dates and booked weekends. . . . In the crowded cafeteria and parking lot, students point out the Korean Corner and Chinatown, derisive terms used to describe the patch of blacktop or lunch table near the Frutopia machine populated by Asian students. . . . The Preppies, known by critics as the 90210s after the television show popularizing lavish high school lifestyles, carve out a spot at the center of the [parking] lot. . . . [Other groups] are . . . Yos (students who favor “gangsta” fashions and music), Jocks and Trenchies . . . [those who wear] overcoats that are suddenly symbols of schoolyard violence [since Columbine]. . . . There are Headbangers who favor heavy metal music, Skaters who are partial to skateboards, Techies who man the drama department’s backstage crews, Nerds and honor students – all part of an array of irregular social groups that operate beneath the school’s more formal network of school-sanctioned clubs. (Wilson & Mishra, 1999, p. A1)

Even teachers, administrators, and counselors sometimes identify students by their school group: for example, “He’s a football player” and “She’s a cheerleader”; “He’s a member of the band” and she’s a “mathlete.” Less attractive sobriquets illustrated in the students’ language above often become labels that can at least offer a relatively safe place to be.

Cliques can cause friction between groups as well as provide a kind of safety net for young people trying to make friends. . . . [The principal] says one of the chief challenges of high school is “finding their place, finding where they fit in and figuring out the pecking order.” (Wilson & Mishra, 1999, p. A1)

How important is this sense of implacement to high school success? Merleau-Ponty (1964/2004b) would understand the vital importance of having a bodily place of your own in high school. “Every thought known to us occurs to a flesh” (p. 261).

The classic line of a person awaking from unconsciousness is “Where am I?” The first order of orientation is to implace my body. “There is no depth or place without this body’s irreplaceable contribution” (Casey, 1993, p. 70).

Our body, to the extent that it moves itself about, that is, to the extent that it is inseparable from a view of the world and is that view itself brought into existence, is the condition of possibility, not only of the geometrical synthesis, but of all expressive operations. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2004a, p. 187)

Students in large, comprehensive—and sometimes incomprehensible—high schools strive to find a place for their bodies from which they can orient themselves. If they cannot find such a place, they may become “literally disoriented, since we can regard it as axiomatic that to be without a here is to lack orientation” (Casey, 1993, p. 51).

The word “disorientation” comes from “dis (a negation) + orient”; orient is “from the Latin *oriens*: direction of the rising sun” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 1980, p. 1002). So to be disoriented when your body cannot find a place in which to locate itself is to be without a sense of direction. Direction is a word sometimes employed by teachers and parents to describe young people who “lack direction” or “have not found themselves.” When students have no place to be in high school, to encounter Being, they lack the orientation, the bodily implacement, which will orient them or give them direction. School becomes not a place but a site, and “site is place reduced to be ‘just there’” (Casey, 1993, p. 65). Is this why they stop coming to school?

Listening to the Stories of Dis-placement

“Absenteeism is the most common indicator of overall student engagement and a significant predictor of dropping out” (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006, p. 8).

“Using a cutoff just below six absences, for example, indicated that dropouts could be distinguished from graduates with 66 percent accuracy, including both false positives and false negatives as errors, by the third grade” (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989, p. 312). In Chapter One, Kim spoke of increasingly tardy arrivals at school; Erica Fields (2008) reports the same story.

A girl in my class started a fight with me [*sic*] and the schools [*sic*] equal punishment rule dictated a week long [*sic*] suspension for both of us. I never recovered from that incident. . . . So, halfway through the year I stopped showing up for the classes I didn’t enjoy. My mother would drop me off at school around 11 o’clock when I decided I felt like going. (p. 1)

Fields’ absenteeism is a symptom of her disengagement, her feeling out of place. She reveals that she “had panic attacks” after that disciplinary event because she felt that “Teachers began sending [her] to the office for minor violations she saw other students getting away with” (p.1). She felt that “All these schools were concerned with was making us into the future employees of America and saving their accreditations from the state” (p.1). She saw no place for herself in school; she felt no connection to what was happening in school.

This lack of connection to school seems to be associated with a resultant draw to join the workforce that further displaces students. Fields (2008) blames the school for trying to make her and her classmates “into the future employees of America,” yet she is proud of her work in “fast food joints and restaurants” and brags that “With my already six year [*sic*] head start on them, I made more last year than they will when they

graduate” (p. 1). She is, apparently, unmoved by the statistics that predict that she and her husband, “two business minded [*sic*] people who try to work for ourselves whenever possible” (p. 1), will earn \$6000 a year less than a high school graduate (Tompkins, 2004). Many dropouts seem to feel this draw to the workforce. The unedited story below has an undeniable validity.

i reckon that it doesn't matter whether you drop out of high school anymore because its easy to go out an find an apprenticeship. . . . like ive dropped out the first term of yr 11 and ive liked it ever since doing my apprentice its not very good wages at the start but mate when your quilyfeid youll rake in the money which is why i look forward to going to work every day and as I look back I reckon dropping out of school is the best thing I ever did! (McBurnie, 2008, p. 1)

Another dropout but eventual GED graduate, Donna Streich, is not so sanguine about her choice as she looks back with the perspective of age.

I had my mind set, I wanted to work full time. . . . I quit school, and it's always been a regret. When you don't finish school you get the hard jobs. They've all been factory, blue-collar, minimum-wage jobs. (Green, 2006, p. 2)

The allure of the workforce, for Fields, McBurnie, and Streich, seems as much about becoming independent and a part of the adult world as it does about the money. This natural and understandable result of nascent maturation propels some students to drop out of high school and seek their fortune. Would the draw to the workforce have been as strong if the students had felt more implaced in high school? Would they have dropped out if the intimate connection between their studies and their life had been more apparent?

Thomas Mcclaflin makes the connection between his desire to work and his perception of the irrelevance of his high school classes.

Sure I was doing alright [*sic*] in my classes for freshman and sophomore year. However, the mundane repetitiveness of English and Math classes cracked me wide open. I no longer felt the need for A's and B's. I felt instead of wasting my

time sitting in the back of a room learning how to write a sentence I should be out in the world getting a start on building towards a career. (Mcclaflin, 2008, p. 1)

Clearly, Mcclaflin did not perceive that his math and English classes were supporting his goals. In the Civic Enterprises Report, *The Silent Epidemic*, the dropouts interviewed echoed Mcclaflin's complaints and added that classes were uninteresting, teachers had low expectations for them, they did not do homework, and they wished that school had forced them to work harder (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Certainly the illiteracy rate contributes to classes being uninteresting. *The Nation's Report Card*, shows that 26 percent of eighth-grade students were reading at "below basic" level. This designation indicates, for example, that "When reading practical text," these eighth graders were *not* "able to identify the main purpose and make predictions about the relatively obvious outcomes of procedures in the text" (National Assessment Governing Board, 2006, p. 26). Could absenteeism as early as grade three, the disengagement students feel in high school, and the illiteracy rate all be the result of a larger sense of displacement?

Teaching and Dis-placement

Could instruction itself be dis-placing some students?

David Stickney [2008 GED graduate] struggled to get through fifth grade before his family decided to home-school him. The 19-year-old struggles with short-term memory loss brought on by a traumatic birth. Thanks to a recent school policy change, he was able to enroll at Hellgate High School for his junior and senior years to participate in music programs—an area where his brain excels. But he lacked the credits to earn a traditional high school diploma. "In the school system, they teach to the class," Stickney said. "In the GED program, they teach to me." (Chaney, 2008, p. 1)

Howard Gardner (1999) piqued the academic world when his Multiple Intelligences theory put an "s" at the end of the word "intelligence." Does Stickney feel more

implaced in his high school program because it appeals to his musical/rhythmic intelligence? Our society, and, therefore, our schools, value mathematical-logical and verbal-linguistic accomplishments. The design of the SAT attests to this valorization, and colleges and universities look closely at achievement in these areas. Naturalist intelligence, Gardner's recent addition to his framework, gets some acknowledgement in biology and environmental science classes, especially when these are laboratory-based courses. In most of the six comprehensive high schools in which I have taught, the language and math/science classrooms are in the front of the building. Classrooms for bodily-kinesthetic (physical education and dance), visual-spatial (visual arts, auto mechanics, and technology), and musical-rhythmic (music) instruction were not so favored, often tucked into ground floor-rear spaces to protect "academic" study from their intrusive noise, reinforcing the impression that these bodily ways of knowing are less cerebral, less favored. Serious study, one infers, needs quiet. Emotional intelligences that understand self and others are usually only addressed in their extreme absence when student fights break out, students threaten themselves or others, or academic achievement shows a dangerous decline.

Gardner (1999) also explores spiritual, existential, and moral capacities. Where are these ways of knowing honored in the comprehensive high school? Where is the "spiritual curriculum" so "no child's soul is left behind" (Lantieri, 2001, p. 170)? Does the absence of a spiritual presence in the curriculum leave some students feeling lost? If students' talents or interests lie in these neglected areas, does the focus on this narrow verbal-linguistic and mathematical-logical band of human intelligences, as conceived by

Gardner, dis-place some students and welcome others? Are there other, subtler ways that students are either invited or ignored in school?

Mentoring Students to “Be”

John Skretta (2000), a high school teacher, reflecting on what he calls his sense of privilege, attributes much of his sense of implacement to the mentoring from which he benefited while in high school.

At lunch during middle school, I remember that a small group of guys who played football and did well academically would sit around on the bleachers and chat with one of the school administrators. I never stopped to think that he didn't talk to just anyone, that as an administrator, he was signifying our importance by taking time from his day to come out on those nice fall afternoons and stand around chatting with us. (pp. 137-138)

Here, then, is another sense of implacement, another invitation to belong that is missing from the high school experience of many students.

Education professor Russell Rumberger of UC Santa Barbara found little political will in the United States to spread out the programs that worked, or add staff members to work intensively with students at risk of dropping out. Many schools nationwide don't have enough staff members to make those connections. "We can't expect teachers who are teaching 150 kids (or) schools that have one counselor for every 600 students to really adequately address the needs of all their kids," Rumberger said. "The point is to make these connections. The heart of it is giving more time, giving more support to kids who need it." (Sacchetti, 2004, p.1)

Young people who are mentored in school begin to define a sense of themselves as students, begin to encounter Being in the opportunities opened up by these relationships with adults. Notice how natural, unstructured, and open the administrator is in this formative mentoring relationship with Skretta and his friends. The administrator allows the students simply to be with him.

My father exemplified this “being-with” in his sharing of time with his grandson, my sister’s son, Eddie. At five and six years old, Eddie would sometimes tell his mother

that he was “Going to visit Grandpa.” Since they lived only steps apart, my sister did not remark on Eddie’s departure except to ask him to be home at a particular time for a meal or a preplanned event. After a while, though, she asked Eddie what he and Grandpa did when Eddie went over to see him. “Nothing,” came the reply. It was not an evasive response; it seemed more peaceful than anything else. Curious now, my sister asked Dad what happened when Eddie came to visit. “Nothing,” he replied.

My sister balked; she wanted details! My father shrugged and said simply, “He just joins me in whatever I’m doing. Sometimes we just watch TV.”

“What do you talk about?” my sister persisted.

“Sometimes we never say anything except ‘Hi’ and ‘Bye.’”

My father and Skretta’s administrator allowed the young people simply to be; they dwelt with them to allow them the freedom and peace to discover themselves.

We are dwellers. But in what does the essence of dwelling consist? . . . To dwell [means] to remain, to stay in place. . . . [It] means to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace. The word for peace, *Friede*, . . . means preserved from harm and danger, . . . safeguarded. To free actually means to spare. The sparing itself consists not only in the fact that we do not harm the one whom we spare. Real sparing is something *positive* and takes place when we leave something beforehand in its own essence, when we return it specifically to its essential being, when we “free” it in the proper sense of the word into a preserve of peace. (Heidegger, 1954/1993b, pp. 350-351)

I know that Eddie and my sister treasure this dwelling space that my father built for himself and his grandson, especially because my father died soon thereafter. Eddie uses words like “safe” and “peaceful” to describe his time with my father. Skretta uses words like “privilege” and “an invitation to belong.” Heidegger would probably say, “to return it specifically to its essential being.” What a gift! To return one to oneself. To feel as if

you belong, to be implaced, to be able to orient yourself; this should be the basis for dwelling in school as well.

Students who find a place for themselves, an identity for themselves, are dwelling in school. This may be the key to their academic success, not intelligence or social skills. Might perseverance be born of implacement? How can I persevere in an activity that takes place somewhere I cannot dwell? How can I concentrate on things external to myself when I am not at peace in myself? Is this how students feel who eventually drop out of high school? What external causes contribute to their sense of dis-placement?

Reflecting on the External Causes of Dis-placement

GED Test candidates are routinely asked why they dropped out of high school. “The same reasons for not completing high school [are] always ranked in the top five: (1) ‘Was absent too many times,’ (2) ‘Did not like school,’ (3) ‘Was bored,’ (4) ‘Wasn’t happy in school,’ and (5) ‘Poor study habits’” (Ezzelle, 2006, p. 11). The candidates largely blame themselves; this may be admirable and a culturally acceptable sign of their maturity, but as I have explored above, are these reasons the results of a deeper dis-placement? What powerful undercurrents exist outside of school in these students’ lives that might also contribute to their feelings of dis-placement in school? Schools do not function in isolation but in a broader social context. Finding your place in the high school halls also may be affected by your place in the larger society.

Reflecting on White Privilege

In addition to the mentoring he received in high school, John Skretta (2000) also describes how his implacement was born of privilege. He describes how his high school

experience and that of his wife were so different, primarily because he found a place in high school.

I was a joiner because I was encouraged to believe that I belonged. Although that was privilege at work, I didn't then recognize it as privilege. But as an adult in education, I realize today that privilege in schools is often best understood as an invitation to belong. I was always treated by individuals within educational settings as if I belonged there. (p. 137)

Skretta was implaced by this "invitation to belong," but "Teresa [Skretta's wife] never felt valued by Northeast [her high school]. . . . She never had that" (p. 137). Skretta's implacement gave him a place in school from which he could orient himself. This "invitation," he feels, was crucial to his success in high school.

Peggy McIntosh (1988), former Associate Director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, points out that

As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. (p. 1)

She has generated a compelling list of white advantages, and some of her observations specifically illustrate how schools invite white people to feel implaced and, at the same time, dis-place others. She speaks, for example, about the subtle invitation contained in curricular materials: "When I am told about our national heritage or about 'civilization,' I am shown that people of my color made it what it is," and "I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race" (1988, p. 1). McIntosh also recognizes the uneven evaluation of people of color: "I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race" (p. 1). "People make assumptions about their [kids of color] intellectual

ability, about their family support, simply on the basis of their skin color” (Miner & Peterson, 2000/01, p. 1).

Although our society has made progress toward eliminating racial discrimination, most of us would acknowledge that our goal is not yet met. For high school students, the most destructive aspect of enduring racial discrimination may be the rejection that undermines their feeling of implacement in society and, therefore, in school.

Incident

Once riding in old Baltimore
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, “Ni—er.”

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That’s all that I remember.
(Cullen, 1988, pp. 607-608)

The speaker in the poem is the poet, based on his own interpretation of this poem; and he is recalling an “incident” from his childhood. He crafts the poem’s meter to reflect the bumpy ride that he took that day. The regular rhythm of the first stanza, as a “heart-filled, head-filled with glee” child, crashes into the irregular pauses describing his world-shattering experience, then collapses back to the regular rhythm of his daily world. Oh, but how that world has changed for him! He is only eight; he has offered friendship to another child; and he has been insulted with an epithet so vile that I cannot write it out in the poem above.

When I was a child, I had a similar experience whose insignificance heightens and explains the impact of Cullen's experience by comparison. Some adult called me "a little Mick," and I asked my father what that meant. He just laughed, told me it meant I was Irish, and somehow made me feel it had been a compliment. We had been taught that being Irish was something to which everyone aspired, but, alas, something into which only the lucky could be born. How does this incident illuminate Cullen's experience and suggest society's displacement of African Americans, and, by extension, all historically discriminated races?

Because I am part of the majority white race, the slur or compliment about my Irish heritage could be ignored, sloughed off, laughed at. In contrast, the adult Cullen still suffers the effects of the insult. With poignant understatement, he admits that he "saw the whole of Baltimore" during his seven-month visit "From May until December," but describes his utter devastation in stark understatement by admitting "That's all that I remember." In 1911, when Cullen would have been eight years old, the United States was still in the throes of "separate but equal" segregation, and a long way from the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* that would hallmark an American civil rights movement. Why would he write of the incident in his adult life? Could the insult he suffered still provoke painful memories? Does the poem alert us to the fact that although civil rights and affirmative action legislation has enabled many African Americans and other minorities to receive relief from discrimination under due process, person-to-person, intimate discrimination still exists?

Why does my African American brother-in-law stand outside a restaurant in D.C. and say, "I can't go in there"? Why does one of my beautiful young students confess to

me that an older, white couple had passed a remark about how “Black people smell” while she was caught in an elevator with them? These “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” certainly “must give us pause.” Children, like Cullen, who grow up on the receiving end of such malicious intentions by others to make it clear to them that they are “less than,” cannot escape the hurt of such displacement regardless of their eventual success. How does this undermine one’s place in those high school halls? Assuming the halls are safely guarded from overt racism, and that may be an unwarranted assumption in some cases, the knowledge these children carry with them in their bodies is always a feeling of caution. As J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield classically illustrates, adolescence is always already a time of profound conflict and personal choices that can define a person for a lifetime: like dropping out of high school. How much more difficult it must be to stride through the high school halls with confidence if you carry in your embodied memory attacks of such a vicious, personal nature that even a family’s love cannot erase them?

One effect of consistent experiences of rejection can be students’ rejection of the promise of success school offers to those who will embrace the system, work hard, and earn a diploma. “If black students expect their academic efforts to be unrewarded, it is because the weight of historical experience has been that black efforts in fact have been unrewarded” (Rothstein, 2004, p. 51). Is this overt rejection the only experience of displacement internalized by students who are different?

Reflecting on Cultural Capital

My grandson, Joey, attends a middle-class elementary school with a 60/40-white/minority mix, 22 percent FARMS (Free and Reduced Meals), and 8 percent limited

English proficiency (Frederick County Public Schools). We frequently attend school functions, and I have had several opportunities to observe the teachers and students interact in formal and informal situations. Awards ceremonies are held four times a year, parents are invited, and each child in Kindergarten through second grade receives an award once during the year. Each time I have attended one of the ceremonies, a similar pattern emerges. The little children sit cross-legged on the floor while the tedious name-calling goes on. The individual children called to the stage are excited and self-conscious, but the 75 percent of children not receiving awards find it difficult to maintain the “good audience behavior” the guidance counselor/Emcee keeps reminding them to observe. What is “good audience behavior”? Who has defined this? Apparently, from her remonstrations, it means to sit silently, to keep your eyes forward and hands in your lap, and to applaud modestly when someone’s name is called. Is this audience participation or audience lethargy? The children who are “behaving,” including my grandson, seem to have partially zoned out. Joey looks as if he has relaxed into passive acceptance; others are still fighting the pose.

During each awards ceremony, some children are called out of the sea of heads to be punished by having to sit by the teacher. Invariably, in my meager number of observations at this school, it is the African American boys who are hauled out because they are poking their neighbors, laughing and fooling around, not displaying “good audience behavior.”

In schools, the linguistic patterns, social behavior, and mannerisms, or cultural capital, of the middle class are used as if all children have equal access to these standards. Schools favor children who have acquired the linguistic and social patterns of the middle and upper class, and promote those competencies as the “natural” patterns of behavior. (King, Hollins, & Hayman, 1997, p. 41)

Perhaps the “good audience behavior” these children have learned differs culturally from the white, middle-class behaviors expected of the students? I think of the difference between African American and white church services, and between jazz jam sessions and violin concerto concerts, and I suspect that I know who has defined “good audience behavior.” The clear message to all of us at the assembly is that the cultural capital of these young boys is not acceptable. What is being taught about the place in society for different kinds of behavior, different kinds of people? Even if we assume positive motivation on the part of the teachers, everyone in the room is learning what is “good audience behavior” and what is not. Some people are not performing well. How will school feel to these children? Are some learning that they are “better” than others? Are some children learning that their very selves seem to be out of sync with what the other students seem to be able to do easily? Are they feeling as if they do not belong? Are they beginning to feel out of place? Is the displacement, the mismatch between school and their external culture and society, limited to “good audience behavior”?

Reflecting on Poverty

What is it like for students from poor families to attend a large, comprehensive American high school? Perhaps in elementary school their poverty is less apparent since the students tend to come from the same neighborhoods. When they reach high school, do they become more aware of or more affected by their limited circumstances? Does this affect their decision to drop out?

In my school, harassment was always ruthless and sometimes violent. The teachers looked the other way as we . . . sorted out who got to enjoy “the best years of our lives.” . . . I was poor. My clothes were shabby. . . . I felt like I was hated for a reason. . . . I was singled out at least three times a day. I was slammed into lockers. I was tricked by friendly faces. I was beamed [*sic*] with

countless volleyballs, and shin struck with hockey [*sic*] sticks. I felt angry and I felt sorry for myself. (Fallesen, 2008, p. 1)

Why is Fallesen singled out for harassment? Certainly other factors might have induced students to target her, but the one Fallesen *feels* is the cause of her misery is her poverty: “I was poor. My clothes were shabby, my hair was home cut” (p. 1). She feels left out, separated, different, ultimately dis-placed. She says, “I tried to forget I had a body at all.” How can she begin to feel implaced in school when she is forced by the other students’ attacks to deny her embodied nature? “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2006, p. 235). How can she continue to stay where her very heart must be denied? How can she dwell in school without her body feeling welcomed, invited to stay?

Amazingly, Fallesen “maintained [her] nearly flawless GPA” (p. 1). Poor children start school with a significant cognitive deficit compared to their middle-class peers (Lee & Burkham, 2002), but academic excellence was not what drove Fallesen out of school.

I cried forever. If I wasn’t crying [*sic*] I was sleeping. If I wasn’t sleeping [*sic*] I sure wasn’t eating. I stopped eating. I stopped writing. Two more years became my mantra. I became bitter and resentful, jittery and paranoid. I dropped out two weeks into my junior year. . . . I walked away from my GPA. (p. 1)

So, despite her academic success, Fallesen swelled the numbers of the low-family-income students who drop out of high school at almost three times the rate of their middle-family-income peers and more than six times the rate of their high-family-income peers (NCES, 2007). Why do poor children drop out more frequently? The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Kids Count Indicator Brief, *Reducing the High School Dropout Rate* (2003), cites studies that suggest, “Family stress associated with poverty diminishes children’s likelihood of finishing high school,” and “Conflicts about money appear to

have a particularly negative influence on boys” (p. 5). If the stress of being poor forces students like Fallesen to drop out, how much more corrosive will the stress of poverty be on students whose academic placement is already undermined by poor achievement?

A similar effect of poverty is how frequently a family moves, and this affects a student’s sense of placement. “Phillip Garcia, 20, [a 2008 GED graduate] had been moving a lot when he was in high school, until he felt so left out, he quit school at the end of 10th grade” (Martin, 2008, p. 1). The student’s feelings of being left out are stronger than his academic or cultural goal to graduate from high school: he leaves, like Fallesen, because he is dis-placed.

In my earlier reflections on both white privilege and cultural capital, the mismatch between a student’s home life and the life of the school was discussed. Poverty exacerbates these differences. One dropout says, “The rich kids always knew how to be good kids . . . so I guess it’s natural the schools wanted to work with them more than the rest of us” (Thornburgh, 2006, p. 7). Generally, middle-class parents engage in what Lareau (2003) calls “concerted cultivation” (p. 2), and this intensive organization of family life around children’s developmental activities is in concert with the organization of school. In contrast, working-class and poor parents rely on “the accomplishment of natural growth” (p. 3), and “their behavior is quite different” (p. 236). Children are encouraged to create their own play and direct their own activities, and this approach does not blend well with the strictures of school life.

There is no suggestion here that the childrearing practices of middle-class parents are morally superior to those of lower-class parents, nor that middle-class childrearing practices develop children who are more psychologically well-adjusted or who function better in adult roles. Taken to an extreme, many middle-class childrearing practices . . . can result in selfish and otherwise “spoiled” children. The only suggestion here is that children who are raised with self-

confidence and a sense of entitlement, whether spoiled or not, can have an advantage when called upon to master difficult academic material in school. (Rothstein, 2004, p. 27)

Addressing the effects of poverty may not be as much about giving students from low-income families the same after-school and summer outings as their more advantaged counterparts (Rothstein, 2004) as about envisioning school as place where a space is created for students to dwell. To be safe, to be welcomed, to be freed “into a preserve of peace” (Heidegger, 1954/1993b, pp. 351) may be more significant than factors more easily measured.

The contrast between Skretta’s and Joey’s invitation to belong and Cullen’s and Fallesen’s harassment provides two ends to a spectrum of personal experiences that affect high schools students’ sense of belonging, their feelings of implacement. The sense of dis-placement for some must be exacerbated by the evident implacement of others. How can we reasonably expect a student to “dwell” in a space where they are actively displaced? “Demography is not destiny, but students’ social and economic family characteristics are a powerful influence” (Rothstein, 2004, p. 16).

Reflecting on Materialism

One of the terrifying aspects of the harassment Fallesen recounted in the previous section was the blatant materialism of her classmates. They judged her to be inferior because of her lack of material goods.

from *The World Is Too Much With Us*

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
(Wordsworth, 1804/1988, p. 549)

This first quatrain of Wordsworth's Italian sonnet is often quoted because for more than a century it has captured the materialism of Western culture that can be so evident in the microcosm of high school. "The world" and its objects are "too much with us."

Of course, in this physical dimension that our surface selves inhabit, things are a necessary and inescapable part of our lives. We need housing, clothes, furniture, tools, transportation. There may also be things in our lives that we value because of their beauty or inherent quality. We need to honor the world of things, not despise it. . . . But we cannot really honor things if we use them as a means to self-enhancement, that is to say, if we try to find ourselves through them. . . . Paradoxically, what keeps the so-called consumer society going is the fact that trying to find yourself through things doesn't work. (Tolle, 2005, pp. 36-37)

As Heidegger describes it, we are Being-in-the-world, encountering the objects of the world as ready-to-hand for our use (Heidegger, 1927/1996). In the extreme of materialism, we not only use the objects of the world for our projects, "we lay waste our powers" in our "getting and spending" to accumulate them not for their use but for the gratification that ownership may provide. Like the story of the foreign visitors who come to see Heraclitus, we accumulate things and experiences to fulfill us.

They believe they should meet the thinker in circumstances which, contrary to the ordinary round of human life, everywhere bear the traces of the exceptional and rare and so of the exciting. The group hopes that in their visit to the thinker they will find things that will provide material for entertaining conversation—at least for a while. . . . The visitors want this "experience" not in order to be overwhelmed by thinking but simply so they can say they saw and heard someone everybody says is a thinker. (Heidegger, 1947/1993c, p. 257)

The visitors are searching for entertainment, not a true encounter. In our Western pursuit of material things and entertaining experiences, we try to satisfy our innate need to encounter Being. How does this cultural orientation to material goods affect high school students? Is their implacement in high school affected by this materialism?

On July 4, 2005, *The New York Times* carried an article about a Brooklyn teen who was stabbed to death over an iPod (Medina, & Sweeney, 2005). Similar stories emerge occasionally over athletic shoes, leather jackets, and cell phones. My youngest sister counsels two elementary school children who barely have enough food in the house; but they each carry a cell phone even though the family cannot afford the service, and it cannot be used for anything except to play the ring tones. Having the phone is a status symbol. “Late and soon” we have taught our children the importance of these electronic devices. These poor children cling to this sad accouterment and actually enjoy the meaningless ownership. Of course, the ownership is not meaningless to them. They have what everyone else has, what they see on TV, what the media tells them is important to have to be “cool.” They are too young to realize the pathos, but they will not be for long. Those high school halls brim with designer label clothes, contraband electronic gadgets, jewelry, make-up, haircuts, handbags, and other expensive status symbols. How does one’s ability to afford these material goods affect students? If they have had some offsetting spiritual guidance, can they understand the relative meaninglessness of these trappings? If they *can* afford them, do they become trapped in their embrace? If they *cannot* afford them, do they have to fight off the desire “to lay waste [their] powers” in this unnatural pursuit? Are they being manipulated by a society that wants high school to teach them their place by dis-placing them from the path to society’s further opportunities for self-knowledge and economic privilege?

Tracing the Effects of Dis-placement

It often is assumed that the key to negotiating high school successfully is academic prowess. Students who are smart and study hard can pass. Is this true? Is

passing the courses all that is necessary? Can a student pass the required courses in a vacuum? How does a student get through those halls to get to class? How does a student pay attention in a classroom full of peers? How does a student interact with her/his peers to complete a cooperative learning task, work with a lab partner, use the same media center, complete a group project, eat lunch, or play a sport? School and society both conspire to implace some students while dis-placing others. What effect does this have on students?

Recent neuroscientific research made us aware that when chronic anxiety, anger, or upset feelings are intruding on children's thoughts, less room is available in working memory to process what they are trying to learn. This implies that at least in part academic success depends on a student's ability to maintain positive social interactions. (Lantieri, 2001, p. 17)

What happens if high school students never find "the place where the athlete, the homecoming nominee, the beauty, the writer, the actor, the shy one, the bold one all [overlap], filling in the gaps that exist in the hallways, as we [see] each other walk by, but never really [look]"? If high school does not provide that "preserve of peace" for students to find their "essential being" (Heidegger, 1954/1993b, pp. 350-351), will the students stay? *Can* the students persevere? What does it feel like to be caught in a social order without a place to Be?

Feeling Out Of Place

Acquainted With the Night

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
 When far away an interrupted cry
 Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;
 And further still at an unearthly height
 One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
 I have been one acquainted with the night.
 (Frost, 1923/1988a, p. 774)

Being “acquainted with the night” means understanding the darkness, despair, loneliness, disquiet, and dis-placement of being alone in a big city or a big high school. Can a student be alone in a high school full of other students and teachers? Frost’s solitary, nocturnal wanderer would believe it is possible. The despairing figure who walks “out in rain—and back in rain” hides his tears; outwalking “the furthest city light” exhausts his search for human companionship. Like the student who will not or cannot explain to parent or teacher her/his loneliness or disquiet, the walker passes “by the watchman on his beat / And [drops his] eyes, unwilling to explain.” Probably the most poignant image in the poem comes in the space between the third and fourth stanzas. This is also the most useful image for illustrating the dis-placement, the lack of connection, potential dropouts may feel in high school. Frost’s wanderer stands “still and stop[s] the sound” his own, lonely feet are making on the pavement, “When far away an interrupted cry / [Comes] over houses from another street.” Notice in the poem how this stanza ends with a comma, not a period. In the space between this stanza and the next we feel hope spring up in the breast of the speaker, and we are forced to feel this upsurge of possibility ourselves. Is this Other voice calling to me? Then reality crashes down on both our heads with a pain sharpened by this moment of hope. The voice is “not to call

me back or say good-by.” No one recognizes his coming and going save the moon, the “One luminary clock against the sky” that proclaims “the time was neither wrong nor right.” The wanderer, like our displaced, disoriented high school student, is not facing a question of rectitude or truth; he is suffering from the lack of human implacement, peace, and freedom to be.

“Many [dropouts] are alienated by the impersonal, often uncaring, nature of schools where it seems no one cares if they succeed or fail” (American Youth Policy Forum, 2008, p. 1). Is this what those students feel who drop their “eyes, unwilling to explain” when we call on them, ask them a question, make a weak attempt to assure them that everything will be all right if they only do their homework, study harder, and make some friends?

My Mistress' Eyes

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red:
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound:
 I grant I never saw a goddess go,—
 My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare.
 (William Shakespeare, 1609/1988, p. 802)

In typical Shakespearean sonnet style, this poem discusses an issue in the first three quatrains, but makes its point in the final couplet. The speakers' beloved is described in a delightful twist on the usual love poetry: she is no more than a normal

woman who does not have lips as red as coral, roses in her cheeks, or perfumed breath. She is a woman who “treads on the ground.” Yet, “by heaven,” the speaker thinks his “love as rare / As any she belied with false compare.” The speaker clearly does not see her in any sort of naïve, uncritical manner, but with the eyes of love. “Love is the light in which we see each thing in its true origin, nature, and destiny” (O’Donohue, 1997, p. 65). This is the confirming, emplacing love Skretta found in school from his teachers and mentors; this is the love Eddie found with my father. If high school students experience this love at home, can they, perhaps, survive its lack at school? If something like this love cannot be found somewhere in the large, incomprehensible high school, what will students do? How long can they live “acquainted with the night” before they find a way to relieve the pain?

Concealing Dis-placement

Human beings hone their defense mechanisms to protect their tender feelings. Veteran high school teachers have learned to recognize several of these techniques, not necessarily to handle them deftly or lovingly; but at least, in abstract reflection, we strive for an understanding that can improve our interactions. “Defense mechanisms protect us from being consciously aware of a thought or feeling which we cannot tolerate. The defense only allows the unconscious thought or feeling to be expressed indirectly in a disguised form” (Suler, 1995, p.1). Two of the more common defenses we see in high school are bravado and insouciance. Both of them seem to be forms of suppression, and each defense is an attempt to hide these true feelings and present a face to the world that will be feared or admired instead of scorned or disrespected. After all, no one can hurt you if you are too tough or too indifferent for any human feeling to touch you. “A rock

feels no pain, and an island never cries” (Simon & Garfunkel, 2008).

Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.
(Frost, 1923/1988b, p. 594)

Adolescents can “perish twice” hidden behind their bravado or insouciance.

These protections are impenetrable: students cannot get out and teachers cannot get in.

The “passion” and “fire” that students feel as part of their natural, physical maturation can be banked behind bravado that forbids true expression. Escalating explosions as these stilted feelings break through can move students further into a “world [that] will end in fire.” Likewise, feigned insouciance forces students to deny their feelings until they may become incapable of expressing any emotions at all. The “ice” with which they surround their feelings “is also great / And would suffice” for their disengagement. Each defense is self-perpetuating: the more it is used, the stronger it becomes.

Unfortunately, neither of these defense mechanisms blends well with the middle-class structure of high school. Teachers, counselors, and administrators are not trained to delve beneath these carapaces, and the ratio of needy teens to caring adults prohibits the sort of “being-with” that means “choosing wicked problems and caring” (Hultgren, 1991, p. 42). What happens to those students who, unlike Skretta, are not invited into school life? What happens to those students who are not mentored into a mature sociability?

Could dropping out of this place, where such dramatic defenses are necessary to protect Being, be the ultimate defensive strategy against the dis-placement that some students feel in high school? Are dropouts running away from this feeling of dis-placement, or could they be searching for a place where they can dwell? Could it be both?

Bulwarking a Safe Place

West Side Story, the modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*, illustrates the essential need to create a place to be. The “star-crossed lovers” who stretch their hearts across gulfs between rival families, gangs, or cultures is a universal story. In *West Side Story* specifically, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim have crafted songs to capture the essence of the tortured path the teenagers must travel. The two New York City gangs, the white Jets and the Hispanic Sharks, fight nominally to defend their “turf” and ideologically to defend a sense of place. The Jets sing the “Jet Song” to lay out their allegiance to one another against the entire world, and specifically against the Sharks, their Hispanic neighbors. They describe their safety in numbers, and this is amply demonstrated throughout the play as Sharks and Jets threaten each other whenever members of the rival gang are caught outnumbered. “Violent boys who have lost confidence in the ability of adults to protect and care for them . . . join gangs in order to feel a little safer rather than not safe at all” (Lantieri, 2001, p. 15). The painfully humorous song “Gee, Officer Krupke” details the ridiculous solutions social workers, judges, and sociologists (the schools and teachers get a pass here) offer to teenagers who come from unloving, abusive homes. The Jets reject the adult world and embrace a life of prejudice and intolerance because they can imagine no other way to deal with the exigencies of their lives. “Where people cannot name alternatives or imagine a better

state of things, they are likely to remain anchored or submerged” in their existing problems (Greene, 1995, p. 52). Has school offered them no alternatives? The earlier-recounted stories of displacement suggest that dropouts saw no connection between their schoolwork and their “thrown” existence (Heidegger, 1947/1993c, p. 231). Were the alternatives offered so abstractly that they seemed irrelevant?

None of the songs in *West Side Story* includes an adult voice. The teenagers strive to find their place with the passion of the ocean’s waves relentlessly flinging themselves against a sea wall without any adult guidance. One adult character makes a serious attempt to advise the teens against violence, but his voice is shoved aside in the face of teenage angst and drama. All other adult characters are embarrassing in their ineptitude and lack of sincerity. How can teenagers learn to encounter the Other successfully without adult guidance? If the Other requires a response from me, and my response is my responsibility, as defined by Levinas in Chapter One, how do teenagers structure a responsible response without adult role modeling? When cultures clash, where is the guidance obtained for dealing with the fear of the Other? If adults are caught up in the nets of intolerance, ignorance, and poverty as Wilson (1987) describes, who will change the pattern? If high school does not address the issues that are real for students, how can they be expected to see any benefit to devoting themselves to unrealistic, unimportant work? What is the profit in that? “By the time many students reach high school, they often lack any sense of purpose or real connection with what they are doing in the classroom” (Gehring, 2003, p. 5). Does school seem a bit ridiculous to teenagers who are fighting for a place to exist? Even if the struggle is not the open warfare of the New York City streets depicted in *West Side Story*, where does school

offer a place to be? The lovers in *West Side Story* sing “Somewhere,” poignantly recognizing their dis-placement in their society. What happens when implacement is denied? Does high school become irrelevant, a useless place?

This discussion also recognizes the powerful passions that drive young people. The etymological root of the word “adolescent” is the Latin word “*adolescere*, to come to maturity, be kindled, burn” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 1980, p. 18). Adolescents burn with passion born of the desire for and fear of their impending responsibility. They burn to establish a place to dwell that is uniquely theirs, chosen by them, and, sometimes, free of adult interference. The innocence and protection that hallmarks elementary school disappears in the melee of middle school and high school halls, lunchrooms, and bus stops where adult supervision becomes less of a presence. Add to this the hormones suddenly crossing all the wires in an adolescent’s brain, and the chemistry of an explosion is fulminating. The movies *Stand And Deliver* and *Freedom Writers* exemplify teachers who channel the passion that burns in young people; *West Side Story* captures the flip side. Hormones and nascent independence combine to make teenagers in our society the most in need of adult advice and the most reluctant to accept it. Gifted teachers like Jamie Escalante and Erin Gruwell discover how to capitalize on this passion. What happens to the students who do not have such gifted teachers? How does adolescent *sturm und drang* express itself? Passion and insecurity make a volatile combination and a poor agar for learning. Do students drop out when their passions can no longer be contained within high school halls?

Escaping High School

Some students may drop out because the society of school halls is too painful for them to bear. Consider, for example, a student who has been *graded* as a “C” student all of his life. I speak of a “he,” but each detail can be equally applied to a “she.” Add to this the fact that he is poor and a historically disadvantaged minority, struggling against the health and cognitive deficiencies of poverty, as well as the cultural mismatches with school described above. He gets to high school, and his modest cognitive skills and content knowledge are now measured against the absolute standard of Carnegie Units, the credits that students must earn to graduate from high school. The focus is no longer on him as a person; he will be measured against absolute levels of achievement based on “work that used the experiences and thoughts of materially privileged people as normative” (hooks, 1994, p. 184). Remember, as well, that he is burning with conflicting messages from media, culture, hormones, and peers, who are probably similarly marginalized, about his masculinity, entitlement, and place in the larger society. Imagine for yourself the way he feels. Now imagine him walking down that hall with privileged students who are being successful in a traditional high school program because they have been gifted with the strong emplacement described above. Those students are being successful; what’s wrong with him, he wonders? Now walk into math class with him. Is he ready to participate? “Good moods, while they last, enhance the ability to think flexibly and with more complexity, thus making it easier to find solutions to problems, whether intellectual or interpersonal” (Goleman, 1995, p. 85). You can imagine how feelings of inadequacy and rejection can do the reverse. “Stress makes people stupid” (p.

149). Are students who drop out of high school survivors, escaping from an environment that just made them feel bad about themselves?

Finding a Place as an Adult

The halls of high school are also symbols of an adolescent's transition to adulthood. Learning to walk down these halls and out the door into the adult world requires making decisions that may have life-changing and life-long consequences.

Choosing Parenthood

I clearly remember one day during hall duty—an attempt to humanize those vicious hallways with a nominal adult presence—a beautiful young girl walked by me saying, “I just want to find a guy to marry who will take care of me and our babies.” I nearly jumped out of my skin trying to restrain myself from dragging her into my classroom to convince her of her misguided ways. But is she misguided? Just because I want something different for her, does that make it right? Is it an issue of right and wrong, or an issue of culture? The arguments I would have thrust on her would have been the economic, self-sufficiency, and child support points that I know to be true. But what is *her* truth?

The truth of her world as revealed by her statement has several possible interpretations. She may have been momentarily frustrated over some minor disappointment at the moment she happened to be passing my door and grabbed onto a traditional refuge that women have used for many years, particularly the one shown so one-sidedly in the 50s TV show reruns she has undoubtedly seen on cable TV. She may have been voicing a deep-seated desire to establish a traditional family of stay-at-home-mom and successfully-employed-dad-who-supports-the-family to perpetuate the

traditional family from which she comes. She may have been seeking an escape from problems that were either temporarily or completely overwhelming her at home or school or both. In any of these scenarios, the common element is that she voiced a desire to escape the world rather than embrace it.

Both women and men sometimes experience this tendency toward escape. Living is hard work, and as childhood recedes and adulthood looms, it seems natural to seek to avoid the unpleasantness of hard work and responsibility. Women have a culturally acceptable way to accomplish this escape by marrying a man and having a baby. Lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women may accomplish the same escape in their own living structures. Regardless of the sexual orientation, this escape from adulthood into wife, housewife, mom, or helpmate is culturally sanctioned. This is certainly not to say that any of these roles is, in itself, an escape; any mom will gladly buzz your ear with the physical, intellectual, spiritual, and creative demands of rearing children. Many women and men amend their personal ambitions in order to provide a home for their children.

And what of the young men who drop out of high school to become parents? If you have been made to feel “less than” by both society at large and your experiences in those high school halls, does fathering a child re-inflate your ego? Does starting your own family and experiencing the unparalleled joy of an infant’s unconditional love mean more to you than a high school diploma? The issue to explore for potential high school dropouts may be the choosing of any of these roles for its promise of an escape from the pain of high school and/or the burden of facing the adult world of a high school graduate.

At the 2007 GED Annual Conference, Cathy Lanier, the current Chief of Police of Washington, D.C., described the beginning of her path from high school dropout to her

position of leadership: she became pregnant, dropped out of high school, and got married. When she quickly found herself divorced and supporting her son with a minimum-wage job, she enrolled in adult education classes, earned her GED diploma, and went to college. Her advanced degrees and responsible job attest to her success.

We know that this is an oft-repeated sequence. What leads so many young women down this path? If the young women, who become pregnant, drop out of high school, and perhaps get married, choose to get a GED diploma to get to college, what is compelling them onto such a difficult path? Why not simply graduate from high school in a traditional program and go to college part-time while working part- or full-time? Was this traditional route not an option? Was access to “adequate coaching, encouragement and advice” (Noddings, 2005b, p. 29) unavailable? Was the pregnancy and the marriage an escape from some obstacle greater than a baby to nurse? Was the baby planned or unconsciously chosen as a shortcut to emancipation? Was the baby an inducement to a diffident suitor and the loss of the traditional high school diploma a reasonable price to pay for starting your own family and having your own home? Was it simply a mistake, a contraception failure, a one-night fling with disastrous results? Calley Duffy, who dropped out of high when she discovered she was pregnant but now has her GED credential and is headed for college, says, “It wasn't a bad thing. To look back on it, can I say I would have rather finished school and not had him? I say definitely not” (Tode, 2006, p. 1). Excavating the place of the lived high school experience in this complex issue may be significant.

Adolescents burn at once to be free and to be accepted, to find safety and to take risks. As our culture has matured, our children have been forced to endure an ever-

extending period of preparation for adulthood to acquire high school diplomas, college degrees, and advanced training. Ironically, the culture also fast-feeds our children adult sexuality, bad-boy attitudes, feigned ennui in place of sincere engagement, repartee and text messaging in place of conversation and relationship, and cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs as recreation. “Behavior that once was seen as ‘fringe, immoral or socially destructive have been given the imprimatur of acceptability by the television industry’ and children are absorbing or even imitating it, the report [by the Parents Television Council, released August 5, 2008] contends” (Elber, 2008, p. 1). Internet images and information only exacerbate the influence of media. This “cool” image puts constant pressure on high school students to both conform and be independent. Sometimes this means getting burned: the consequences of your choices dictate a life you were not mature enough to anticipate. Other times, the passion for your dream leads you to success.

Challenging Society’s Expectations for Dropouts

Gwendolyn Brooks captures the direst consequences for those students who cannot find a place in high school and, therefore, wander down the hall and out the door and are never missed at graduation.

We Real Cool

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon.
(Brooks, 1988, p. 668)

The poet captures the essence of “cool,” a quality highly prized by young people. The dangling pronouns emphasize the speakers’ definition of themselves as a group, not as individuals. Belonging to this “cool” group defines who they are and gives them a place to dwell. The syncopation of the broken lines echoes the jazzy atmosphere of their rebellious lives and antisocial behavior. Their cool lives began when they “left school,” seemingly the first qualification for being cool. Now that they are free of society’s restrictions as exemplified by high school, they engage in all the activities against which adults and middle-class society have harangued: they “lurk late” into the night; they “strike straight” in pool or bowling or even matches for cigarettes or other chemical amusements. They “Sing [about] sin,” “Thin [their] gin,” and “Jazz June”: completing the panoply of bawdy behaviors. Brooks’s ironic closing twist causes the speakers and the readers to catch their collective breaths. This ‘cool’ life has a terrible price, she warns. Certainly the poet does not mean to suggest that the lives of all dropouts are as dissipated as these lost souls; but the poem’s dark prediction weighs heavily on the socioeconomic lives of dropouts.

An estimated 67 percent of prison inmates nationwide are high school dropouts. A 2002 Northeastern University study found that nearly half of all dropouts ages 16 to 24 were unemployed. . . . Finding good work is only getting harder for dropouts in the era of the knowledge-based economy and advanced manufacturing. (Thornburgh, 2006, pp. 16-17)

If this is the life expectancy of high school dropouts, are they returning in large numbers to get a second chance at their jurisdictions’ high school diploma by taking the GED Tests?

Across the entire GED testing program in 2007, 1.6 percent of adults without a high school diploma took one or more parts of the GED test battery, 1.4 percent of adults without a high school diploma completed the battery, and 1.0 percent passed the battery. In other words, of all the adults who lack a high school diploma, only one out of every 100 attempted and passed the GED Tests. (GEDTS, 2008a, p. vii)

What is it, then, that motivates this one percent of high school dropouts to return to get their GED credential?

GED stories reflect the unique positions of individuals within our society. The common motivating factor, though, seems to be when individuals realize that they want something more out of life either for themselves or their families.

The Staunton branch of the Virginia Army National Guard gave Cynthia Branch an ultimatum. The Scottsville resident who had worked trades her whole life and had not stepped into a classroom in 22 years had until January to get her [GED diploma] . . . on the day before her 40th birthday, the last possible day Branch could sign up for the National Guard. (Deegan, 2006, p. 1)

It is not unusual to hear stories of families taking on the GED credential challenge together, especially when the older generation leads the way to model goals for children or even grandchildren.

Never before had three generations of one family received their GED [credentials] at the same time. Thursday night, Frances Huston, her daughter, Donna Streich, 46, and Donna's two daughters, Crystal Kahle, 27, and Heather Leek, 26, . . . received their certificates. . . . Before the commencement, Huston said, "I think my main goal was to get the girls to go back to school. I figured by me going, even if I failed, if they went back I would be accomplishing something. But I got a bonus. I'm graduating, too." (Green, 2006, p. 1)

Many GED credential-holders, such as Katie and Charles in Chapter One, cite the birth of a child as the impetus to earn a GED credential. In a similar vein, women often decide to earn a GED credential to support their children when they become widowed or divorced, such as DC Police Chief Cathy Lanier or Ruth Ann Minner, the former governor of Delaware.

Ruth Ann Minner, left school at age 16 to help her family work their farm. She later married Frank Ingram, who died suddenly when she was 32 years old. As head of the household with three sons to raise, she returned to school to earn her General Educational Development (GED) diploma, while working two jobs and providing for her family. (Delaware, The Official State Website, 2008, p. 1)

Obviously, however, a GED credential is not a guarantee of success. “These days high school dropouts need not apply [for a job on the factory floor]. Even a GED [credential] is not sufficient for a job here any more” (Thornburgh, 2006, p. 17). Do these motivated people pursue postsecondary education?

Although Charlottesville Superintendent of Schools, Rosa S. Atkins, reminded GED graduates that “one out of 20 first-year college students is a GED recipient” (Deegan, 2006, p. 2), “For most GED recipients, high school certification represents the highest level of school they completed. However, a minority (38 percent) completed at least some postsecondary education, and 8 percent earned a bachelor’s degree or higher” (Bauman & Ryan, 2001, pp. 9, 11). What is it like for a GED-credentialed student to attempt college?

Sarah Miller was one of the “pushouts” of the previous decade when students were encouraged to drop out if they demonstrated rebellious or uncooperative behavior. Today, at 28, Sarah has “her GED, but now she’s too afraid to try community college, she says, because she doesn’t want to look stupid” (Thornburgh, 2006, pp. 6-7). Other GED graduates lack the financial resources with families of their own to support.

The 35-year-old [Sandy Chambers] understands what it means to struggle without a high school diploma. She knows what it means to be slighted because of her current GED [credential]. “We know what life is like without that education,” she says. Sandy earned her GED [credential] in 1992 at Brown Intermediate Center. . . She then studied business management at Ivy Tech Community College for a year-and-a-half. But she took a semester off after experiencing a

death in her husband's family, and she never went back. . . . She'd love to go back to school now, but she envies those who are financially able to do that and run a household, too. (Smalls, 2008, p. 2)

Economist James Heckman (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001) has little tolerance for the struggles of GED holders who dream of a college education.

The GED [credential] is a mixed signal. Dropouts who take the GED [Tests] are smarter (have higher cognitive skills) than other high-school dropouts and yet at the same time have lower levels of noncognitive skills. Both types of skills . . . affect schooling choices. . . . Inadvertently, a test has been created that separates out bright but nonpersistent and undisciplined dropouts from other dropouts. . . . GED [graduates] are "wiseguys, [*sic*]" who lack the abilities to think ahead, to persist in tasks, or to adapt to their environments. (p. 146)

Educators take a somewhat different view of what it is like for a GED graduate to think about college.

The problem is that many of our GED graduates are afraid to attempt to further their education either because they do not view themselves as "college material" or because they cannot see themselves navigating complex college admissions and financial aid processes alone. (Palacios, 2007, p. 1)

How *do* GED graduates get to college?

Adult education programs, like that housed at Austin Community College, accept that part of their mission is to transition GED graduates to college.

"When I was getting my GED, I didn't have any plans to go to college," says former Adult Education student Diane Larralde, 36. That was before she met recruiting/advising specialist Diana Quinonez two years ago. "Diana told my class, 'I'm going to walk you through all of this, and I'll be here with you to the end,' " Larralde recalls. "I asked her, 'Is that a promise?' and she said yes." Larralde is now in college and planning to graduate from ACC in 2008 with an associate degree in social work. She still meets regularly with Quinonez. "She's important to me because she pushes me," Larralde says. "She's more than a counselor or advisor; she's a friend." (ACC, 2008, p. 1)

Many students, like Larralde, credit their instructors with their success.

This fall, GED graduate Taylor Williams will start her second semester as an accounting major at Del Mar College. . . . "Mrs. Salazar got me to enroll in college one month after enrolling in the GED program. Mr. Zamora encouraged

me to go into accounting. They have changed my life.” (Del Mar College Campus News, 2008, p. 1)

Dr. William McDowell, the winner of the 2008 Cornelius P. Turner Award, given by the GED Testing Service to an outstanding GED graduate, credits enablers in general, people who say yes when so many others say no, for his success. “The intervention of others in my life—I call them enablers—has made the difference!” (GEDTS, 2008b, p. 2). DC Police Chief Cathy Lanier talks about the importance of her mother’s support in caring for her child while she worked and attended classes. Others, like former Surgeon General Richard D. Carmona and California Assemblymember John Dutra, found the support they needed from the training and encouragement they received while serving in the US military. Could the difference be the feeling of implacement these GED graduates finally found? “My body continually takes me into place” (Casey, 1993, p. 48).

As dropouts negotiate their lifeworld, do some feel implaced through Being’s encounters with the world? Do some dropouts finally come to a sense of implacement through parenthood, the faith of a mentor, or the discipline of the military? After dropping out of high school and searching for a place to belong, this must feel like coming home. Cathy Lanier told us in her acceptance speech at the 2007 GED Conference that she usually refuses requests to speak: but the chance to thank the organization that gave her a second chance at life was worth her flying to Alaska and back in one, 24-hour day.

Most dropouts simply lead the lives we all lead, each life differentiated by our education, motivations, emotional intelligence, financial acumen, and familial, cultural, geographical, and socioeconomic situations. Some high school dropouts earn their GED diploma, graduate from college, and become indistinguishable members of the middle

class. What makes these high school dropouts different? **What is the lived high school experience of GED college graduates?** What insights into the dropout crisis might emerge from an examination of the stories of their unique perspective on high school?

In Chapter Three, I explore hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology that allows me to listen to the GED graduates' stories. "We've come into the presence of the one who was never apart from us" (Rumi, 2004, p. 125). High school dropouts are part of the fabric of school, not a missing part. The GED college graduates' stories may help us re-member these adolescents into their place in the student body, enlarging our understanding of the high school experience and, thereby, increasing our ability to respond with care.

CHAPTER THREE: CARING ABOUT DROPPING OUT: PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL GROUNDING

Reflecting on the life contexts of children, and on the significance of the values embedded within them, may help us to heighten our pedagogical thoughtfulness and increase the likelihood of demonstrating appropriate pedagogical understanding in our everyday living with children. (van Manen, 1997, p. 55)

In the context of caring about the underlying context of GED college graduates' dropping out of high school, a phenomenological methodology provides a space for understanding pedagogical relationships. What compels such a different way of understanding?

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured
with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wandered off by myself,
In the mystical moist night air, and from time to time,
Looked up in perfect silence at the stars.
(Whitman, 1855/1988, pp. 814-815)

Much in life can be measured, and excellent decisions and treatment plans can be made based on scientific information. But, as Whitman and Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006) would remind us, we are not just mind; we are also body. "For us, the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions" (p. 36). This means that some of us understand the world with "charts and diagrams" while others respond to the felt instinct to "look up in perfect silence" to reflect on "our expression in the world." The beauty in this divergence in the human search for understanding is that some of us weigh the pros and cons while others want to hear the stories: some of us want to measure the stars and some of us want to meditate on

them. Some of us connect to the logic that structures life; others of us respond to feelings generated by an embodied life. This chapter grounds my “turning to stories” to capture the lived high school experience of GED college graduates. This turning to stories also calls me to turn to phenomenology.

Heeding the Call to Reflection

In *The Tact of Teaching*, van Manen uses Ondaatje’s “Bearhug” to discuss pedagogy. The poem mediates a parental experience, but let me open it up as a metaphor for the dropout’s experience of school.

Bearhug

Griffin calls to come and kiss him goodnight
I yell ok. Finish something I’m doing,
then something else, walk slowly round
the corner to my son’s room.
He is standing arms outstretched
waiting for a bearhug. Grinning.

Why do I give my emotion an animal’s name,
give it that dark squeeze of death?
This is the hug which collects
all his small bones and his warm neck against me.
The thin tough body under the pajamas
locks to me like a magnet of blood.

How long was he standing there
like that, before I came?
(Ondaatje, 2008, p. 1)

The poignancy of this poem garners its power from the contrast between the first and last stanzas. It is not that the child was left unloved; the torture of the parent is “How long was he standing there / like that, before I came?” The parallel for a dropout’s school experience is in the waiting. How often, how long, how faithfully does the dropout wait, metaphorically “standing arms outstretched,” waiting for school to embrace her? It does

not take much imagination to see that often she goes unhugged: no one comes to sweep her into a circle of care and make her feel implaced in the school community.

The *fact* of teaching requires attention to diurnal administrative tasks and myriad educational and political demands as well as a need for encountering our students with “appropriate pedagogical understanding” (van Manen, 1997, p. 55). Like the parent in the poem, most teachers hold an abiding commitment to their students but are distracted by mundane, maybe technical, demands. The *tact* of teaching requires attention to reflection. One powerful stimulus to prompt educators to this reflection comes from a willingness to see the drooping outstretched arms and the fading grins as some of our students reluctantly realize that school will never offer them that implacing bearhug. They drop out. Certainly some dropouts appear to abandon high school because of parent, family, school, or legal coercion; but many leave without duress. How many would have left if their bearhug human needs had been met? Adolescents do not usually have the élan of a toddler who can call for a “kiss goodnight” or a simple acknowledgement of an idea, a thought, a question, or even a confirmation of her simple presence and stand waiting with open arms, confident of a parent or a teacher’s response.

My early conversations with two GED graduates who were in college suggest that they felt “No one cared.” Is the human implacement, in all its myriad and personal manifestations, missing from the high school experiences of those who drop out? They have no power to change the system, but they do have a powerful alternative: the GED program. What insights might be garnered from reflecting on their lived high school experiences that might improve the school experience for these students?

Resisting the Technical

Van Manen's (1997) idea of the source of authority of teachers provides an arresting point of departure for pedagogical reflection.

But the adult can only have pedagogical influence over a child or young person when the authority is based not on power, but on love, affection, and an internalized sanction on the part of the child. Pedagogical authority is the responsibility the child grants to the adult, both in an ontological sense (from the viewpoint of the pedagogue) and in a personal sense (from the side of the child). The child, in a manner of speaking, authorizes the adult directly and indirectly to be morally responsive to the values that ensure the child's well-being and growth toward mature self-responsibility. (p. 70)

We know the power aspect of authority fairly well, perhaps because, as van Manen recognizes, it is from *our* viewpoint that we have this power. We are the adults; we are responsible for the education of this child. We take this ontological responsibility seriously, and we work hard to see that children in our care learn what educational policy has determined is important for them to learn. It resides in our thinking about classroom *management and discipline* and curriculum guides that proscribe rather than respond to students' needs. Is this technical approach working for our GED students? Is it working for any of our students who drop out of high school? Have we been "morally responsive" to these students?

It certainly is easier "seeing school small" (Greene, 1995, p. 11) because it reveals the technical details of teaching and learning that we think we can measure, especially things like student achievement on objective tests and teachers' classroom management skills. Whether motivated by selfish defenders of the status quo, or well-meaning social reconstructionists of little vision and courage—or even those practical people who are willing to take what they can get because they will not or cannot believe in their

dreams—anxiety drives us into what John Dewey called “the quest for certainty” (as cited in Greene, 1995, p. 18).

As humans, we are “condemned to meaning” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2006, p. xxii). Once the Enlightenment ejected God from His heaven and placed our Reason as the arbiter of all Truth, humans no longer had the comfort of relying on religious authority to provide guidance. Greene (1995) points out that Gadamer “calls for decision-making according to one’s own responsibility—instead of conceding that task to the expert” (p. 55). If teachers and the school experiences they create with students rely solely on scientific experts to mediate the world around us, then we lose the intuitive way of knowing through phenomenological reflection on the lived experiences of our students that might help us re-create the school experience.

Embracing Phenomenology

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
(Frost, 1916/1988c, p. 584)

How is phenomenological reflection unique? For one, a statistical study draws its strength from examining a large number of subjects because its goal is to establish a high probability that a given event or sequence of events will produce a particular result. In contrast, a phenomenological study draws its strength from the individual because its goal is to understand a particular circumstance in its emerging nuances. Statistics yearns for the generalizable; phenomenology gazes at the individual. Statistics searches for patterns; phenomenology thinks about uniqueness. Statistics takes a technical approach to the world to establish predictions that can be used to control and improve end results; phenomenology, on the other hand, wonders how individuals’ lives reveal glimpses into

the truth of our humanity to guide our choices. As van Manen points out in the introduction to *Researching Lived Experience* (2003), “Human science can practise [*sic*] the paradox of theorizing the unique” (p. *xii*). We must balance the privileged way of knowing by “scientific research,” as advocated by such large-scale solutions as *NCLB*, with a way of knowing by the individual, the unique, the complex human. Van Manen captures this distinction between the general and the specific quite elegantly.

In education we often confuse what is possible with what is desirable. For example, even if it were possible for many children to *be able* to read by age four, that does not mean that children *should* be reading at that early age. The understanding and skill required to teach children to read early is not the understanding and skill required for knowing what is appropriate for this or that particular child. The first kind of knowledge may be the expertise of reading theorists; the second kind of knowledge is pedagogic.

My point is that no matter how challenging it may be to develop theories or models of learning, reading, doing mathematics, and so forth, no learning theories, teaching methods, or reading models will tell us what is appropriate for this child in this situation. That is the task of pedagogical theory. Pedagogical theory has to be *theory of the unique*, of the particular case. (p. 150)

Attention to a problem, such as one in education, may stir the same depths to awaken imagination or analysis, but the tools the imagination takes up and the roads toward which it turns its face, as Robert Frost says, make “all the difference.”

In Hannah Arendt’s words, “The new always happens ‘against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which, for all practical purposes, amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle,’ something that could not be expected” (as cited in Greene, 1995, pp. 21-22). Phenomenology seeks these miracles because it looks forward to understanding, rather than backward to the predictive, statistical probability of the way things have been.

When this sort of imagination-powered reflection is focused on the lived high school experience of college graduates with GED diplomas, what might be revealed about pedagogy? What sort of pedagogical relationship might be imagined that would create places in our high schools that would embrace those students who stretch out their arms for a different way of being than we currently offer? Can we learn a different, better, or more effective way to care for all students by reflecting on the lived experience of students who found they had to turn away from our traditional high schools in order to find their place? Can we care that much?

The Essence of Caring

Van Manen (1997) has suggested that the power an adult has over a child can be exercised from without, in the manner of the technical paradigm discussed above, or from within, by reflecting on the manner of the caring relationship schools envision for their students.

The Guitarist Tunes Up

With what attentive courtesy he bent
Over his instrument;
Not as a lordly conqueror who could
Command both wire and wood,
But as a man with a loved woman might,
Inquiring with delight
What slight essential things she had to say
Before they started, he and she, to play.
(Cornford, 1988, p. 565)

Cornford's poem captures van Manen's distinction in the way schools might care for their students. Although we must set aside the powerful genderized roles of guitarist and instrument to read the poem as a metaphor for education, this guitarist bends "over his instrument" and his bodily implacement communicates a care-full concern that is

contrasted with “a lordly conqueror who could / Command” attention. Positioning the poem in this discussion of school, contrasting images of caring immediately spring to mind: one which, working from a technical, power-based paradigm, demands attention; another, working from a caring ethic, solicits a dialogue by “Inquiring with delight / What slight essential things” the students “had to say / Before they started [together] to play.” The details that construct the essence of caring are plentiful. The guitarist inquires “with delight.” He appears to have no time limit, no curriculum or lesson plan that has structured their time together beforehand; their time together has a specific focus but not a predetermined end. He is delighted to hear “What slight essential things she has to say.” Notice the missing comma between slight and essential to emphasize the connection between the two words: the absolute importance of the words may be “slight,” but the words are “essential” for both speaker and hearer to use in building their relationship. Students are replete with such contrasts: we may erroneously judge the things they have to say as “slight” when measured against the scope and sequence chart, but if we do, we also disregard the “essential” nature of these efforts of beings to reach into the rift between school and student and create Being. When we do this, we miss out on the “play” of a growing relationship. We fail to care. Can this be why some of our most needy students drop out?

Caring is an integral aspect of phenomenology. Noddings (2005b) describes Heidegger’s notion of care as our being “immersed in care; it is the ultimate reality of life” (p. 15). “Man sustains Da-sein in that he takes the Da, the clearing of Being, into ‘care’” (Heidegger, 1947/1993c, p. 231); and later “Man is the shepherd of Being” (p. 245). Noddings develops a concept of caring that highlights a particular condition of our

culture's construction of school that may be helpful in explaining why some students, such as those who turn to the GED program alternative, find school intolerable. The caring relationship is inhibited from the first by the way our culture has *conceived* of schooling.

To be talked at by people for whom we do not exist . . . throws us back upon ourselves. To be treated as “types” instead of individuals, to have strategies exercised on us, objectifies us. We become “cases” instead of persons. Those of us who are able to escape such situations do so with alacrity, but escape is not always possible, and for some of us it is rarely possible. The fact is that many of us have been reduced to cases by the very machinery that has been instituted to care for us. (Noddings, 2003, p. 66)

This description of the inhumanness of institutions, such as schools, might suggest that the GED students are the only ones who have had the strength to escape. The image of a school as “machinery that has been instituted to care for us” highlights the impersonal nature of places such as school where care is supposed to be given. A technical approach to education substitutes the “machinery” of proscribed curriculum, objectives, lesson plans, and tests, for a caring relationship where “the cared-for ‘grows’ and ‘glows’ under the perceived attitude of the one-caring” (p. 67). A caring relationship is difficult, perhaps impossible, to “institute” in such a school; the verb acknowledges the abstract nature of the undertaking. Most teachers come to the institution of school to care for their students; but the pressure of tests, grading, and curriculum combined with the large number of students assigned to them, results in students being “reduced to cases by the very machinery that has been instituted to care for” them. Does this destroy the relationship of caring the teacher intends?

A second point Noddings (2003) makes about schools relates to her definition of a caring relationship. A caring relationship exists only when the cared-for acknowledges

that she or he is cared for. On a first consideration, this requirement seems unfair. I claim that I care for my cranky mother even though she tells all her friends that I do not. I counter her argument with the evidence of my daily phone calls and weekly visits, but my mother's complaints persist. Noddings asserts that, in this case,

The relationship cannot be characterized as one of caring. This result does not necessarily signify a negligence. . . . There are limits in caring. [Your mother] may be paranoid or otherwise pathological. There may be no way for [your] caring to reach [her]. (p. 68)

How do we translate this into a school situation with a teacher and a student? If the student insists that "No one cares," and teachers insist that they do care, can we simply suggest that "There may be no way for" the teachers' "caring to reach them"? Teachers struggle to implement their belief that all children can learn and to envelop all students in a caring school atmosphere. Many students succeed and do not discern a lack of caring; others do not succeed and may experience schools as uncaring. If GED students are among the victims of the "machinery that has been instituted to care for" them, they may be able to help us imagine a better way to create caring relationships through an investigation into their lived experience of high school if we can find a way to open a listening space for their stories to be heard.

Describing Phenomenology

In *Inventions of Teaching*, Davis (2004) traces the nature of western worldviews as they originated in the Greek understanding of the world as metaphysical: literally "beyond" the "physical" world there exist predetermined ideals that govern the world. Knowledge is a search for these ideals. Darwin's thinking offered an alternative view of knowledge as emergent: the world is always growing and changing; therefore, knowledge is not based on an ideal but on constantly evolving truths. In response to this conception

of attaining knowledge about the world, two different approaches emerged: intersubjectivist and, later, interobjectivist. Both approaches are rejections of the metaphysical understanding, and both recognize the participation of humans in the development of knowledge. “Interpretivist (intersubjectivist) discourses and participatory (interobjectivist) epistemologies both arise in the reluctance to explain things in terms of any sort of supernatural force, entity, or realm” (p. 105). “Intersubjectivist discourses are most represented among the arts and humanities” (p. 110), and include phenomenology.

Philosophical Basis of Phenomenology

The phenomenologists’ cry, “to the things themselves,” invokes a commitment to discover, or, perhaps, re-discover, truth as it can be obtained from a searching gaze directed toward a human experience. As van Manen explains:

Phenomenology does not problem solve. . . . Phenomenological questions are meaning questions. They ask for the meaning and significance of certain phenomena. Meaning questions cannot be solved. . . . [Rather], meaning questions can be better or more deeply understood, so that, on the basis of this understanding, I may be able to act more thoughtfully and more tactfully in certain situations. (2003, p. 23)

In our diurnal machinations, we move about the world in a natural attitude that allows our consciousness to construct a world for our use. We experience objects as “ready to hand” or existing as tools to be used to accomplish our projects. Passive synthesis allows us to experience sense-contents already structured since it would be impossible to accomplish the structuring of our world intentionally. The existing world is taken for granted. We function in this natural attitude in the natural sciences as we examine the world for its repeatable cause/effect relationships that we then catalog into laws. This stored knowledge can be and is used to gain control over our world; we can

predict the results of certain actions and so can predicate our own choices on the dependability of these expected results. The alacrity of the computer in assembling and analyzing this sort of data has led us into an age of unprecedented dependence on the statistical prediction and generalization founded in this natural world.

Phenomenology asks us to consider the world anew. Edmund Husserl (1913/1999) advocated a reduction, a process of reflection that is an attempt to loosen the assumptions on which we base our human activities in order to grasp the underlying functioning of our consciousness. With the intention in place to relax the assumptions of the natural attitude deliberately, we can engage in a phenomenological reduction that attempts to coax into light the workings of consciousness. The objective is to engage in a phenomenological reflection that reveals what our active minds would “naturally” ignore. How do I negotiate my world? How is it that I can enter this complex social situation that is the world and move, think, speak, read, feel, react, plan and so on without ever monitoring how my world is constituted by consciousness? Indeed, even when presented with problems to be solved, we more often, perhaps out of simple habit or empiricist training, engage in dissection rather than reflection. The objective of the reduction will be to silence the scientist and listen to the philosopher.

It would be one of Husserl’s admiring students, Martin Heidegger, who would establish phenomenology’s intersubjective basis and leave his teacher behind academically and socially. Heidegger initially embraces Husserl’s ideas about phenomenology, but he uses them as a foundation to reclaim the question of being that always already exists behind Husserl’s concept of intentionality and perception. Heidegger’s phenomenology is not back to the “things,” but back before the things to

“being.” *Dasein* is “*Sein*” or “being” fully present in the “*Da*” or the “here and now.”

“*Dasein* is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather, it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its Being this being is concerned about its very Being (Heidegger, 1927/1993a, p. 53). *Dasein*, the true Being of being, creates a space between earth and world where Truth can reveal itself to being. One of the results of embracing this concept of being is the absence of any authority to define what Truth is.

We already know one moment when “disguises” break up and authentic Being discloses itself—the moment of anxiety. The world loses its significance, it appears as a naked “that” against the background of nothingness, and *Dasein* experiences itself as homeless, unguarded, and unguided by any objective Being. (Safranski, 1998, pp. 162-163)

In the face of this anxiety, we humans sometimes find refuge in an authority/expert/God into whose hands we can place the guidance of our lives. As I pointed out above, even though it is not, we *feel* it is safer. Our philosophical and religious heritage says this is so. Education certainly suffers from this lack of courage as the politicians plan our schools rather than educators.

It is only when we are faced with the nothingness, maintains Heidegger, that we come to the realization of our own creativity. The anxiety we feel when we realize that we are all alone in our finitude is not fear of death but a fear of life (Safranski, 1998). Embracing our Being in the fullness of its options for an authentic existence is a frightening challenge. “Man dwells, insofar as he is man [*sic*] in the nearness of god” (Heidegger, 1947/1993c, p. 256). Insofar as we live authentically, we have the potential for a fullness of Being. It is in such authentic engagements, then, that we find the meaning of our lives. Heidegger offers educators the philosophic grounding to question the status quo in education through authentic engagement in questions of Being.

Accepting Martin Heidegger

The decision to base a phenomenological study on Heidegger perdures because of the philosopher's dominant role in developing the concepts on which the field is based. The thinking that guides my research draws on Gadamer, Levinas, Noddings, Levin, van Manen, and Parker, all of whom draw on Heidegger.

The first question with Heidegger, though, is how can he be countenanced after his role in the National Socialist Party of Germany and his life-long avoidance of any admission of responsibility for the atrocities committed by these leaders? Can this silence be construed as anything but tacit approval? Can his thinking be redeemed from this grievous lack of character in the man himself? Can this penumbra be lifted from his deft insights?

Heidegger was a human being. His philosophizing and thinking center on human beings' ability to exist authentically in Being from their thrown position in the world. Heidegger kept humans' historical position clearly in view as he described how the present human is thrown from a past that creates a future that is intimately connected to the past. Heidegger's future was as much a part of this past as it is for any other human being, and Safranski's (1998) "even-handed study" (Rorty, 1998, p. 1) of the philosopher provides the background for my analysis.

Implacing Heidegger. Heidegger's happy, provincial childhood of limited resources did not prepare him for the harsh judgments of an elevated social and academic world. He was a country boy, and "Even in the 1920s in Marburg, when he was by then the secret king of philosophy in Germany, many colleagues and students—unless they knew him personally—would take him for the heating engineer or the janitor" (Safranski,

1998, p. 22). His parents' lack of money forced him to seek the financial support of the Catholic Church to sponsor his education, even when he no longer embraced this faith of his childhood. He was forced to write humiliating letters of supplication, which Safranski notes, "leave a sting in those who write them" (p. 47). As a young man, he was ensnared in this nest of vipers of his own making, telling Jaspers how he had to deny much of his own thinking to avoid offending the Catholic hierarchy and thereby lose his scholarships. Indeed, Safranski notes that "This institution system [the Catholic Church and its extensive control of educational opportunities], with its policy of interest in public life, became so distasteful to him that one of the reasons he later sympathized with the Nazi movement was its declared anticlericalism" (p. 10).

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore -
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over -
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?
(Hughes, 1951/1988, p. 583)

Hughes posits in his poem that a dream deferred, the way Heidegger's was, can have various deleterious effects: the dream itself can "dry up" or "fester like a sore." It can "stink like rotten meat" or "sag like a heavy load." These depressing alternatives seem to sink toward a climax of the poem, which then unexpectedly thrusts out,

assertively claiming the space a dream deserves to expand and grow. The yawning complacency of watching from the outside while someone else's dream is "deferred" is jolted into frightening confrontation in the last line. This is not the demure depression of those who are denied their chance to embrace Being; this is the demanding, self-assertive claim of Being pushing into the rift between earth and world and asserting its rightful space to grow and be heard. The cleared space of Being is everyone's birthright. Humans might fight for what they want.

Applying this insight to Heidegger. Is it reasonable to assume that the swelling of the Heideggerian intellectual prowess, the publishing of *Being and Time*, and the ego-enhancing acclaim he received as a result of these developments might have inflated his ego? Might he have begun to think he had the ideas that would enlighten the world? Might he have seen himself as the leader of such a revolution? What can we infer from his subsequent actions?

Despite the limitations of his background, Heidegger was imbued with a sense of his own leadership even before he strode onto the stage of university life. In a 1918 letter to Elizabeth Blockman at the end of World War I, he already envisions the need to "educate" the country.

Certain and unshakable is the challenge to all truly spiritual persons not to weaken at this particular moment but to grasp resolute leadership and to educate the nation toward truthfulness and a genuine valuation of the genuine assets of existence. (Safranski, 1998, p. 86)

When Heidegger finally received the appointment to a professorship, his thinking, his writing, and his pronouncements burgeoned into a forceful production that seemed to fill

his lungs. His thinking was radical. His students were amazed. He had become free and recognized at last.

Heidegger's ideas moved along the lines of humans forsaking the structured truths of history and religion and taking a fresh look at "the things themselves." Humans, he believed, could resurrect original experiences phenomenologically and move closer to understanding the ontological truth of their being. Once this mode of thinking enshrined itself, humans could begin to live an authentic life. This revolution would fundamentally change Germany, and it might change the world. Heidegger felt he could lead this philosophical revolution.

He [Heidegger] intends to be the herald of a historical-political and, simultaneously, philosophical epiphany. There will come a time that is worthy of philosophy, and there will come a philosophy that is in control of its time. And in some way he will be one of the party, as a squire or as a knight. Now he has to be vigilant, lest he miss the moment when politics can and must become philosophical and philosophy political. (Safranski, 1998, p. 22)

Heidegger's politics, unlike his philosophy, were perhaps not as well thought-out. It seems that he had absorbed much of the then-current aristocrat's unease with the democratic government stuck with staggering war debts and dispirited citizens. He, like many of his fellow Germans, embraced Adolph Hitler's promises of strength, pride, and prominence. Yet, Heidegger, perhaps, saw a chance for himself, too. Fueled by the explosive fulfillment of his dreams of academic position yet still without national dominance, Heidegger perhaps felt he had the opportunity to become Germany's philosopher. He would align himself with the rising power of Hitler's party and attain the glorified academic and leadership position he desired.

On balance, though, I think it is also necessary to recognize or, at least, allow for, Heidegger's sincere desire to lead his country, perhaps all of humankind, into a new philosophical attitude that would recreate the world. If he could persuade enough people to join him, he could revolutionize the thinking—and the living—of human life. His philosophy called for a rejection of traditional values, and National Socialism blew this same trumpet. Heidegger answered its call to arms.

Heidegger's thorough commitment to National Socialism is clear. He attained the office of rector through his affiliation with the party and had to play his part in the sociopolitical machine. He implemented strong military-style procedures to build up the army of intellectual leaders he felt would be necessary to implement his own part of the revolution. He tacitly approved the sanctions placed on his Jewish colleagues, some of whom, like Husserl, were his friends. He started a military-style summer camp that combined drilling and firearms with philosophical discussion and nature hikes. His "*Heil Hitler*" is recorded in some of his letters and durable in the memories of some of his students. How can this be the same man who believes that to Care for Being includes care for people?

But if man is to find his way once again into the nearness of Being he must first learn to exist in the nameless. In the same way he must recognize the seductions of the public realm as well as the impotence of the private. Before he speaks man must first let himself be claimed again by Being, taking the risk that under this claim he will seldom have much to say. Only thus will the pricelessness of its essence be once more bestowed upon the word, and upon man a home for dwelling in the truth of Being. But in the claim upon man, in the attempt to make man ready for this claim, is there not an implied concern about man? Where else does "care" tend but in the direction of bringing man back to his essence? (Heidegger, 1947/1993c, p. 223)

The power of both the “seductions of the public realm” and the “impotence of the private” were clearly on Heidegger’s mind when he expanded and prepared this “Letter on Humanism” for publication in 1947. He had, by this time, been banned from teaching, and perhaps these sentiments directly reflect his feelings of failure to bring about the revolution he had hoped to lead. Perhaps, though, Heidegger’s ideal that “Man is the shepherd of Being” (p. 245) has more to do with an individual’s being true to his own “ek-sistence” (p. 246) in Being than an individual’s relationship with others as implied in his “concern about man.” As with many of us, the disconnect between what we believe and how we manage to guide our daily actions by those beliefs may be real.

This human frailty of the man seems quite understandable to me. I agree with Hannah Arendt when she said Heidegger had a “lack of character” (Safranski, 1998, p. 314). He embraced the National Socialist party, perhaps to soothe those childhood hurts which we never outgrow, perhaps to become Germany’s philosophical leader to a new age of Being, perhaps for simple self-aggrandizement. The misstep does not bother me as much as the absence of an acknowledgement of it.

What galls with Heidegger is the pretense of nonparticipation. He maintained throughout the de-Natzification process that his participation was nominal when, in fact, it had been vigorous. We stood by years ago and listened to Bill Clinton weave the same web of deceit that only he believed. Both men were gifted with abilities that could change the world. By measure of the influence they had, Heidegger’s—at this point in time—seems to be even more durable than Clinton’s. And there’s the rub: Heidegger’s small measure of humanity is so out of balance with his large measure of insight into the Being of humans.

Heidegger's belief in humans' participation in Being postulates that beings are claimed by Being. In the cleared space of Being, beings can embrace their ontological oneness through a phenomenological thinking that re-captures the essence of what it means to be human. This is a thinking space. This is the space where Heidegger lodged himself, except for his brief foray into politics. The conundrum is how Heidegger's thinking space and his political sphere of action managed to coexist.

Integrating Heidegger's disparate places. Levin (1985/2003) explores this problem when he describes the progression from Heidegger's thinking through Merleau-Ponty's to his own. He explains that Heidegger frames the question of essence with thinking.

The problem is this: when 'thinking' frames the question of 'essence,' it tends to *stand opposite* the body, secretly detaching itself from 'the body' in a move that only perpetuates the conflict already inherent in dualism. 'Thinking' spellbound by the authority it wields during the role of metaphysics, is itself part of the problem. (pp. 60-61)

Thinking is detached from the embodied experience. Being, it seems, is conceived as a completely intellectualized field. It was Merleau-Ponty, one of Heidegger's students, who re-conceptualizes the body as something other than either the physiologically analyzed and reduced-to-chemical-processes object of science or the marginalized, demonized body of metaphysics. Levin says that Merleau-Ponty "wrestled" with the classical subject-object dualism of the body structured by classical metaphysics. "The deconstruction of this rigid subject-object polarity ultimately must take place, as he [Merleau-Ponty] patiently shows us, in the context of a radicalized phenomenology of embodiment" (p. 65). Levin feels that Merleau-Ponty makes the critical break by developing his notion of "flesh" (p. 65):

‘Flesh’ is a notion which finally makes it possible for us to articulate the human body with respect to its ontological dimensionality: its inherence in the field of Being as a whole, and the density, or ideality, for which this inherence claims us. (p. 67)

The essence of the body is a pre-ontological flesh in which our own bodies always already participate in Being. More recently, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) propose that the very structure of our reasoning comes from our embodiment.

Reason is not disembodied, as the tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience. This is not just the innocuous and obvious claim that we need a body to reason; rather, it is the striking claim that the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment. The same neural and cognitive mechanisms that allow us to perceive and move around also create our conceptual systems and modes of reason. Thus, to understand reason we must understand the details of our visual system, our motor system, and the general mechanisms of neural binding. In summary, reason is not, in any way, a transcendent feature of the universe or of disembodied mind. Instead, it is shaped crucially by the peculiarities of our human bodies, by the remarkable details of the neural structure of our brains, and by the specifics of our everyday functioning in the world. (p. 4)

In his turn, Levin (1985/2003) connects our bodies and our thinking in Being. He acknowledges that we have an “‘inveterate tendency’ to become absorbed in an unnecessarily narrow, needlessly restricted world-field of purposive, dualistically polarized, and mostly ego-centered action” (p. 101). But he insists that our ontic questions about “how to improve . . .” lead us to an ontological wondering about Being-in-the World. One cannot claim to believe one thing and do another.

As we begin to feel the call in our body of pre-understanding, as we begin to sense the significance of our attunement [to the field of Being as a whole], the ontical fact of our belongingness-to-the-field becomes an ontological question that cannot be avoided; and our very existence becomes the answer. Our decision is how we live: how we are moved to comport ourselves, how we bear witness to that which has moved us, the kind of stand we take, and the various postures and positions by which we continually manifest what we have understood of the attunement. . . . Either we

seek, or we avoid, an ontologically appropriate motivation and an ontologically attuned configuration of movement. (Levin, p. 103)

And here, for me, is the essence of the problem with Heidegger: I want his behavior to reflect his philosophy. His concerned care of Being within the interpersonal being-with-others seems in direct opposition to his refusal to express regret over the treatment of beings during the Nazi administration. But perhaps Heidegger *is* acting within his philosophy. Perhaps his amazing mind, so disciplined by the metaphysics of his Catholic upbringing, exists so isolated from the body he had been taught to demonize that it can *think* about the reality of being-with-others but never *feel* the connection. While he posits a “care” of Being that exists in an ek-static, authentic existence in Being, is it a “care” of Being, not necessarily the “care” of beings of which someone like Noddings speaks? Heidegger, perhaps, performs the dualistic magic of separating his thinking from his life. Karl Löwith offered the view that Heidegger’s separation of Hitler from events—and, perhaps, by extension, himself from the plight of his Jewish “friends” and the atrocities in the larger world—was typical.

Nothing is easier for Germans than to be radical when it comes to ideas and to be indifferent to facts. They manage to ignore all individual facts in order to cling all the more decisively to their contempt of the whole, and to separate “matters of fact” from “persons.” (Safranski, 1998, p. 321)

He can separate the two; I cannot raise that wall so easily.

Additionally, Heidegger’s choices may be consonant with his belief in authentic existence: individuals responsible only to themselves for the truth of their being. If so, it follows that the only judgment of a life is the authenticity of its being-in-the-world, and the only judges of the authenticity of being are the beings themselves. Apparently

Heidegger has judged himself and faulted himself only for his ineptitude in leading the philosophical revolution he envisioned.

Heidegger puts the best possible face on the failure of his rectorship: he inscribes himself in the history of Being as a herald who arrived too early and is therefore in danger of being crushed and rejected by his time. (Safranski, 1998, p. 290)

Heidegger seems to feel that his leadership, or more accurately, the faulty vision of the world's thinkers, was at fault. "If these gentlemen had not been too refined to get involved, then everything would be different; but, instead, I am entirely alone now" (as cited in Safranski, p. 321). Can I judge him by my standards, or must I accept his own assessment as the only authentic one within his philosophy?

Although Heidegger's refusal to acknowledge how his support contributed to the atrocities committed by his government makes him a shameful figure in my eyes, I can understand how his own childhood threw him into a position where the Nazi party's promises appealed. I can also accept that his philosophy's emphasis on authenticity may have provided a basis for him to excuse himself. Can I honor his insights without honoring the man? Can I separate the man from his work?

An English teacher's reflection. Perhaps approaching this problem from the stance of a reader of poetry can clear a space for an answer to emerge. Poets often operate on an insightful plane of Being, producing works that touch the rest of us. Heidegger (1971/2001) allows that poets dip into the void to experience the ecstasy of a connection to Being that vibrates in the poetic form. "Their [poets'] song over the land hallows. Their singing hails the integrity of the globe of Being" (p. 138). They capture that momentary connection to Being that Heidegger postulates. The resulting work offers a viewpoint, a "making sense of," an observation of what it means to be human for the

rest of us to consider. Some of us are uplifted by their work; some of us are scornful. Some of us just turn away because we feel more comfortable with the positivistic control of science and technology.

Reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1991) authenticates *all* these responses. Reader-response theory has two interrelated assumptions. First, literature's existence depends on a dialogic response between reader and the words: literature exists only in this space. The writers' influences are mediated solely through the words they write down. Anything the writer *intends* is irrelevant or can be judged only on the efficacy and effect of the words. Sometimes poetry is interpreted through specific cultural stances, like feminist criticism, and sometimes readers see interpretations because of their understanding of the writer's historical perspective, such as within New Historical criticism. Sometimes large numbers of readers privilege a particular meaning for a poem because it co-responds to their widespread world-view or educational background. Reader-Response Theory authenticates the readers' voices, not the writers'.

Using this theory, a clear space opens for my use of Heidegger's thinking as expressed in his writing. His *writing* lives and has its Being in *my* response to it. I do not need to understand or justify the man or his life to engage his writing. My concern as a reader is whether or not his writing speaks to me and my research. I can embrace the writing without regard to the being behind it.

Ultimately, I think I can be at peace with the man and the writing. His philosophy clears a space for my thinking. He re-conceptualized God for me in a way that connects with my own spiritual reading. Because of Heidegger, I can understand God as the essence of Being that animates our own existence, not as a supreme being with powers

and insights that in some way control our mortal sphere. More directly, Heidegger gives me what I believe to be an important way to look at education: a chance to focus on the lived high school experience of college graduates with GED diplomas in order to listen to their authentic experience of high school. His philosophy opens this space to care about these students whose high school experience was not successful in the traditional sense.

What can these non-traditional students tell us about caring for all high school students? Do we have a responsibility as educators to listen to them? How does Heidegger's insistence on "care" unfold as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas develop Heideggerian philosophy into a description of our relationship with others? How does this resultant philosophy describe a space for listening to and caring for these students' lived high school experiences?

Developing a Philosophy of Caring

Heidegger's notion of care derives from his concept of Being. When being embraces Being, moves toward its fulfillment, it does so in an attitude of care. We care for Being; that is, we nurture, explore, and seek out the fullness of Being. In this excerpt from his "Letter on Humanism" (1947/1993c), Heidegger uses his term "ek-sisting" to distinguish between man's (and I accept his use of "man" to mean "human") daily, unreflective mode of living in the world with ready-to-hand objects available for our use that is simple existing, and the contemplative, reflective mode of existence with present-to-hand objects, existing in their own right and available for contemplation that he names ek-sisting. In the latter mode of ek-sistence, we try to understand our Being.

Man is, and is man, insofar as he is the ek-sisting one. He stands out into the openness of Being. Being itself, which as the throw has projected the essence of man into "care," is as this openness. Thrown in such a fashion, man stands "in" the openness of Being. "World" is the clearing of Being into which man stands

out on the basis of his thrown essence. “Being-in-the-world” designates the essence of ek-sistence with regard to the cleared dimension out of which the “ek-” of ek-sistence essentially unfolds. (p. 252)

We are thrown into the openness of Being to care-fully discover the essence of our Being. Care, then, is essential to carrying out the project of Being; therefore, Heidegger’s theory opens a space where concern for the care high schools give to the projects of Being of their students is reasonable and desirable.

Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas use the space created by Heidegger to consider, in part, how our projects of Being are inextricably bound up with the experience of the Other. How does Heidegger’s basic notion of care in our projects of Being affect our relationships with Others?

Sartre’s theory of the Other is based on his belief that all human relationships involve conflict. Humans exercise their freedom and develop projects to pursue a fullness of Being. Our consciousness, or “*pour-soi*” (for itself), recognizes what is lacking in its development and proposes projects to reach toward this fullness of being, “*en-soi*,” or something complete unto itself. These projects perforce deny or compromise the freedom of others. If we each lived in our own world, the exercise of our own freedom would not impinge that of others. But others do exist in our world. We know they exist because we come under their gaze and their love.

Influenced by Hegel’s master/slave relationship thesis, Sartre (1943/2005) posits that my self-identity is affected by the gaze of the Other. Our emotional reactions to this gaze remind us that we are aware of Others and subject to their gaze: their approval or disapproval. Arguably Sartre’s most famous line from his fiction is Garcin’s quip in the drama *No Exit*, that “Hell is—other people” (1944/1949, p. 47). We want to control this

dominion they have over us, and this produces conflict. Love relationships in particular illustrate the conflict of individual freedoms. The lover loves the beloved, but the soaring joy of requited love is fragile because it is dependent on the Other's free choice to love. "The beloved cannot will to love" (Sartre, 1943/2005, p. 235). The lover seeks a pledge of undying love from the beloved to assuage the fear of loss of this freely given love. The moment the pledge is given, however, the beloved becomes bound to the lover, no longer a free agent who can give love freely; hence the conflict: the lover at once wants to control the beloved's loving and to free the beloved to choose to love. If the beloved becomes objectified, the beloved is no longer the being in whom the lover once found and founded love. The dance of intimacy requires the lover to vacillate constantly between exercising freedom on and relinquishing freedom to the beloved. Because, as Sartre believes, "We are condemned to freedom" (Moran, 2003, p. 420); the care we take of others seems to revolve around the exercise or denial of our own freedom. Does this offer an insight into how GED students struggle in high school where they are ultimately denied the care for their own projects as they are overpowered by Others?

Sartre (1943/2005) describes people who deny the robust nature of their freedom as living in "bad faith." He believes we must avoid accepting the views of others and/or restrictions that others wish to place on us to live authentically. He describes "cowards" who deny their own freedom and "swine" who deny the freedom of others partly as a denial of their own freedom. Might Sartre have a model here for high schools, especially as they function for the GED graduates who must leave the traditional system to exercise their freedom? Since large American high schools are designed more like prisons than empowering teaching situations where "schooling as a means of developing human

capital has become the most important goal of the educational system in the twentieth century” (Spring, 2001, p. 253), can school functionaries be accused of being “swine” who deny students their freedom to explore their own Being partly because we have denied our own freedom to imagine school in different ways? Clearly this choice does not fulfill Heidegger’s notion of care for Being and provides evidence, on the other hand, for Sartre’s darkly conceived notion that this care for our own Being necessitates a lack of care for the projects of Being of the Other. Understanding care, then, will require an appreciation for how the care of our own projects of Being may impinge on the care others may be able to give to their own projects.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty develops Sartre’s belief that we are “condemned to freedom” with the concept that “we are condemned to meaning” (1945/2006, p. xxii). Where Sartre suggests that all interpersonal relationships are a struggle to balance personal freedoms, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that these struggles must be placed in the gestalt of our bodies and the world and history into which they have been thrown.

But the factual presence of other bodies could not produce thought or the idea if its seeds were not in my own body. Thought is a relationship with oneself and with the world as well as a relationship with the other; hence it is established in the three dimensions at the same time. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2004b, p. 261)

Our bodies are flesh and are part of the flesh of the world, and it is our flesh, as part of the world, that allows us to see the world.

It is the body and it alone, because it is a two-dimensional being, that can bring us to the things themselves, which are themselves not flat beings but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above, open to him alone that, if it be possible, would coexist with them in the same world. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2004c, p. 253)

The fundamental body and spirit of the flesh is Being; it defines being-in-the world.

We must not think of the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit—for then it would be the union of contradictories—but we must think of it, as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2004b, p. 263)

The excitement of this compound nature is the intertwining “of the seeing” body “and the visible” (Merleau-Ponty, p. 263) object which are all flesh of the world. The touching and the touched are illustrated by Merleau-Ponty as the right-hand touching the left-hand: where does the touching end and the touched begin? It is all flesh of the world into which we are corporeally inserted. “It is a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact” (Merleau-Ponty, p. 263).

How does Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that the truth of all ideas is “in transparency behind the sensible, or in its heart” (1964/2004b, p. 265) help me develop a philosophy for caring in schools? It adds the imperative to consider the corporeal nature of learning. As Foucault (1977) describes the relationship of human science knowledge and its power to ignore the human body in favor of controlling the human soul, so schools can be seduced by a technical approach to learning that attempts the same division of learners into mind and body and the repression of the latter. Bodies cannot be ignored, disciplined, or managed in the service of learning or teaching; rather, they must be acknowledged and incorporated into any description we develop.

Does a moral or ethical imperative exist within phenomenology for pursuing an understanding of the Other? According to Moran (2003), Levinas gives phenomenology “a radically ethical orientation, an orientation it had lacked since the death of Scheler” (p. 320), who died before Heidegger’s work transformed phenomenology. Although “Levinas agrees with Heidegger that being is primarily a field of action of solicitude” (p. 333), Heidegger attempts to understand Being in terms of being’s struggle to achieve it,

and Levinas sees this as egoism. “Against this egoism, he wants to argue that my responsibility to the other is the fundamental structure upon which all other social structures rest” (p. 321).

The pre-original responsibility for the other is not measured by being, is not preceded by a decision, and cannot be reduced to absurdity by death. . . . No one, not even the promisers of religion, is hypocritical enough to claim that he took away death’s sting; but we may have responsibilities for which we must consent to death. The Other concerns me despite myself. (Levinas, 1972/2003, pp. 56-57)

Levinas suggests that Being is an ontic question, before the ontological construction of knowledge of being. He sees our responsibility for the Other in the same sphere: prior to any decision or choice of our own. Our responsibility to the Other is both prior to and independent of our mortal nature.

It is interesting to reflect, in light of Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on the intertwining of body and spirit, how Heidegger’s and Levinas’s life experiences could have affected their starting points for examining the lived experience. Both men lived in a time of world wars, the bloodiest testimonials to people’s inability to understand themselves, their world, and those who inhabit it with them. Yet Heidegger never experienced combat, spending his active duty time during World War I censoring letters and sorting communiqués, a necessary military activity but without the threat of physical violence. Levinas had the opposite experience. He was called to duty during World War II as an interpreter because of his multi-language facility, was captured, and spent the war doing forced labor. He struggled to comprehend the slaughter of his fellow Jews while he was saved from execution because he was a French officer. How much did these experiences affect the ideas growing in the body and spirit of the two men? Heidegger’s philosophy flew into the interior reaches of man’s being as it yearned toward an internal

fulfillment, while Levinas's thoughts dwelt externally, upon humans' treatment of each other. Heidegger was never forced to face the indignity, ignominy, and ignorance of war; Levinas was. Heidegger's contemplative nature was nurtured by his isolation and protection; Levinas was faced with daily, inescapable reminders of the failure of philosophy to offer people any guidance to prevent the atrocities he witnessed. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the intertwining of our flesh and the flesh of the world suggests that "Every thought known to us occurs to a flesh" (1964/2004b, p. 261), and the flesh of the two men, who looked at phenomenology from two different orientations, had two distinctly different, life-defining experiences.

Heidegger's *Dasein* posits an existent world into which being is thrown. This being can exist unreflectively, moving about the world using "ready-to-hand" objects, just existing. But to ek-sist, being must embrace Being from its thrown position in the world. In the Introduction to *Existence and Existents* (1978/2001), Levinas acknowledges that his "reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being" (p. 4). But Levinas wants to argue an ontic position that "Existence is not synonymous with the relationship with a world; it is antecedent to the world" (p. 8). Human life, for Levinas, will be a struggle.

For man is able to take up an attitude with regard to his very existence. Already in what is called the struggle for life, over and beyond the things capable of satisfying our needs which that struggle intends to acquire, there is the objective of existence itself, bare existence, the possibility of pure and simple existence becoming an objective. There is in the struggle for life and in the primacy this concept has acquired for the interpretation of life a break with the traditional conception of the relationship between what exists and its existence. . . . Hitherto a being was taken to have been given existence by divine decree, or to have it by virtue of its very essence; its existence thus was taken to belong to it in a natural and quasi-imperceptible fashion. The new and fundamental idea is that

this belongingness is the very struggle for life. (p. 10)

He will paraphrase Sartre as Merleau-Ponty did, but assert his own, perhaps darker, view of existence by proposing that “We are condemned to being.”

Consonant with his view of existence as being external and prior to human existence, Levinas (1961/2007) rejects the traditional, totalizing Western view that defines the other in terms of me. “If the same would establish its identity by simple *opposition to the other*, it would already be a part of a totality encompassing the same and the other” (p. 38), such as described by Husserl, who defines the other as what I would be if I were “over there,” and Sartre, who defines the other as another with whom I am in constant struggle in an absurd world, and Heidegger, for whom the world is “The foundation of the site, the quintessence of all the relations that constitute our presence on the earth” (p. 77). Against this view, Levinas proposes that “The absolutely other is the Other” (p. 39):

A relation whose terms do not form a totality can hence be produced within the general economy of being only as proceeding from the I to the other, as a *face to face*, as delineating a distance in depth. . . . We know this relation only in the measure that we effect it. (pp. 39-40)

In this “face to face” relationship, Levinas names the “calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics” (p. 43). “Power, by essence murderous of the other, becomes, faced with the other and ‘against all good sense,’ the impossibility of murder, the consideration of the other, or justice” (p. 47). Levinas suggests that the confrontation with the Other “abolishes the inalienable property of enjoyment” of the world in separation, and measures me instead by “what I give” (p. 76). I am defined by my response.

What sort of ethical response are we making to students who fail to complete high school in the traditional program? How would we, as a nation, be defined by this response? What might we gain by using a philosophy of care to create a research space to listen to the stories of the dis-placed students?

The space to write the verse of life as lived
Erupts from thoughts that fly to Being's lair,
Such Martin offers being so involved,
Philosophy that opens life to care.

For where within this mortal coil free
Can we escape the thrall of head alone,
Unless our being stride ahead to Be
And thrust the heart's own intuition home?

The Frenchmen build on Martin's castle-mind,
And Nel the caring world and words define
That scribe the world we see and feel and find,
So all who wish can write the story's line.

And then we know, without a graph in sight,
How we might start to set the world aright.
(Mary Grace Snyder, 2008)

A philosophy of caring suggests that we have an ethical imperative to listen to the stories of dis-placement of the embodied Other to recognize her/his need to embrace Being.

Does our traditional high school recognize this ethic?

Imagining an Ethic of Caring

School, as it is, leaves some students out. They drop out, turn away, and, on rare occasions, commit violent acts of rebellion against their teachers and their classmates. It seems that a new approach is necessary to understand these students. We have not been successful with these students by continuing to attempt to engage in caring relationships using the positivistic model. Noddings (2003) suggests that "Teaching is completed in learning and . . . caring is completed in reception by the cared-for" (p. 69). These

students are failing to graduate and claiming that “No one cares.” Ethically, we must respond to their claims by daring to abandon a traditional approach to them and to envision something new. Like Heidegger, Sartre and Greene maintain that we must engage our imagination to envision something different. This vision of something new can then motivate a desire for change.

I am reminded of Jean-Paul Sartre’s declaration that “it is on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs that a new light falls on our troubles and our suffering and that we *decide* that these are unbearable.” (Greene, 1995, p. 5)

Heidegger’s phenomenology allows me to privilege a way of knowing that values the unique being of GED students who are groping into the cleared space we can create together to share their lived experiences of high school. With care-full attention, we can let them be and learn from them.

To embrace a “thing” or a “person” in its essence means to love it, to favor it. Thought in a more original way such favoring [*Mögen*] means to bestow essence as a gift. Such favoring is the proper essence of enabling, which not only can achieve this or that but also can let something essentially unfold in its provenance, that is, let it be. It is on the “strength” of such enabling by favoring that something is properly able to be. (Heidegger, 1947/1993c, p. 220)

Several phrases in this excerpt are interesting. It is interesting that embracing a “thing” or a “person” is equated. All things have a being through an engagement with life that emphasizes the vitality of the embrace. For educators, is it recognizing the value-free orientation to true embracing that students and teachers may share when both of them are free to become themselves? It is also interesting to note that “such favoring means to bestow an essence.” So when we embrace a thing or person, we give it its essence? More likely, when humans embrace a thing or person, we allow it to reveal its true essence as part of our own unveiling, for “the proper essence of enabling . . . can let something unfold in its provenance.” Schools and teachers, then, to “properly” enable

their students, must let them unfold. The last line of the excerpt essentially summarizes the previous idea, but this time the word “strength” is in quotation marks. I believe the rhetorical purpose of this technique is to ask the reader to consider this word in an unusual diction. I believe the “strength” of this enabling is the mature love of Padgett’s poem.

Hug

The older I get, the more I like hugging. When I was little the people hugging me were much larger. In their grasp I was a rag doll. In adolescence, my body was too tense to relax for a hug. Later, after the loss of virginity—which was anything but a loss—the extreme proximity of the other person, the smell of hair, the warmth of the skin, the sound of breathing in the dark—these were mysterious and delectable. This hug had two primary components: the anticipation of sex and the pleasure of intimacy, which itself is a combination of trust and affection. It was this latter combination that came to characterize the hugging I have experienced only in recent years, a hugging that knows no distinctions of gender or age. When this kind of hug is mutual, for a moment the world is perfect the way it is, and the tears we shed for it are perfect too. I guess it is an embrace.
(Padgett, 2008, p. 1)

Padgett describes the way humans, if they are lucky, grow to enjoy an embrace that, in Heideggerian terms, “bestows essence as a gift.” Heidegger states that the “proper” essence of enabling is to “properly” let some thing be. Merleau-Ponty adds the emphasis of the body’s integral role in our embrace of Being. Their philosophies seem to merge in this poem to show how the growth toward maturity, toward Being, is embodied. The speaker “slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2006, p. xv), explores the lived bodily experience of being hugged, and finds a path to his/her mature understanding of Being: “the moment the world is perfect the / way it is.”

Unfortunately, the earlier observation still holds true: not everyone, not every student, reaches this fulfillment. In an educational system dominated by a Tylerian, data-driven, *analysis* of teaching, teachers and students lose the embrace of the gestalt: the whole is greater than the simple sum of the scientific parts. Breaking the art of teaching into technical bits of mastery will never touch the “tact of” the “courage to” or the lived experience of teaching individual students. Teachers burn out and students drop out because school is not a fulfillment of their humanity but an intentional, albeit, I hope, positively motivated, breaking down of the school experience into bits of measurable mastery. Perhaps teachers and students who could give and receive the life-affirming and person-confirming metaphorical hugs of one human to another might experience more fulfillment and less loss.

Parker Palmer (1998) makes this point clearly in *The Courage to Teach*. He first explores how the current “academic culture that distrusts personal truth . . . and honors only one . . . ‘objective’ way of knowing . . . takes us into the ‘real’ world by taking us ‘out of ourselves’” (pp. 17-18). This separation from our hearts and feelings fosters a “culture of fear” among and between students and teachers because the constant focus on the “right” answer, technique or skill as measured “objectively” destroys community, diversity, and wholeness. Palmer observes that even “modern physics has debunked the notion that knowing requires, or even allows, a separation of the knower from the known. Physicists cannot study subatomic particles without altering them in the act of knowing, so we cannot maintain the objectivist gap between the world ‘out there’ and the observer ‘in here’ as posited by premodern science” (Palmer, p. 97) and, curiously, it is still maintained by education’s reliance on “scientific” research. If subatomic particles are

affected by human observation, how can educators begin to fathom the depths to which humans affect each other in the intimacy of a classroom where we are constantly asked to bare our souls to an objective examination and, ugliest of all, a stratified evaluation and grading of our living truth instead of aiming for “the highest form of love, love that allows for intimacy without the annihilation of difference” (Palmer, p. 55)?

To reiterate, Heidegger’s phenomenology is a focus on “the things themselves” (Heidegger, 1927/1993a, p. 72). Heidegger’s “things,” indeed all of phenomenology’s “things,” are lived experiences, not the broken bits of analysis isolated in a quantitative approach. A deep reflection on a lived experience may provide access to insights into human experiences unavailable to any scientific analysis. As the crisis of high school dropouts intensifies, an examination of the lived high school experience of college graduates with GED diplomas may suggest how our high schools are deficient in ways unobservable by tests. If these GED students have graduated from college, academic acumen clearly was not the precipitating problem. One aspect of the “things themselves” of schools is the relationships students experience. If these relationships are implacing, caring relationships, as Noddings has described them, would thousands of high school students drop out of high school every year? What insight might we gain about students’ high school experiences from a phenomenological focus on these interactions? These philosophers have provided a space for the GED students to write down their experiences; now how do we learn how to read them?

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

“What does it say?” the child asks. It is the same question whether the adult and child are standing in the middle of the forest looking at animal tracks or in the grocery store

looking at the signs over the fruit displays. It is magic to be able to read the signs whether the signs are the clouds, the bending grasses, the sounds that whisper through the trees, or the printed word. The child is eager to learn the magic. In the case of written language, once the skill is mastered, some of the magic disappears. I believe that to understand the hermeneutic phenomenological way of knowing, we must recapture our understanding of the magic of language and how it creates understanding. Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty says, phenomenology “is the impression . . . not so much of encountering a new philosophy as of recognizing what [we] had been waiting for” (1945/2006, p. viii).

Written Language

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram (1996) connects the animism required to read a stone to the faculty for reading the inert letters upon a page.

Animism was never, in truth, left behind. The participatory proclivity of the senses was simply transferred from the depths of the surrounding life-world to the visible letters of the alphabet. Only by concentrating on the synaesthetic magic of the senses upon the written letters could these letters begin to come alive and to speak. “Written words,” says Socrates, “seem to talk to you as if they were intelligent . . .” Indeed, today it is virtually impossible for us to look at a printed word *without* seeing, or rather hearing, what “it says.” For our senses are now coupled synesthetically, to those printed shapes as profoundly as they were once wedded to cedar trees, ravens, and the moon. (p. 138)

Both kinds of reading construct knowledge necessary for human survival. In the technical world we have created today, the reading of the natural world is not privileged. The loss of this way of knowing is proving highly detrimental to our world in the face of the ecological disasters we have both caused and remain unable to solve through our illiteracy.

What is required in both kinds of reading is animism and synesthesia. Animism is the animation of signs by our human brain. In early representational writing, pictures

reminded humans of the real-world animals, plants, events, and human actions they represented. When writing became systematized through a phonetic representation, the connection between physical and symbol was interrupted. As Abram says above, “The animism was transferred from the depths of the surrounding life-world to the visible letters of the alphabet” (1996, p. 138). The phonetic symbols “came to have a strictly *human* referent: each letter was now associated purely with a gesture or sound of the human mouth” (p. 138). Thus the animism required “to read” became self-reflexive. To read printed symbols requires a human connection to humans. Further, to animate the phonetic symbols, or text, requires a synesthesia of the senses. Humans read the phonetic symbols with their eyes, but they “hear” the words, mentally or audibly reproducing the sounds humans make when they speak. The child in the forest or the supermarket knows that the visible must be made audible: the synesthesia between sight and hearing is used to create meaning by understanding what nature or the letters “say.”

Synesthesia is the combination of the prefix “syn” whose Greek origins carry the meaning “with, together with, at the same time,” or “by means of” and the word “aesthesia” which comes from the Greek *aisthesis* which means “perception, or sense impression,” and in English has come to mean “the ability to feel sensations” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 1980, p. 1443 and 479). The migration of the original Greek word that simply meant “perception” to the English word meaning “the *ability to feel* sensations” begs the question of intellectualization. Perception can be both a bodily function, i.e., visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile perception, as well as the intellectualized functions to use these embodied sensations to perceive meanings behind facial expressions, body language, symbols, natural signs, and other information that

comes through the senses and is interpreted by the brain. The “ability to feel sensations” points solely to the first meaning of embodied information. If this is so, then the meaning of synesthesia suggests a combination of *only* embodied sensations and not the overlay of the *interpretation* of these sense impressions suggested by the original Greek meaning of perception. But the meaning of synesthesia is construed both biologically, a “sensation felt in one part of the body when another part is stimulated,” and psychologically, “a process in which one type of stimulus produces a secondary, subjective sensation, as when a specific color evokes a specific smell” (p. 1444). Thus synesthesia, in the psychological meaning, has recovered the full meaning of perception to include the mindful function of perception: one stimulus causes another sensory reaction to take place in the brain. The secondary sense is not physically stimulated, so the stimulus is only the brain’s association of the primary sensory event with the associated second reaction. Reading uses the synesthesia of sight and hearing in the expanded sense.

Phonetic reading, of course, makes use of a *particular* sensory conjunction—that between seeing and hearing. And indeed, among the various synaesthesias that are common to the human body, the confluence (or chiasm) between seeing and hearing is particularly acute. For vision and hearing are the two “distance” senses of the human organism. In contrast to touch and proprioception (inner-body sensations), and unlike the chemical senses of taste and smell, seeing and hearing regularly place us in contact with things and events unfolding at a substantial distance from our own visible, audible body. (Abram, 1996, p. 128)

Abram’s “substantial distance” is critical to the act of reading.

Reading

When we read, we use our synesthetic abilities to span Abram’s “substantial distance” to connect to another person, time, place, idea—possibly all four. Gadamer makes it clear in *Truth and Method* (1960/2006) that the task that confronts a reader is to question the text to create understanding. He rejects what literary critics call

Historicism/New Historicism or New Critical/Formalism Literary Theory which emphasize an approach to interpreting a text that attempts to recapture the historical or individual background of the text and/or writer to rebuild the “original” meaning of the text. Gadamer, rather, seems to embrace a Reader-Response approach to reading.

Reader-Response Theory, as I discussed earlier, proposes that the meaning of a text is constructed between the text and the reader: understanding is the reader’s task. As Gadamer (1960/2006) says, “Precisely because it [the text] entirely detaches the sense of what is said from the person saying it, the written word makes the understanding reader the arbiter of its claim to truth” (p. 396). Further, this “horizon of understanding cannot be limited either by what the writer originally had in mind or by the horizon of the person to whom the text was originally addressed” (p. 396). Indeed, Gadamer asserts that it is only through a “fusion of [the] horizons” of both reader and text that understanding occurs. In this step, Gadamer has exceeded the bounds of Reader-Response Theory by creating an interactive meeting place for two entities, text and reader, where a poem of understanding can be penned.

Additionally, Gadamer (1960/2006) asks us to recognize that “Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting” (p. 390). Thus the “meaning” of a text (or of the tracks in the snow, the flight of birds, or the stillness of the night) is not an object to be apprehended or “a fact that can be empirically investigated” (p. 405), but an interpretation to be captured in mental and sometimes written language. The language of the interpretation itself creates the understanding. “It is not that the understanding is subsequently put into words; rather, the way understanding occurs . . . is the coming-into-language of the thing itself” (p.

371). Teachers know that when students can express an idea in their own words, they have more than the idea: they have encoded the idea into an understanding *in words*. Mathematics teachers, in particular, who can be thought of as teachers of another language, sometimes find it useful to ask students to explain the steps in a mathematical process *in words*. The encoding into words of the perhaps arcane language of mathematics actually *creates* an understanding. Therefore, “The fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is actually the achievement of language” (p. 370).

Finally, each interpretation, or construction of meaning, is one possibility of interpretation. Words and language are always incomplete, imprecise, limited by our individual facility with language, and individually constructed in a particular circumstance so that “The general concept meant by the word is enriched by any given perception of a thing, so that what emerges is a new, more specific word formation which does more justice to the particularity of that act of perception” (Gadamer, 1960/2006, p. 427). In other words, each word formation and, by extension, each text formation is unique. It follows, then, that the “fusion of [the] horizons” of text and reader is also unique.

At this point, then, I have explored an understanding of the process of writing and reading as the primary process of human construction of meaning and understanding. How can these tools be used in the investigation of a phenomenon, particularly, investigating the lived high school experience of college graduates with GED diplomas?

Vicarious Learning

As discussed above, understanding is created with language. In both actual experience and the act of reading, the self-reflective sign language of writing, the

synesthesia of sight and hearing, formulate experience into an interpretation expressed in language. Is this how we learn?

We learn through experiencing the world, and this information is stored in our brains. Natural scientists formulate their understanding of learning by defining the physical process.

During the development process, the ‘wiring diagram’ of the brain is created through the formation of synapses. At birth, the human brain has in place only a relatively small portion of the trillions of synapses it will eventually have; it gains about two-thirds of its adult size after birth. The rest of its synapses are formed after birth, and a portion of this process is guided by *experience* [my emphasis]. (NAS, 2000, p. 116)

Natural behavioral science goes on to examine the importance that influences, such as prior knowledge, context, and environment, have in the effective storage of information; and they also recognize that “the ability to remember . . . is not the same as understanding” (NAS, p. 56). They have compared experts to novices and discovered that the ability of the former to address problems comes from wide ranging *experience*, not memorization of facts (NAS, p. 49).

Dewey (1977/1938) makes the same distinction for formal classroom situations.

When preparation [for the future] is made the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future. When this happens, the actual preparation for the future is missed or distorted. The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his future. We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything. (Dewey, 1977/1938, p. 49)

In Dewey’s view, experience, not uncontextualized memorization, fosters true learning for the future. “What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual

loses his own soul: loses the appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative” (p. 49).

Human scientists and philosophers are also interested in the way experience affects learning. Gadamer (1960/2006) takes an interesting view of experience that differentiates the effects of learning by experience from the learning of factual information:

Experience stands in an ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge. The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences, but is also open *to* new experiences. The consummation of his experience, the perfection that we call “being experienced,” does not exist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (p. 350)

I think it is possible to draw a parallel here between learning through quantitative research and learning through qualitative research. Quantitative research, as suggested by Gadamer here and Greene above, is superb for discovering patterns that can be used to make helpful predictions about our world. We learn this “general theoretical or technical knowledge” and it gives us one view of the world. Yet, we know we learn from experience as well.

Why is learning through experience important? Gadamer (1960/2006) points out above that “The experienced person proves to be . . . someone who is radically undogmatic” (p. 350). Undogmatic, according to *Webster’s*, means “not dogmatic” or “not committed to dogma,” and dogma, according to the *Online Etymological Dictionary*,

comes from the “Greek *dogma* which means ‘opinion, tenet,’” or “literally, ‘that which one thinks is true.’” So, an experienced person who is “radically” undogmatic will be open-minded. Axiomatically, “because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them,” the experienced person “is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and learn from them.” It is a recursive, self-reflexive process, and for the wellness of the world in general and education in particular an important process to recognize. Without sufficient experience, both spheres will, as Greene points out above, rely on quantitative data to predict the world and miss the imaginative, open-mindedness garnered from a plethora of experience. The connection I want to make is the *vicarious* experience. If experiential learning can be shared, then learning by experience can be expanded.

Certainly direct experience with the world is a learning experience. “Life teaches more effectively than books or school” is an old proverb; however, vicarious experience is also a well-established learning technique. In many cases, learning by vicarious experience is through direct observation. As the third girl in a family of seven children, I have profited all my life from vicarious experiential learning as my two older sisters walk the path of life before me. How blessed I have always felt to be given such clarifying, tutorial vicarious experiences as I have profited from observing the consequences of my older sisters’ choices. Humans also have vicarious learning experiences through direct experience with fine and performing arts, with literature and poetry, and with teaching/learning through vicarious experience in all its guises in both formal school venues and real-life guises. Indeed, vicarious learning is the only way we can explore beyond our own world, expand our understanding beyond our immediate experiences,

and bridge the gaps that exist between people near and far. How can the phenomenological researcher stimulate imaginative, open-minded thinking by investigating lived experiences and sharing them with educators who can learn from the vicarious experience?

Gadamer (1960/2006) speaks of this sort of expansion of thinking as expanding horizons.

The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of the narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. . . . A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him. On the other hand, “to have a horizon” means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it. (p. 301)

The examination of others’ lived experiences can result in vicarious learning that expands horizons.

How can others’ lived experiences become vicarious learning experiences?

Primarily, the lived experiences can be captured and shared through language. Using the two processes described above of using language to construct understanding, people first put their own experiences or the experiences of others into words in a conversation, then hermeneutic phenomenological researchers can use the language of these conversations to explore possible insights into the lived experience and to share the experience with others. Hermeneutic phenomenology, then, involves two conversations.

Conversation

Hermeneutic conversation, as described by Gadamer (1960/2006), is dialectic, a dialogue. The essence of open-mindedness is the ability to ask questions. “Every sudden idea has the structure of a question. But the sudden occurrence of the question is already

a breach in the smooth front of popular opinion” (p. 360) or accepted, unquestioned tradition. It is already an expansion of horizon. The hermeneutic “art of questioning is the art of questioning even further—i.e., the art of thinking. It is called dialectic because it is the art of conducting a real dialogue” (p. 360).

The purpose of such dialogue or conversation is “the art of forming concepts through working out the common meaning” (Gadamer, 1960/2006, p. 361). Through conversation or dialogue, two (or possibly more) people agree to investigate a particular topic to create a new understanding. By using language as the medium of understanding, participants in a conversation or dialogue listen to each other; they exchange their emerging understandings by putting their thoughts, ideas, and insights into language. The result of such a conversation is, as Gadamer has said, a “fusion of horizons [that] is actually the achievement of language” (p. 370). Through the language of the dialogue comes the creation of a new understanding. “To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were” (p. 371).

Hermeneutics, as a specialized type of conversation, is the task of “entering into such a dialogue with the text” (Gadamer, 1960/2006, p. 362). The text participates as the partner in a true dialogue. The interpreter approaches the text in the same manner as a partner in a true dialogue: a searcher for truth, a seeker of broader horizons, a pilgrim for enlightenment. It is an approach that demands a “fusion of the horizons of understanding” of both text and interpreter (p. 370). Just as partners in a true dialogue recognize that neither holds the answer to the questions or even holds all the questions, so

the interpreter of a text recognizes that both interpreter and text must participate in a recursive process that seeks a truth that neither can achieve independently. “They both come under the influence of the truth . . . and are thus bound to one another” in the creation of truth (p. 371).

The truth of educational lived experiences that can be revealed through a hermeneutic phenomenological conversation, and shared vicariously, can provide insights into how schools can enhance their being-with students. Perhaps this qualitative way of knowing school can create enough tension with our quantitative knowledge about school that an in-between space can be cleared for greater understanding.

The Methodology of Phenomenology

Van Manen (2003) has expressed the methodology of phenomenological research using the following components:

- turning to the nature of lived experience;
- investigating experience as we live it;
- reflecting on essential themes;
- the art of writing and rewriting;
- maintaining a strong and oriented relation; [and]
- balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 31-33)

The components are recursive, interwoven, and insightful—much like writing poetry.

Turning to the Nature of Lived Experience

I do not choose to write a love poem; love itself seeks expression. I “turn to the nature of lived experience” to feel its nuances fully. In Chapter One, I describe how I turn “to a phenomena which seriously interests [me] and commits [me] to the world” (van Manen, 2003, p. 30) of high school education. While teaching high school for 25 years, my spirit became involved, “fell in love,” if you will, with my students. Then I became part of the GED Testing Service, and I fell in love with the gutsy, motivated students I

had never missed at graduation. These people refuse to be dismissed by the educational program at which they had “failed.” They grab the second chance for a high school diploma and find their way back into the halls of academia through the back door of the GED Tests, and some graduate from college. I fell in love with their stories, largely because they succeeded without me, almost in spite of me. They put me in a place where I could see my lack of insight. They showed me that as much as I had accomplished in my career in high school education, there were some students who ultimately had not needed what high school had to offer, some who succeed in spite of their rejection by or of the traditional high school program. They did it on their own. If they can graduate from college, why did they drop out of high school? What was the high school experience like for them? The question compels my educator’s heart: **What is the lived high school experience of GED college graduates?**

Investigating Experience as We Live It

The experience of love, or, perhaps, any other strong emotion, undermines the natural attitude. The natural attitude is that which allows us to negotiate our world without ever stopping to think how it is constructed. When we become dissatisfied with the practical, natural attitude, we seek to know the *Vorhandenheit* of things “*as they are in themselves* [emphasis in the original]” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 67). When I am moved to express my love in poetry, I do not seek a scientific explanation for the feelings I have. The “natural attitude” of scientific study, suitable for discerning the laws of nature as they operate in the natural world, cannot approach the exquisite music, mesmerizing art, and penetrating, soul-full nature of my love. Similarly, I seek to set aside my outsider’s experience of dropping out of high school, through statistics and

theory, and begin “investigating experience as we live it” through the students’ stories to “‘borrow’ [their] experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of [this] aspect of [their] human experience” (van Manen, 2003, p. 62). I seek to understand what high school was like for those students who dropped out without anyone noticing or caring. I began this examination in Chapter Two and develop it in Chapter Four.

Reflecting on Essential Themes

Writing love poetry requires that I consciously reflect “on essential themes” in the experience of what it is like to love. Yet here the experience of writing poetry and the writing of hermeneutic phenomenological reflections diverge in a revelatory way. I write of my love in poetry and leave my meaning implicit; I reflect on possible themes in the stories of GED college graduates and “systematically develop a certain narrative that explicates [the] themes” (van Manen, 2003, p. 97). As an English teacher, this is a comfortable space for me. I must have spent years of my life thinking about the significance of prose and poetry as it lays out life in its myriad colors, painting ever-unique landscapes. It is the obverse of *writing* the poetry; it is the *explication* of poetry. Each literary experience, like each GED college graduate’s story, adds shades to the palette of my understanding as I meditate on their meanings.

How does the literary critic understand how a poem means? How does a hermeneutic phenomenologist gain insight into the stories of human lived experience? The literary critic can draw on various literary theories and the traditional manipulation of the structure, sound, and sense of poetry to guide interpretation. Van Manen (2003) suggests that phenomenologists use three different, increasingly detailed, approaches

“toward uncovering or isolating thematic aspects of a phenomena in some text: (1) the wholistic [*sic*] or sententious approach; (2) the selective or highlighting approach; [and/or] (3) the detailed or line-by-line approach” (pp. 92-93). The “wholistic or sententious approach” gathers the text in a summary fashion, reflecting on its overall meaning and then formulating a statement to express the “main significance of the text as a whole” (p. 93). This approach optimizes an initial understanding of a text that may effectively begin the task of examining an individual story, and then facilitates the integration of several texts into a full description of the phenomena. The second approach selects “particularly essential or revealing” (p. 93) phrases through multiple engagements with the text. This highlighting of particular phrases draws attention to significant utterances that may suggest particular aspects of the phenomenon. The final approach, the sentence-by-sentence analysis, is the most detailed textual examination, and it may be helpful in a number of situations, such as a dense text that resists other thematizing approaches because of its involved figurative language, passionate expression, or other diction; or a text complicated by the writer/speaker’s hesitant, incomplete, or inadequate expression. I use all these approaches as I examine the stories of the lived high school experience of GED graduates. First, I examine the individual stories with a highlighting approach, focusing on difficult passages with a line-by-line approach when the text resists my attempts to understand it; and then I group these statements into holistic statements of theme that synthesize the details into the fullest possible description.

Each discipline also suggests that the interpreters uncover the universal themes that the poet and the co-researcher trouble in their unique way to create individual truth.

Van Manen (2003) suggests four “lifeworld existentials . . . as guides to reflection in the research process: *lived space* (spatiality), *lived body* (corporality), *lived time* (temporality), and *lived human relation* (relationality or communality)” (p. 101). As I discuss in Chapter Two, the lack of implacement some dropouts feel may prove to be a fruitful thematic thread to follow. Since “*lived space (spatiality)* is felt space” (p. 102), the feelings that the GED college graduates may associate with the halls, classrooms, lunch rooms, buses, and auditoriums may be significant. Because “The space in which we find ourselves affects the way we feel” (van Manen, p. 102), and because high school is an *enforced lived space*, how the GED college graduates feel about this space is revelatory. Abram (1996) speaks of the distance writing has created between lived space and our stories: “The places themselves are no longer necessary to the remembrance of the stories and often come to seem wholly incidental to the tales, the arbitrary backdrops for human events that might just as easily have happened elsewhere” (p. 183); however, the unique *enforced lived space* of high school is crucial to the feelings and experiences the co-researchers recall. Van Manen (2003) writes of home as a lived space, that it “is where we can *be* what we *are*” (p. 102). Should school be the same sort of place for students?

Thus, the school trains the intelligence, and the home and church train for morality and emotional well-being. We must reject this view emphatically. It is not that these functions cannot be separated theoretically. It is, rather, that the human being who is an integral composite of qualities in several domains is thereby shaped into something less than fully human by the process. (Noddings, 2003, p. 172)

Does the space of school try to engage a student on a single plane of existence? Do they feel dis-placed?

Finally, the ineffable intuition that is born of reflection must guide interpreters in both traditions. John Milton (1650/1988) in “On His Blindness” offers that “They also serve who only stand and wait” (p. 628), which captures the explicator’s final step when the etymologies, diction, and essential themes must await reflection to coalesce into their unique understanding of the lived experience. We must “stand and wait” actively, through reflective thought and re-reading, for the text to speak to us.

The Art of Writing and Rewriting

And, of course, there is the writing: “describing the phenomena through the art of writing and rewriting” (van Manen, 2003, p. 30). Here writing poetry and writing phenomenological reflection flow together again: they are both a process of revealing. “Writing gives appearance and body to thought” (van Manen, p. 127). In writing and rewriting about my understanding of the lived high school experiences of GED college graduates, I begin to see what I understand.

The words are not the thing. And yet, it is to our words, language, that we must apply all our phenomenological skill and talents, because it is in and through the words that the shining through (the invisible) becomes visible. (van Manen, p. 130)

In both poetry and phenomenological writing, my success is measured in communication. Have I built an oriel through which we can perceive the meaning of an experience? In my hermeneutic phenomenological writing, my attempt is first to explore and extend my understanding of the lived high school experience of GED college graduates, and then to shape my understanding of the pedagogical significance of these stories about high school into a narrative that encourages insightful reflection on the part of my reader. As the poet William Carlos Williams reflects:

The Red Wheelbarrow

So much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chicken.

(Williams, 1923/1988, p. 520)

So much depends upon juxtaposing the actual words of the lived experience, e.g., the wheelbarrow, the rain, and the chicken, and the reflective, intuitive understanding of the unique aesthetics, e.g., the red, the glazing, and the white, and combining them into a cohesive, pedagogic interpretation of the world with more than our reason to guide us.

At nearly the same time as Descartes, Pascal discovers the logic of the heart as over and against the logic of calculating reason. The inner and invisible domain of the heart is not only more inward than the interior that belongs to calculating representation, and therefore more invisible; it also extends further than does the realm of merely producible objects. Only in the invisible innermost of the heart is man [*sic*] inclined toward what there is for him [*sic*] to love. . . . This presence too . . . is a presence of immanence. But the interior of uncusomary consciousness remains the inner space in which everything is for us beyond the arithmetic of calculation, and, free of such boundaries, can overflow into the unbounded whole of the Open. (Heidegger, 1971/2001, p. 123)

This space of which Heidegger speaks is the “inner and invisible domain of the heart” where hermeneutic phenomenological understanding “extends further than does the realm of merely producible objects” and finds the unique human presence in “the unbounded whole of the Open” that can produce an understanding that “extends further than does the realm of merely reproducible objects.” The human science research narrative, like love poetry, must reach into that “invisible innermost of the heart” to pluck the strings of

insight, perception, and alignment that cannot be described by reason but must be heard in the music of Being itself: “the whole of the Open.”

Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation

To achieve this essential communication in poetry and hermeneutic phenomenological writing again requires similar disciplines. For my poetry to be effective, I must express my true feelings; for hermeneutic phenomenological writing to be similarly alive, I must maintain “a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon.” I am called to delve into the phenomena of the lived high school experience of GED college graduates, and I must refrain from taking the narratives to an unwarranted, generalizable space. My co-researchers have a story to tell, a story that provides a window, a unique perspective on a bit of the national high school dropout crisis. Just as my love poetry will only succeed when it is beautifully yet honestly expressed, so my research succeeds only when it “reflectively brings to speech the meaning of [this] pedagogic situation” (van Manen, 2003, p. 160). The effective description of the unique stories of these dropouts may help us dream about what measures might be effective to support the next potential dropout.

Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole

Finally, for my love poem to achieve its unique communication, it must express my personal feelings yet draw upon a long tradition of lyric poetry. In the same way, my exploration of what the high school experience was like for GED college graduates involves “balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.” I must balance my passion for these individual stories with my pedagogic interest in elucidating the experience of these marginalized students. I must find the path through the texts, and,

at the same time, impress an organizational structure on my interpretation that will clarify, communicate, and inspire.

If this textual research and theorizing finds by means of language the means to express the ineffable, it is because the secret of our calling is expressed by the pedagogic work we do with children, which teaches us to recognize the grounds that make the work possible. (van Manen, 2003, p. 173)

And always, as I write my love poem, I am coming to endings, and falling in love all over again as I reflect and find new words to express my deepening love. Because it is a recursive process, it can be endless. In much the same way, the hermeneutic process continually re-instigates itself. The act of writing opens new ideas, the mundane tasks of living suddenly illuminate a fresh understanding, a mentor suggests a new book, or a sister shares an insightful comment. Each moment has the potential to restart the thinking-writing-reflecting-rewriting process to capitalize on additional thoughts. Yet, as with the poetry, I must make a thoughtful, well-formulated end. To have the poem ready for the beloved's birthday or to give my insights, however meager, to those seeking a solution to the national dropout crisis requires the courage to share one's heart.

I give myself over, then, to a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to explore the question, **what is the lived high school experience of GED college graduates?**

Listening to the Lived High School Experience of GED College Graduates

The journey toward a description of the lived high school experience of GED college graduates is one of a thousand steps, but it began—and ultimately ends—with those valiant spirits, my co-researchers, who are willing to open the books of their lives and read me their stories. Who are these storytellers?

The seven GED college graduates' stories are set in divergent contexts, representing different ages, genders, and socio-economic statuses. My co-researchers range in age from late twenties to over 60-years old, freighted with reflection about how earlier choices funneled their lives onto specific paths. Four are female, and three are male, which further shades the texts by allowing the two unique perspectives to add their color. Six participants are white, and one is Latina. The participants come from poor, working class, and middle class families, but they are all solidly middle class professionals as adults. The differences in these settings for their stories, from penury to affluence, from rural to urban cultures, also alters the plot lines of the stories. "Varying the examples is the way in which we address the phenomenological themes of a phenomenon so that the 'invariant' aspect(s) of the phenomenon itself comes into view" (van Manen, 2003, p. 122). Their differences create a strong web of experiences on which to base my integrated interpretation of their lived experience of high school.

Locating the intrepid voices of my participants required casting a wide net. The contacts I had acquired through my association with the GED Testing Service and at the GED Annual Administrators' Meeting appeared robust at first, but locating people who had graduated from college after passing the GED Tests instead of graduating from high school highlighted the gap in the data collection of GED programs and colleges. The GED programs do not follow their students after graduation, and colleges could not easily identify and retrieve a GED status for their students. My most productive avenue proved to be the GED Administrators for both Virginia and West Virginia. The administrators in both states issued an email call for volunteers and attached my contact letter (Appendix A). Six of the seven participants responded to this request by contacting me directly via

email or telephone. The last participant I found through Virginia's *GED Success Stories* that is published online. Many others offered their stories, but, for one reason or another, they were unable to participate. The biggest barrier turned out to be physical proximity since I could not conduct the conversations by telephone.

When my participants contacted me, I spoke with them at length, sharing my enthusiasm for the project. I related my personal experiences with the GED program and described the scope of their potential involvement (Appendix B), and answered their questions. The seven people who came forward were eager to tell their stories. One revealed that she had kept her GED diploma as a "dirty little secret" (personal communication, October, 2008), but she was pleased to know that someone wanted to know the story in an effort to help those who still struggle to find their place in high school.

I spoke with each of my co-researchers twice, meeting them at a place of their choosing, traveling to them in Virginia and West Virginia. I arranged to meet the West Virginia people on consecutive days, requiring an overnight hotel stay each trip. One Virginia co-researcher lives in the furthest reaches of Virginia, and meeting with her also necessitated an overnight stay. The remaining three Virginia people could be reached in day trips. Each conversation lasted approximately two hours and, with their permission, was audio taped with two digital recorders and one cassette recorder to forestall problems with equipment failure and missed words as the tape ran out and was flipped over. It was impossible to have any group conversations since my co-researchers live hours apart.

The excitement truly began when I scheduled the first meetings with my co-researchers. Just finding each other at our designated meeting place had the frisson of

blind date nerves, encountering the mostly unknown Other. Introductions, welcomes, thanks, and answers for all their questions about the study occupied us at first, followed by signing the consent form (Appendix C), and setting up the tape recorders.

To initiate the first conversation, I shared my own biography with them, emphasizing how I was called by the success stories of GED graduates. Telling my co-researchers the stories I have shared in Chapter One communicated my admiration and respect for the accomplishments of GED graduates. Next, I tried to share my excitement for the research project. I told the story of how hermeneutic phenomenology rescued my English teacher's heart from the positivistic research stance, and how I am yearning to incorporate the lived high school experience of GED college graduates into my understanding of high school. I offered my aspiration that together we might contribute a piece of the solution to the national dropout crisis. Often, as it turned out, they were just as interested in hearing about what I was doing, pursuing a doctorate *after* retirement, as they were in telling their own stories.

When I felt that I had established some rapport by sharing my own story, I asked to hear theirs. "Tell me your story," I urged them. "I want to hear what it was like for you in high school." Some seemed to burst, like an overfilled balloon, with wide-ranging anecdotes while others were more reflective, cautious, and terse. As our conversations proceeded, we laughed and cried over these sometimes hilarious and sometimes painful memories. Revisiting this time in their lives seemed cathartic and thought-provoking, as they often responded to my requests for elucidation of a particular point with comments such as, "I never thought about it this way," or "Now that I look back . . ." suggesting a

new-found perspective. I felt that we were truly engaging in a dialectic process, creating “a fusion of horizons” (Gadamer, 1960/2006, p. 370).

I found that my role as sympathetic listener was more than adequate to maintain the flow of conversation. Most of them expressed surprise and pleasure that anyone was interested in what high school had been like for them, and none of them resisted my encouragement to examine particular revelations more closely for the feelings behind the facts. As they would describe their high school experiences, it seemed natural, in my role as listener, to ask them for illuminating details about their physical, emotional, and even spiritual responses. Questions emerged such as, “Did that upset you? How did that make you feel? What were you thinking? Why do you think this particular event from high school stands out? What would you say to these people now?” Sometimes we exchanged stories about particular canonical experiences we had shared, and this, of course, continued to build a connection between us. Most often, though, I listened in awe as these successful adults shared the misery, fear, acceptance, rebelliousness, and final capitulation to dropping out that defined their high school experiences.

At the end of this first conversation, I asked my co-researchers to engage in further reflection on their lived high school experience by first, reviewing the transcription of our conversation that I would email to them, and second, writing a description of a seminal high school experience. I usually suggested that they could revisit a particularly provocative event they had excavated during our conversation, examining the experience more closely for the feelings buried within it. I assured them that I was not expecting any sort of organized, professional paper; I wanted something more like a personal journal or diary entry: a story told from their personal viewpoint,

focusing on thoughts, emotions and reactions rather than events. These two activities, reviewing the words of our first conversation and bringing fully to voice a seminal high school experience, served as grounding for our second, face-to-face meeting.

An unanticipated blessing emerged in the two- to five-hour car trips back and forth to my conversations. I discovered in this enforced quiet time, both before and after meeting with my participants, that I was able to focus my energy on preparing for and reflecting on the conversations. I believe that the stillness of riding in the car, surrounded often by scenes of natural beauty, opened my mind and heart to receive impressions and make connections that otherwise might have been jumbled in the world's cacophony. I found myself urged to contemplation by the power of the words just exchanged. As I began to understand the participants' experiences, the conversations began to coalesce into a composite portrait of these students I had never missed at graduation.

After the initial meetings, I transcribed the conversations, emailed them to my co-researchers, and continued the thematizing I had begun in the car trips. Transcribing the conversations quickly meant that I could deepen, adjust, and even re-formulate my initial thematizing as words, phrases, or whole stories leapt from the page to coalesce into fuller impressions. The same process occurred as the participants shared their writings. As I began highlighting "*statement(s) or phrase(s) [that] seem[ed] particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon* [italics in the original]" (van Manen, 2003, p. 93) and/or that elicited questions demanding further clarification, the conversations I had with the texts charted a course that became clearer with each additional encounter. For me, this is the excitement of hermeneutic phenomenology: the uncovering of a deep understanding

of the “fecundity of the individual case” (Gadamer, 1960/2006, p. 34) that clarifies a vision of the whole.

My second meetings with the participants were informed by the emailed exchanges we had shared, commenting to each other on the transcribed conversations and written stories. Each relationship developed differently. One woman and I seemed to embrace on a strong spiritual basis, another seemed to look on me as the counselor she had always wanted to find who would understand and appreciate her experience, and a third found an urgency in my work that continues to inspire me. One fellow commented that he did not realize he “talked so country,” and decided to take his experience with me as a spur to personal improvement. In each case, however, the frankness and generosity of these individuals to reveal personal information was a testimony to their desire to improve the lived high school experience of others.

The procedure after the second conversation was much the same as after the first: transcribe the conversation, email it to my co-researchers, and thematize the text. Again, I found that the reflection I began in the car was clarified and edited as the conversation was transcribed. The themes that emerged threaded their way through the tapestry I was weaving of the full high school scene, stitching together their stories into an understanding of their lived high school experience

Yet, I often found that it was in the quiet moments just before falling asleep, resting after exercise, reading or listening to poetry or fiction, or talking about my research with others that the clarifying insights would occur. Sometimes, I learned, the unfocused living with the texts was as productive as the active, intentional encounters. Just so, hermeneutic phenomenology tutors the faithful.

The space my participants and I created by coming together to talk about the GED college graduates' high school experience necessarily put us on opposite sides: they were trying to communicate something vital about themselves, and I was trying to understand. I "seek not to surpass but to understand the variety of experiences . . . [and] expect to find truth in them" (Gadamer, 1960/2006, p. 85). The interplay, as Gadamer describes it, between my being at once part of their world and separate from it, creates a tension or a between space. "*The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between*" [italics in original] (p. 295). I can only search for meaning from my own historically situated place, reaching out to my co-researchers through their stories to understand the lived high school experience of college graduates with a GED diploma and put it into words.

Language is not merely a tool of communication in which thoughts are put into words, nor is it merely a bearer of representational knowledge. Language is a way that humans live humanly in the world. . . . The challenge to evaluators of this [hermeneutic] persuasion is to disclose life as lived in and through language, thereby disclosing in some way what it means to be human. (Aoki, 1991/2005b, p. 181)

Visiting the spaces between the texts and continuing to build on my initial reflections following van Manen's guidelines, enabled a description that illuminates the phenomenon.

A phenomenological description is an example composed of examples. If the description is phenomenologically powerful, then it acquires a certain transparency, so to speak; it permits us to "see" the deeper significance, or meaning structures, of the lived experience it describes. (van Manen, 2003, p. 122)

What is the lived high school experience of GED college graduates? This is the description I sought to create; this is the transparent understanding I hope I achieved.

From the beginning of this journey, I understood that I would develop a single snapshot, a unique rendering, and a personal poem of perception of the lived high school

experience of college graduates with a GED diploma. Yet, I also believe that the best method for developing a vision of what high school can be for all students is to listen carefully to what people who were not successful there have to say about the experience.

Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
(Tennyson, 1842/1988, p. 597)

CHAPTER FOUR: DELVING INTO THE DISQUIET OF DISPLACEMENT

To descry the displacement of high school dropouts as definitive seems fatuous and simplistic at first: these students would not leave if they felt firmly implaced in an embrace of affirming acceptance. But delving more deeply into this phenomenon suggests that dropping out of high school expresses complex interpersonal interactions that disturb this facile understanding.

What should it mean when the overall national public high school graduation rate for the class of 2006 was 68.6 percent (NCHEMS, 2009)? If over 30 percent of high school students are dropping out of high school before graduation, this suggests a disquieting level of displacement that may be enframed by a myriad of non-school causes embedded in the inequalities of social class and poverty, such as reduced cognitive skills (Lee & Berkham, 2002), a mismatch between home and school culture (Lareau, 2003), hugely disproportional asthma rates (Sachdev, 2003), and a loss of faith in the efficacy of schooling in an economy that holds no promise of employment for minority students (Rothstein, 2004; Wilson, 1987). It is dangerous, perhaps, to set these injustices aside to examine the high school environment more closely since this may suggest the immutability of these forces. They must remain a dissonance in any discussion of high school dropouts. Acknowledging and allowing these concerns to background a deeper examination of the lived experience of high school dropouts does not ignore their power but perhaps allows their effects to be observed more clearly in the disengagement of dropouts.

Merleau-Ponty (1945/2004a) observes that "In the home into which a child is born, all objects change their significance; they begin to await some as yet indeterminate

treatment at his hands” (p. 206). Because “Place is what takes place between body and landscape” (Casey, 1993, p. 29), the arrival of a new person completely changes the nature of the place. Merleau-Ponty assumes an opening of the place to the new baby, but even if the place does not *welcome* the baby, the baby will still make her/his needs known, will affect the place with her/his being. The place becomes, to some degree, the place of the baby; the baby’s presence changes the nature of the place. The interaction between the place and the baby’s body affects both to create a degree of implacement for the child.

Implacement is an ongoing cultural process with an experimental edge. It acculturates whatever ingredients it borrows from the natural world, whether these ingredients are bodies or landscapes or ordinary ‘things.’
(Casey, 1993, p. 31)

Casey’s use of the word “experiment” suggests the immediate and tenuous nature of creating implacement. It is an interactive process. The degree to which the growing child will feel implaced in her/his home will be related to the degree to which the child’s embodied being affects the culture of the place. Will the place become a single-child-centered place, or will the place experience more interaction with a wider range of embodied beings? It is a constant experiment in living, this creation of place, that will implace the child. “A place, despite its frequently settled appearance, is an essay in experimental living within a changing culture” (Casey, 1993, p. 31).

How does the ongoing cultural process of school create implacement? School is not a home, which interacts intensely with a child. School is a particular place, a building, and “*A building condenses a culture in one place* [emphasis in the original]” (Casey, 1993, p. 32). Each school building will be different because each will embrace different bodies, landscapes, and things; therefore, each school culture will be unique.

That said, the cultures of the high schools experienced by the GED college graduates seem to be recognizable by some common cultural elements: a large place straining to acculturate a diverse student body into a limited number of predetermined molds. It is not in the nature of school to respond to or interact culturally with the students; it is in the culture of school to set limits on interaction. School does not conceive of itself as an experiment; school conceives of itself as the actor *on*, not *with*, the students.

This place of school, then, creates challenges to emplacement in the nature of its intense culture. In order to feel implaced, I must have the opening to interact with others, to affect the place with the presence of my being. “For what is paramount in a culturally specified place is the experience of *being* in that place and, more particularly, *becoming part of the place* [emphasis in the original]” (Casey, 1993, p. 33). The stories of the GED college graduates speak clearly about a loss or lack of this implacing interaction with place. They do not become part of the school place; they become displaced through difference, disregard, and disappointment.

Listening to the Disquiet of Displacement

In the following introductions, the constants within the stories’ wide diversity are the courage and faith the participants in this study demonstrate in their willingness to come forward with their stories of displacement and dropping out in the hope of improving the experience for today’s high school students. All proper names are pseudonyms, including people and places.

Catherine

Catherine tells a story of years of drug abuse; older, divorced parents who were present but not available; and a Boulder, Colorado school system that was ineffectual at

best. As a young teen, she became gripped by the existential questions that can haunt the sensitive and hyper-aware. She would worry that Earth was just a ball hanging in space, and yearn for reassurance from an uninterested mother that the planet would not just crash and burn. She read the dark plays of Pinter, Becket, and Sartre and felt that she and her similarly-minded friends were the only ones who “got it”: that humans are an unimportant speck in the universe. She spent untold hours volunteering in a local theater and watching these “dark” plays, not understanding how they relentlessly narrowed the world as she saw it.

Interestingly, she does not fault the school system for their failure to meet her needs; it is her parents she feels “disappointed [her] so deeply” (Catherine). Hospitalized twice, she finally eschewed the refuge offered by drugs, left home, and moved to California. There she had the influence of educated people to turn her toward a college degree, but her minimum-wage job in a grocery store probably propelled her into college faster than anything else.

I thought to myself. I looked at these women [working at the grocery store as clerks], and I said, “You know, if I don’t get an education, I’m going to be just like this when I’m forty years old . . . workin’ at Pick ’n Save [grocery store]. I didn’t want to do that. So, I figured out that you need an education to get money. And that was kind of my motivation. (Catherine)

Once in school she was a huge success. She was “turned on” in a way she had never been before.

I remember sitting in the library at the community college and looking at all the books, and thinking, “Wow, I have a lot of books to read.” It’s just like somebody just turned the light on. I was just . . . I couldn’t get enough. I was like a sponge. I was just . . . I just wanted to learn everything. (Catherine)

What meaning resides in the experience of a woman of such strength, intelligence, and analytic ability who had to drop out of high school to find her place?

Simon

Simon's voice, his manner, his speech all reflect an inner peacefulness that seems to come from understanding exactly what he knows to be important in his life. His story is set in Pennsylvania, but includes the mobility that marks many high school dropouts' stories.

Basically, the first school that I had gone to for the longest period of time was middle school. I was at the same middle school for three years. Up until working here, in Beaufort County, I hadn't been in one school system for longer than three years. Nor college, nor high school. I had gone to four different high schools and ended up dropping out after being retained after my tenth grade year. (Simon)

Simon's travels through high school consisted of a Catholic day school for freshman year, an international school in Paris for his first sophomore year, a repeat of sophomore year in a boarding school in Pennsylvania, and the start of an eleventh grade year in a private high school near his home. Simon refused to go back to the boarding school because of its illegal drug temptations, but he also knew he didn't belong in the private day school from the first day he started his eleventh grade. "It wasn't a place that I was going to stay" (Simon).

Simon was blessed with two guidance counselors who honored his feelings even though they could not accommodate his needs within their walls. They found him an internship with a local politician that eventually led to a full-time job with the state government. Again, Simon was blessed with a mentor, this time in his boss.

She said, "They can hire you, but in a year, I'm going to fire you. After that year, you're going to have your GED, and you're going to be enrolled in college."
I said, "OK." (Simon)

And he did. He took and passed the GED Tests, was accepted at Temple University, and away he went! Again, what does it mean that a perceptive, mature young person had no place in his high school?

Lee

This story is one of active displacement. During the 1960s, Lee was a fifteen-year-old freshman. She and many of her friends reacted to the end-of-the-world threats of the cold war and the loss of life in the hot Viet Nam war by marrying their sweethearts before they left for combat. After her husband was dispatched, Lee applied to return to high school for her sophomore year.

She had been a good student, active in many school-sponsored activities such as basketball, student government, and science club. She was shocked when they told her she could come back to school for classes, but she couldn't participate in any extra-curricular activities because she was married. "You were like you had the plague, I guess, in a way" (Lee).

Even this rejection was not enough to deter her, but the harassment by her English teacher was. "But the worst thing was actually a teacher that I had who was . . . For some reason, he made derogatory comments to me. Some of them were sexual in nature" (Lee). Lee complained to the administration, but the comments didn't stop.

Eventually, "It just all went together to make me not happy at all" (Lee), and she dropped out. Lee's story is one of active rejection based on overt discrimination, but it helps us to recognize and understand the similar yet far more subtle rejection of students such as Catherine and Simon. What meaning might reside in these displacements?

Reenie

Reenie and her younger sister were raised by a strong, protective mother who, despite her own lack, valued education and would sit at the kitchen table with the girls while they did their homework. “She couldn’t help us with it,” says Reenie, but her fierce determination that her children have a better life than hers instilled in the girls a belief that education is important.

Reenie spent her formative years shuttling back and forth between Puerto Rico and Newark, New Jersey. The difference between the two environments is an important part of her eventual need to escape from school.

The thing with Puerto Rico is that, you’re not just your mother’s daughter. You’re the neighborhood’s daughter. You always . . . you made sure that you were there [where you were supposed to be]. Because if you were out of line, by the time you go home, somebody had already told on you. (Reenie)

In Newark, this neighborhood feeling was completely absent.

The school I was in was in a side of Newark where it was low-income population. We had . . . It was a school that was located . . . that served a lot of different communities, so we had a big group of Hispanic, a big group of African American, a big group of American/Caucasian students. And we were all mixed in there, so we didn’t know who was what. Everybody had their own little things. . . . Once inside this old building it was chaos as usual. I remember my sophomore year at Braelock High School in Newark, New Jersey was a far cry from the school I graduated from in the ninth grade. . . . And it wasn’t this connection where you got the students involved. (Reenie)

Reenie completed ninth grade in the warmth of a Puerto Rican neighborhood, but the more urban, impersonal Newark system put her in ESL classes when she returned for her tenth grade.

Tenth grade was a period of adjustment. I had just come back from Puerto Rico. A period of adjustment in language. Although I spoke English, once you’re in the islands speaking Spanish all the time, it’s just like you’re coming back to a new life. Confused. So I was adjusting to that, so they had me in the ESL program. (Reenie)

Junior year she moved into “regular” education classes, but she says, “I don’t know how successful that was.”

Despite her strong family support, Reenie “fell in love” (Reenie), got pregnant, and married an older man in the navy. She thought this escape into “happily ever after” (Reenie) would give her the life for which she longed.

When I met Tom (her future husband), I was like, “Oh, this is my savior. I don’t need to come to school. I could just get married and live happily ever after.” Of course, that’s a misconception, but that was my mentality. And the kids, your friends, encourage you. “Oh, my god. He’s in the military. He’s writing to you. He’s doing this.” And you start feeling special. You’re getting this attention from an older guy because I was sixteen and Tom was twenty-one so, yeah, he was a little older. (Reenie)

When she was later “divorced with three [small] children” (Reenie), the harsh realities of supporting her family without a high school diploma exploded in a series of snapshots where she took the place of her mother, working two jobs just to make ends meet. It was her mother who supplied—as usual—the steady faith in the opportunities provided by an education: she would take care of the children if Reenie would go back to school. “You owe me this,” she said (Reenie). Reenie took and passed the GED Tests, graduated from college with a B.A. in education, and now holds a Master’s Degree in curriculum and instruction. All three of her children are college graduates as well. What meaning plays below the surface of this story of high school romance that is told a thousand times over every year? Can we come to understand the displacement behind these stories that leads to dropping out?

Chad

Today, Chad holds an MBA as well as a Bachelor’s Degree, and oversees the clinical engineering needs of four hospitals. He allows that he was too “hardheaded” to

listen to anyone who tried to tell him to stay in school. He was “just wanting to have a car and have some money in my pocket, that’s all. That’s all as far as I thought about” (Chad).

When Chad got out of high school, he “flipped hamburgers, . . . dug graves, . . . washed cars, . . . [and] built houses” (Chad). He got married at eighteen and he thinks, “Maybe my son awakened me. [Before that], nothing really mattered. I just wanted to have a good time. And then I had to flip that. And the friends I was running around with and everything, we just parted ways” (Chad). He badgered the employment office at the coalmines—where he knew the missing high school diploma would not affect his paycheck—until they took him on.

Chad’s awakening gained focus while he was working in the coalmines. He remembers:

When I was in the coalmines, I worked every job that you can do. I was studying to be an electrician, I tried every . . . I started to realize that learning was fun. Which I never experienced until that time. (Chad)

Despite Chad’s positive learning experience, the coalmines were not without their drawbacks. “I got hurt in the coalmines. I had a piece of rock fall on me twenty-foot long and twenty-foot wide, ten to eighteen inches thick. Squished me pretty good.”

After a long hospitalization, Chad decided to change his life.

I worked in the coalmines for seven years. . . . So, I’m about twenty-five; my son’s five years old. My wife is not working. I just decided to start all over. . . . I just walked in and took the [GED] Test[s] and started in on my next thing. . . . I went to community college. I went to the unemployment office and talked to them. I tried to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up. (Chad)

What can be learned from the lived high school experience of such a “hardheaded” kid who had to—literally—get hit over the head to go back to school for his high school,

Bachelor's, and MBA diplomas? What does it mean that students find their high school experience so displacing?

Sharon

Sharon barely survived her lived high school experience; yet, on paper, she was the model student. She had been in gifted and talented programs since second grade, had a stellar high school GPA, worked on the school newspaper, the yearbook, and studied photography. She did volunteer work with the homeless. Certainly she dressed in army boots, but her teachers indulged that idiosyncrasy because of her academic achievement. Her fellow students, however, were not so tolerant.

Since I was antisocial, and chubby, and too smart for my own good, and a bit of a smart ass, I never really sort of had the social development cues of dating or functioning in that fashion. I didn't care to. And when you don't care to, and you grow up in this place, people will develop the idea that either you're a freak or you're a lesbian. Neither of which is true, but . . . it's hurtful. (Sharon)

She found a small group of "degenerate rejects like me," and some of the time in the photography studio was used for doing drugs as a "way to fit in" (Sharon).

I could figure out absolutely that I had no hope of conforming. So I stopped trying. . . And instead learned how to hide. That made sense. Also, . . . there were some ways out. There were AP classes. . . And I had stuck myself in as many specialty programs, elevated programs, and AP programs as I possibly could. Because I wanted to finish. I wanted to have that [high school diploma]. Because you needed it. (Sharon)

But she still had to walk through the halls to get to those classes, and those public school places were not safe for her.

[I remember once] I was shoved up against a locker by a guy that I know. . . . He had me pushed up against the locker. And I can remember tears just streaming down my face, and it making me so furious. Cuz I hated that he could make me cry. Oh, I was furious! But that made me cry harder and that made me madder, and I didn't even know what to do with it. And he was just . . . physically holding me against that locker, and saying the most vile and repulsive and evil things to me. . . . [He wasn't sexually assaulting me], he was just hurting me.

And making me miserable. And holding my neck. And I was crying, and I couldn't get away because he was bigger. (Sharon)

Tragically, an English teacher opened her classroom door to investigate the noise and saw what was happening. "And she went, and she closed her door. So that the locker noise wouldn't bother . . . Cuz she's not going to get into that" (Sharon).

Six months before her graduation, with a perfect score on the ACT and a transcript and extracurricular activity list to die for, Sharon slashed her wrists in front of her mother. It was not a suicide "attempt," says Sharon. She was desperate enough to avoid going back to high school that she felt she would rather die.

But she didn't take me seriously! And I thought, "Fine. I'll kill myself. Because I'm not going back in there! Ever again. Never." And she didn't listen, so, yeah, I went for it. But I wasn't kidding. I wasn't playing. I wasn't like, "I'm going to write a suicide note and tell everyone how sad I am." No, I went into the kitchen, and I was like, "I know what I'm doing. Down, not across." And it resulted in a bloody wrestling match with the knife and the phone, and they came and got me in a little ambulance and took me to the hospital. (Sharon)

If she was serious about the suicide, why do it in front of her mother?

Cuz I didn't want to die! The rest of my life was not bad. School was horrible, but I liked my friends. They just couldn't help me. And I liked my neighbors, and my life, and volunteering to help homeless people. I had things I liked, but if I had to do that [go to high school]. . . I couldn't do it anymore. And I was not going back. . . . I just wanted to be safe. (Sharon)

Is it our focus on academic success that hides that "nearly Columbine-level" (Sharon) bullying and desperate fear and sadness from us? Did Sharon suffer because all we could see was her academic and extracurricular successes? What does her story of torment at school mean for us?

Joe

Joe says, "I'm twenty-nine now, and I got clean when I was twenty." He now provides job counseling to people who are trying to find their way back into the system,

just as he himself did several years ago, and he volunteers on several civic projects related to dropout prevention and youth development programs.

Joe's story starts with a school-tracking program that wrenched him away from his elementary school peers when he entered middle school.

I think I was a victim of some sort of school tracking or whatever, where they try to place people based on their test scores. I don't know what day or what [test] I screwed up on, because . . . I went to Bluefield State on a full scholarship; I graduated magna cum laude; I have a full scholarship to college; I have a 3.7 GPA at college while working full time. . . . If I was intelligent enough to do that, then I don't know what test I screwed up on. . . . I got stuck in this crack. And I really believe that. I wasn't the smartest kid in the class. . . . I was at the bottom end of this high side, I believe. And I was at the top end of the next group [down]. And when . . . the high group moved ahead, I stayed still, and I fell through this crack. The proverbial crack . . . And that's why I say I got screwed because all my friends that I had made from kindergarten up were gone. (Joe)

Elementary school had been "good, to say the least" (Joe), and memories of football, choir, and playing games with a big USA map to name the state capitals during rainy-day recess are still vibrant. The transition to high school stripped Joe of his peer group, and he found a group of "unhealthy" friends. This group met each morning on the gravel parking lot outside school and decided on the day's plan. More often than not, the agenda did not include school.

Yet, the whole time, Joe knew he was "doing wrong." He was "smart enough . . . that by doing the class work, [he] could make at least Bs and Cs" (Joe), but he dropped out in the spring of his tenth grade year. He came back the next fall to try again.

So, I convinced my mom to let me quit, and then the next year I went back to tenth grade. . . . In the fall. Went back. And the only reason that I can think of that I went back is that in my heart, I knew that I wanted to graduate high school. I had no other desire but to graduate high school. I wanted to. And I went back. (Joe)

Unfortunately, this resurgence of interest in school was short-lived. Quickly, Joe found the draw back to his “unhealthy” crowd too strong to resist, and, besides,

Not one person ever talked to me when I came back to school. I don’t even think I had to reenroll or anything. I think because I had been there. Maybe I was there the day we got schedules or whatever. Or maybe I just showed up, and they put me in a homeroom and gave me a schedule, and there I was. (Joe)

Back with his “unhealthy” friends, Joe continued to skip school and escalate his drug use. One teacher called his home. One. But the wild crowd, their call was siren. Eventually, his own commitment to a healthy lifestyle, the GED Tests, and a dedicated group of teachers brought him back into education’s fold. What can we understand about the experience of such competing factors in the lives of high school students?

Each of these successful adults left high school before graduation, temporarily derailing their futures. What were these young people experiencing? What is it about these experiences that made them flee? What can we come to understand about their experiences that will help us uncover the undercurrents of displacement that now elude our understanding?

Understanding the Intensity of Displacement

I was just reading some of Wayne's responses to the book project and thinking there should more thoughtful people like him in the world. Perhaps sometimes thoughtful people have the most difficult time making sense out of our [school] system. (T. Wion, personal communication, December, 2008)

This teacher’s comments startle and disarm me. One would think—or hope—that a thoughtful person, someone *full of* thought, reflection, and sensitivity, would flourish in our school systems. What are these GED college graduates feeling that drives them inexorably out of high school where, by every measure *we* use, they should be experiencing success, acceptance, and implacment?

Lingis (2007) describes the restless, displacing feeling that people experience when their sense of self is thwarted.

The word we have put on ourselves [he uses the word “dancer” as his example], is fixed in our sensibility, our nervous circuitry, our circadian rhythms, and our momentum and its tempo. It vanishes from the conscious mind, which can fill itself with new words and scenarios. I no longer have to recall, in the midst of morning concerns that require my attention, that word “dancer” uttered in myself. I instinctively head for the dance studio and feel restless and tied down if I am prevented from going. (p. 38)

This instinctive restlessness to move toward my unique engagement with Being, my place in the world, is heard in the stories of the GED college graduates. As Catherine says, “You act as if it’s a choice; it’s not.”

Feeling the Disquiet of Displacement

Can we re-read the stories of the GED college graduates as stories of the disquiet of displacement rather than stories of their high school failure? Did they not so much drop out as they fled, following their instincts to escape something damaging to their being and potentially to find the place where they might belong? Perhaps they resisted society’s efforts to subordinate them to its will. Perhaps they did not leave us behind as much as they ran toward something they believed would fulfill their word of honor, “the word we put on ourselves” (Lingis, 2007, p. 40) that delivers us into the hands of Being to create the person we feel we are meant to be. Consider the following poem.

The Palomino Stallion

Though the barn is so warm
that the oats in his manger,
the straw in his bed
seem to give off smoke—

though the wind is so cold,
the snow in the pasture
so deep he'd fall down

and freeze in an hour—

the eleven-month-old
palomino stallion
has gone almost crazy
fighting and pleading
to be let out.
(Nowlan, 1996/2009, p. 1)

The passion of the young horse “fighting and pleading to be let out” strikes me as an apt parallel to the GED college graduates who also respond to a basic instinct to escape bondage, to find their place, to make their own way in the world. The poet deliberately withholds the age of the stallion, placing before us, instead, the contrasting images of his “warm” barn with “oats in his manger,” and an outside where “the wind is so cold, / the snow in the pasture / so deep he’d fall down / and freeze in an hour.” The carefully constructed inside, which shelters, protects, and provides for the comfort of the animal, is contrasted with the potential dangers of the outside. When we get to the age of the stallion at the end of the poem, we immediately understand the literal intent: he’s too young to know any better, too young to appreciate all that has been done for him. He must be protected from his immaturity.

That’s the quick read of the poem. Reflection, however, suggests another interpretation. Perhaps the animal “has gone almost crazy / fighting and pleading to be let out” because he is young enough to retain some of his natural spirit. He is not completely tame, dependent on his human master for a place to be. Perhaps he knows better than his owner how to contend with the snow and cold, and he is drawn by the wildness in his blood and bone and sinew to be free to implace himself in *his* world. His natural state is to be free, to be affirmed in his Being, his word of honor. Where he touches Being, he knows how to take to the high, windswept plains, huddle within the

warmth of the herd facing into the wind, and protect himself, his fellows, and the survival of his species. How handicapped has he already become in captivity? Would he be able to cope with his natural environment, or would he indeed “freeze in an hour”? Is the warm barn, “the oats in his manger, / the straw in his bed” simply a prison designed to tame him into a servant for man’s society?

Is it part of the domestication of the young stallion to instill in him the belief that this enforced, albeit comfortable, discipline is the only way to survive? Is domestication simply the destruction of the animal’s instinctive faith in his own abilities and an acquired dependence on his master? Is this also the role of the school “master”? “Maxine Greene (1978) speaks of the malefic generosity of education: the ‘killing’ that is done ‘for the child’s own good’” (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2008, p. 83). Are students who escape from high school running away to preserve their chance to let “Being arrive as a presence” (Heidegger, 1957/2002, p. 31)? The fact that the poet is also a high school dropout who became a successful writer, journalist, and poet cannot be lost on us.

The notion of what it is to be free is interesting. The Old English *freo* means “free, exempt from, not in bondage,” but also “noble and joyful.”

The primary sense seems to have been “beloved, friend, to love;” which in some languages (notably Germanic and Celtic) developed also a sense of “free,” perhaps from the terms “beloved” or “friend” being applied to the free members of one’s clan (as opposed to slaves, compared to the Latin *liberi*, meaning both “free” and “children”).

This entry continues with several references to other languages where a cognate of “free” means such things as “love,” “affection,” and “wife.” To be free, then, entails some sense of love. Parents and societies proffer freedom to those who are loved. Yet, there is an undeniable indifference in freedom. Our society is founded on the belief in individual

freedom, but some of the results of this tenet have been children and elderly without health care and the “savage inequalities” (Kozol, 1991) of the public school system. So, while the stallion’s struggles to be free can be seen as a noble cause, the picture must be balanced with the recognition of the indifference of nature that may kill all the wild horses in this snowstorm and the benevolent guardianship of the owner who will protect this young horse.

Are our children, our *liberi*, free to pursue their own implacement in their world, or does school attempt to squeeze each one of them into a limited number of pre-determined molds that, in our beneficence and desire to protect them, we have designed to allow them to fit into our society with ease and grace? Do we, thereby, squeeze them out if their instincts tell them they are not implaced?

Molding Dropouts

One of the conventions of Shakespearean drama is the return of a royal personage in the final scene to restore order. In *Measure for Measure*, the final scene brings the duke back from exile and portrays two virtuous women pleading with him for the lives of fault-filled brother and husband. The ill-used wife pleads with the duke to spare her husband Angelo’s life, pointing out that, “They say best men are molded out of faults, / And, for the most, become much more the better / For being a little bad” (V, i, line 440). In this case the molding that will occur is by the hands of the law: her husband will be allowed to live as long as he loves and is faithful to his wife.

It is clear to the audience, from the earlier events in the play, that if the misbehaving husband refuses to be “molded” by the law, he will be put to death. Order must be maintained at the price of molding the “little bad” in wayward “men” to achieve

their “best.” Setting aside the vast implications of gender present in this scene, as well as accepting that the “little bad” is more character flaw than felonious conduct, consider the molding that is enforced to make the “best” people. The fictional conflict is resolved with the restoration of order when “men” recognize and obey the law of the land. Does today’s school function the same way? Does school intend to mold students into predetermined, prescribed shapes in order to preserve society’s order?

And how are we to interpret the phrase “molded out of faults”? A reflective playgoer may question whether good people can be created when faults are disciplined and subverted into submission to the law. This suggests a necessary purification of and intolerance for difference: a denial rather than an integration of one’s being and an acquiescence to a pre-determined mold or a shaping that does not recognize individual differences. Is this how school looks at students who are different, “ask odd questions, interfere in dreams, / leave home” (Reid, 1988, p. 598), resist the conventional norms, and refuse to be “schooled”? When we discuss the molding schooling suggests, must we consider the sort of caring that “will not easily be distracted from the dynamic and complex events of concrete life by promises of abstract simplicity and permanence” (Noddings, 2003, p. 56), i.e., by law?

One must question what sort of marriage the pleading wife will experience after her husband is restored to her by lawful action. The feeling of peace and joy that accompanies the unraveling of Shakespeare’s clever plot knots and the marriage of the virtuous characters sweep the audience into a joyous conclusion that permits them to gloss over the realities of what may happen to this match made by law. But reflection

troubles this surface peace by asking how fully will a man enter into a marriage if he is forced to deny part of himself?

This molding by law, it seems, must be tempered by care. The violence of forcing Angelo to love his wife seems ill-advised as love cannot be legislated. Likewise, it seems that forcing students into the molds recognized as “good” by school and society may do a similar violence to students who cannot see the benefit to submission. One GED college graduate’s perception is that “School is supposed to burn away everything that’s you” (Sharon). Are we inadvertently molding some students into dropouts through intolerance of their differences?

This is the delicate balance of our schools and our society: how do we give young people the freedom to grow and to learn from their mistakes while, at the same time, protect them from the dangers we know can harm them, sometimes irrevocably? And, conversely, how do we successfully mold young people so they will not harm society and even contribute to the common weal? When the young stallion and some of our students strain against their displacement, how do we understand them?

How far can we take this notion of freedom into the interpretation of the GED college graduates’ flight from the confines of high school? Certainly they express the stallion’s sense of being trapped and “fighting and pleading to be let out.”

I really don’t feel like I had a choice. I think . . . that’s really what it comes down to. I felt trapped. And I needed to do something. Fight or flight. I just had to leave. (Simon)

Certainly school does not intend to harm students; the clear intention is to prepare them for the world. But it is a world identified by the adults whose intention it is to replicate the world in which *they* exist. “So often in schools, the troublesome child is understood

only pathologically. They are rarely taken to be a commentary on *us* and what our curriculum guides and our institutions have presumed” (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2008, p. 38).

Perhaps the success of the GED college graduates defines the desperate desire of the young stallion to follow his *own* survival instincts rather than those of a society whose practical beneficence is looking for tamed citizens, not wild individuals. Perhaps the success of the GED college graduates attests to the possibility that the stallion might *not* “fall down / and freeze in an hour” but find its way to an equine version of a successful teacher, principal, librarian, or hospital administrator as these GED college graduates did.

What is it like to feel this deep sense of displacement? What drives some of our capable students to reject the shelter of the warm barn and ample food to brave the cold world on their own? Understanding the disquiet of their displacement may uncover a deeper appreciation of their compulsion to drop out.

Several of the GED college graduates used the metaphor “square peg in a round hole” to describe their sense of displacement in school. They were different, and they and school knew they were different. Efforts to shape these students into an acceptable mold only highlighted the difference and intensified the displacement.

Experiencing the Displacement of Difference

The GED college graduates with whom I spoke often found that they did not fit the mold, that they were different. They also found that high school was intolerant of this difference.

We believe as a society, that we have made significant progress in learning how to avoid discrimination based on gender or race and ethnicity. The election of our first African American President attests to a certain recognition of the talents and abilities of a person beyond his historically discriminated race. “Everywhere around us we are experiencing a new tone of hope and renewal” (F. Hultgren, personal communication, January 22, 2009), but educators must not subscribe to a “mythical hope, . . . a profoundly ahistorical and depoliticized denial of suffering that is rooted in celebrating individual exceptions” (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 184). The GED college graduates testify to the mendaciousness of the mythical hope for equal opportunity through education and hard work when one is different. Their stories demand that we recognize how being different can become an insurmountable obstacle to enduring high school, much less discovering hope for the future there.

What makes difference so disquieting and ultimately displacing, especially in high school? High school is always already a search for an implacing self-identity. It is the nature of adolescence, as explored in such seminal, canonical *bildungsroman* novels as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *A Separate Peace*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Yellow Raft on Blue Water*, or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The *bildungsroman* is “a novel of formation” (Lynch, 2009, p. 1), chronicling the struggles of a person from childhood to young adulthood to structure an identity. In each case, the protagonist matures by experiencing the vicissitudes of life, some as a result of her/his thrown situation in the world, but others engendered by her/his own choices as an embodied, contextualized being. The adolescent often suffers intensely as she/he learns that “self-realization, self-fulfillment, a personally meaningful life, these cannot be accomplished

or obtained merely by surrounding oneself with artifacts which can be taken as signs of authentic selfhood” (Anton, 2001, p. 151). The plots entangle the adolescent in a struggle to understand how, in Derrida’s terms, the opposites of friend and enemy, adults and youths, rules and freedom contaminate each other (Moran, 2003). In “real” life, the protagonist learns, embodied existence necessitates an in-between space where *la différance* can be tolerated, even embraced, and maturity is a process constantly deferred until the next experience. The enduring importance of these novels emphasizes how difficult, isolating, and displacing this process of growing up can be. High schools gather all these desperate seekers into one place, and the fundamental search for self can become the main plot against the less vital background of academic pursuits. Then high school identifies a limited number of molds for success, and encourages (demands?) those who are different to conform or be marginalized.

Each of the GED college graduates found her/himself in some way marginalized. Usually they do not feel this is the fault of the school. Instead, they see themselves simply as different. Some of them could sustain an instinctual sense of their own worth, but they also recognized that school was not the place where their worth would be valued.

A Certain Swirl

The classroom was dark, all the desks were empty, and the sentence on the board was frightened to find itself alone. The sentence wanted someone to read it, the sentence thought it was a fine sentence, a noble thorough sentence, perhaps a sentence of some importance, made of chalk dust, yes, but a sentence that contained within itself a certain swirl not unlike the nebulous heart of the unknown universe but if no one read it, how could it be sure? Perhaps it was a dull sentence and that was why everyone had left the room and turned out the lights. Night came,

and the moon with it. The sentence sat on the board
and shone. It was beautiful to look at, but no one
read it. (Ruefle, 2007, p. 1)

The isolation wrapped around a tiny flame of indomitable self-confidence that reverberates in this poem speaks poignantly of the basic conflict felt by a student who bears the burden of being different. The student, the “sentence on the board,” is “frightened to / find itself alone.” The description that “The classroom was dark, all the desks were empty” creates an image of the isolation school can create for some individuals. Like the GED college graduates, the sentence “wanted someone to / read it” to confirm its belief that “it was a fine sentence, a / noble thorough sentence, perhaps a sentence of / some importance.” This belief is not completely secure, however, because the sentence falters, coming apart briefly after realizing it is merely “made of chalk dust,” its parts separated by line’s end and held together by the tiniest hyphen. The sentence clings to the belief that it contains “a certain swirl” of unique creation, but is assailed by self-doubt. “Perhaps it is a dull sentence” or a dull, unattractive, un-cool, different student, and “That was why everyone had / left the room and turned out the lights.” Students who are left alone, isolated, and sometimes rejected outright, can find themselves in the darkness of the withdrawal of approbation so crucial to any human spirit, especially that of an adolescent, damply emerging from its chrysalis. The excitement for us as educators is that the GED college graduates “sat on the board / And shone” in the moonlight. If they couldn’t have the sun, they would find their own way to shine. Examining and interpreting their experience may increase our understanding and tactful response.

Being an Outcast

Many of the GED college graduates in this study speak of feeling like a misfit, a reject, or an outcast. In Lee's story of leaving high school twice, it is easy to see society's prejudices against married women coming into social contact with the unmarried maidens, regardless of how untrue this virginal status may be. The school rule prohibited pregnant girls from attending school, but Lee was not pregnant when she came back to finish high school after her husband left for his tour of duty in Viet Nam. The school had to allow her to re-enroll, but they found another way to exclude her: she would not be permitted to participate in any extra-curricular activities.

And then, when I came back and went to high school again, so I actually quit school twice, I went to high school, and being married and in school is not . . . I doubt it's any different but they wouldn't let you do anything, nothing extra. You were like you had the plague, I guess, in a way. . . . They said you weren't allowed. You couldn't get involved in extra things, like the science club, or anything like that. They wouldn't let you because you were married. And so, you could come to school. They let me come to school, but that was pretty much the limit. (Lee)

The school made it obvious to Lee that she was not welcome. This did not completely deter her, though she had been and continued to be, when she got to college, a joiner of clubs and a person who "had a lot of ideas that [she] wanted out there" (Lee).

This exclusion of Lee from the social life of school because of her married state was reinforced by the teacher who made sexual comments to her in class. Why did he feel he had the freedom to treat her this way? Was the school's rejection of her enough to give him implicative institutional approval for his behavior? The school's action made Lee "feel like an outcast. And I guess that set the stage for him being like he was, the English teacher" (Lee). Lee's outcast state can be held at arm's length because we know

that such official school policies could not withstand current political and social scrutiny. But is this completely true?

Reenie's unique, bi-lingual, bi-cultural experience offers a window into the world of English as a Second Language (ESL) high school students, and the atmosphere in that world is similarly insalubrious.

It's pretty much like now. It's sad to say, but the mentality is not . . . it's not as . . . They always looked at the ESL students like outcasts, or they were the troublemakers. They don't understand them. We have them all confined in one classroom. So, unfortunately, that type of mentality is still prevalent. (Reenie)

Like Lee's "official" rejection, Reenie and her fellow ESL students are "cast out" of the school's mainstream academic and social world, ostensibly to address their difference, but effectively isolating them because of this difference. They must be purged of their difference before they can participate in the community as equals. Perhaps the school's administrators and teachers would honestly deny any official intent on their part to "cast out" these students from the general population, but the perceptions of the students themselves cannot be denied. We know that a larger percentage of ESL students drop out of high school than the majority population (Swanson, 2004), and this feeling of being an outcast probably contributes to this result.

If official schooldom conducts this sort of insidious measuring and categorizing of students by how well they fit the mold of the ideal, if it refuses to "meet them as our kin and not just as our object" (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2003, p. 147), then how surprised should we be that the students themselves imitate this measuring, categorizing, and rejecting by creating cliques of "cool" that reject the others who, in turn and perhaps in response, form their own "un-cool" groups?

Finding Yourself Outside the “In-Crowd”

Joe and Chad both tell a story of being cast out of their elementary school group of friends in the movement to larger, comprehensive junior high schools and high schools. The carefree, happy-go-lucky childhood experience of elementary school was displaced by the stricter social cues for placement in junior high and high school. The displacement they felt because they were separated from their friends was a significant contributor to their eventual dropping out of high school.

New experiences, however unforeseeable and baffling, and the impassioned states they arouse, will be shaped by the story that had preceded them. And they may induce us to realign the plot, introduce new characters, or even abandon our word of honor. . . . We incorporate into the story we tell ourselves our story as we hear others tell it. (Lingis, 2007, p. 54)

As the two then-boys incorporated their new experiences with the altered social order of junior high and high school into their life’s story, it changed them decisively. “Every life is a story. . . . Our life becomes a story that we are always in the process of discovering and also fashioning” (Metzger, 1992, p. 49). Their life’s story became a narrative of difference. They wrote into their stories the belief that they were different, failures at school, not part of the successfully schooled students.

Incorporating the story of difference, of not being part of the “in-crowd,” can be a life-changing experience. It is truly an “in-corporation,” a taking into one’s body the belief in the story that being different is tantamount to being bad. These boys learn that since they cannot fit into one of the successful student molds, they must write a story of difference. “Many of the alienated or marginalized are made to feel distrustful of their own voices, their own ways of making sense, yet they are not provided alternatives that allow them to tell their stories” (Greene, 1995, p. 110). Ultimately their story of

difference is a successful one; but here, in the mass of students who are compared, graded, and slotted into different quality bins like so many apples in the annual harvest, they recognize that they are headed for the juicer, not polished for sale to pink-cheeked children.

Chad admits that he was “hardheaded” and that “no one could tell [him] anything,” but reflection has led him to believe that the estrangement he felt from his elementary schoolmates may have had more to do with his feelings of displacement in high school than he realized at the time.

Let me tell you something that’s kind of interesting. I went through high school, and I went to a small elementary school. And I had the same people pretty much in the classes with me as we went through. And we went to high school, and maybe that was some of it. I never thought about it this way. And then everybody started taking different classes, and you weren’t with the same group anymore. You’re just kind of out there on your own. (Chad)

Chad’s laconic description of this experience is the extreme opposite of Joe’s bitter exclamations of being severed from his “healthy” friends and joining a group of kids who were skipping school and using drugs.

All my friends that I had made from kindergarten up were gone. . . . I didn’t make the grades to play football. Had I been with those guys who were my friends all the way through elementary school that I played football with . . . and played soccer with . . . But that’s when I began . . . to drift away from those healthy friends that I had in elementary school and started drifting toward the unhealthy kids in junior high. (Joe)

The importance of these social groups is clear. Younger adolescents are more deeply influenced by their peers (Sumter, Bokhorst, Steinberg, & Westenberg, 2009); “At-risk students [have] more dropout friends, more working friends, [and] fewer school friends” (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997, p. 355); and the perceived behavior and sanctions of friends are strong predictors of an adolescent’s misconduct (Greenberger et al., 2000).

Chad and Joe both appreciate the influence the less-academically-motivated friends had on their eventual choice to drop out of high school.

Joe describes this tension and frustration of being institutionally thrust out of one social group and floundering to find his place as getting “stuck in this crack” (Joe). This sense of “stuckness,” existing in an in-between social-group space, is part of all the GED college graduates’ stories. Living in this “Zone of Between,” as Aoki (1986/2005a) names it, means experiencing “the challenges and difficulties that living within [it] entail” (p. 163). Perhaps one of the vital differences between these GED success stories and the vast number of students who keep telling themselves a story of failure is how they live in this stuckness.

Heidegger (1969) observes in *Identity and Difference* that “Only when we turn thoughtfully toward what has already been thought, will we be turned to use for what must still be thought” (p. 41). In other words, if we continue to move *forward from* what has been thought, then we will never look *back on* what has been thought to re-think these underlying beliefs, which might enable us to move in original directions. To our Western minds, trained in the scientific method, the only way out of stuckness is to move forward. Heidegger is suggesting that the way out of stuckness is to move backwards; otherwise, we will consider only the “Two roads [that] diverge[d] in a yellow wood” (Frost, 1988c, p. 584) rather than rethinking the road itself.

Stuckness can engender a beginner’s mind. “Beginner’s mind is Zen practice in action. It is the mind that is innocent of preconceptions and expectations, judgments and prejudices” (Hartman, 2001, p.1). Stuckness offers the stillness to encounter Being.

Stuckness shouldn’t be avoided. It’s the psychic predecessor of all real understanding. An egoless acceptance of stuckness is a key to an understanding

of Quality, in mechanical work as in other endeavors. It's this understanding of Quality as revealed by stuckness, which so often makes self-taught mechanics so superior to institute-trained men [*sic*] who have learned how to handle everything except a new situation. (Pirsig, 1974, p. 279)

Can I read “Being” for “Quality” in Pirsig’s words? The Eastern-style practice of an “egoless acceptance of stuckness” engenders a state of surrender where ideas flow more freely. Writer’s block comes to mind. My students and I sometimes talk about how we devise strategies of relaxation and acceptance for opening that connection between mind and page through which the words seem to flow from an unknown fountainhead. The stuckness of writer’s block cannot be actively fought; it must be allowed its own lifetime, its own being. The connection to Being can be re-established, not by fighting through it, but by living through it. To relax and accept the temporary withdrawal of the muse, to consider what life has to teach you at the moment, Pirsig calls a “key to understanding Quality.” If we are reading “Being” for “Quality,” then our ability to relax into stuckness may measure our quality of life.

Pirsig’s application of living through this stuckness is the superior *understanding* of self-taught mechanics as opposed to those who have acquired *knowledge* in an “institute” of learning. Do the GED college graduates succeed where other dropouts fail because they are able to re-think their situation? Does the stuckness, which clearly makes Joe uncomfortable, ultimately allow him a freedom that school, with its pre-determined molds, never permits? Are the dropouts who never are able to re-write their life’s stories actually the ones who have been so well schooled in Western tradition that once they see themselves as characters in a tale of failure, they can only move forward in that narrative? Do they become stuck by their outcast status and the privileges they perceive accrue to those who are not different?

Experiencing the Displacing Dispiritedness of Inequitable Treatment

The significance of these two stories of displacement from one social group to another also underscores the experience of unfair privilege that dispirits high school students when they always already feel displaced by difference.

It seems like there's certain kids in a school that always get more attention than other students. Your athletes, your people that have political power. They tend to get more opportunities to prove themselves, more opportunities sometimes to get the recognition without proving themselves. (Lee)

The sense of being displaced by difference can be intensified by this realization that school unequally rewards those students who are *not* different, who have the academic skills, the family support and socioeconomic advantage, or the willingness to adapt their being into proscribed molds. “The kid that makes straight As, and his parents are the big boosters of the team, and this and that, they’re going to get an easier ride than some of the other kids” (Joe). What happens to students’ spirits when they begin to perceive this unequal treatment as inevitable?

Carlsson-Paige (2001) describes how reward systems in elementary schools, “along with similarly divisive systems such as grading and ability groups, . . . undermine children’s sense of safety and ability to form caring relationships with one another” (p. 33) which leads to the adaptive behaviors school calls disruptive. By the time these students are in high school, they are “challenging us, saying with [their] actions, ‘Come on, prove me a failure again’” (Roerden, 2001, p. 55).

What has been displaced by this unequal treatment? What is lost when students perceive, perhaps only bodily and never consciously, that they are being treated as “less than”? What happens to students’ spirits when they begin to perceive that the labels they wear in high school, those in the necks of their clothes as well as those heard in the

susurrations of the subtext of teachers and students' attitudes, are an indication of their individual worth? What is lost when they finally *believe* that the inequitable treatment they receive in school is due to an inescapable part of their being?

In *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, the protagonist, Edna Pontelier wrestles with her husband, her friends, and her society to preserve a hope for a place for her *self*. In this inversion of the *bildungsroman*, Edna is unable to mature, to come into herself, because all the beings around her—even those who purport to love her—force her to believe that she is worthy only in the role of the proscribed and limited life of a wealthy matron in nineteenth century society. She becomes unable to believe in, even to formulate, her “word of honor” (Lingis, 2007, p. 40). Completely dispirited, she walks into the sea to drown herself. In contrast, Janie Mae Crawford, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, is able to nurture her word of honor, moving through three significant relationships to emerge as a contented old woman who has experienced love and life in full measure. Each novel measures a life by two extremes of hopefulness for the future.

Is there an in-between space between Edna's self-destructive despair and Janie's full contentment? Do “Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them” (Thoreau, 1910, p. 8)? Holden Caulfield thinks so. Unfortunately, his polemic on the “phoniness” he ascribes to the adult world also describes his own character: he cannot find the strength to be true to himself, and he never finds fulfillment or happiness. To use Thoreau's metaphor, he never finds the strength to sing his song. Holden works so well as an image of the dispirited teenager because he cannot conform,

he cannot accept the mold that school and adulthood offer to him. He is dropping out: dropping out of high school and life.

What extinguishes the spirit of the students who are treated differently? Lee describes it as the harm that is done through the inequitable treatment.

And I don't know if some of the ones who seem singled out to receive the recognition awards ever had any of those things [rejections] that stick with them forever. But I don't see them disliking school as much as some of the people who didn't finish school. (Lee)

Chad illustrates his dispiritedness in high school by contrasting it with the excitement he experienced working in the coalmines.

I was with a crew in the coalmine, we wanted to set records how much coal was being produced. We challenged each other on a daily basis. It wasn't OK to be so so. If you didn't do your part, then everybody else couldn't do theirs. You'd become part of a team. Whereas in high school, you didn't feel that way. You were one of many. It wasn't a team. You might've felt that way if you was in the clique that made the better grades, the stuck-up people we would call 'em. They kinda fit the mold of what they wanted. Maybe they felt that way. I never felt that way when I was in school. (Chad)

It seems that the dispiritedness Chad experienced in high school speaks directly to our lack of “awareness of the fact that every gesture we make takes place with a clearing of this field” (Levin, 1985/2003, p. 139) of Being. “Gesturing in the forgetfulness of our ontical everydayness” (p. 138), we respond within our limited notion of success and failure, doling out approbation and disapproval. The “ontologically deepened gesturing, which is mindful of the tangible givenness of Being” (p. 138), seems beyond our capabilities in the frenetic pursuit of Annual Yearly Progress reports.

Chad had to leave high school to find a place where he fit in, where he could nourish a hope for something better for himself. Whether the “stuck-up people” actually felt part of the team is irrelevant. What is important is that Chad perceived that those

students were implaced by the preferential treatment they received by virtue of their good grades, their ability to perform and conform.

High school teachers want to believe that all students can be successful, but they sometimes accept and reinforce the labels already worn by dispirited teenagers they encounter.

I was in a high school, I won't mention which one, and I was talking to a Guidance Counselor. This kid walks in, and he's obviously wanting to go to college. Handsome guy, well-dressed, normal high school kid. He would probably be in the B group in the pecking order, just by mere observation. He walked out of that Guidance Counselor's office, [and] another Guidance Counselor walks in and says, "Don't waste your time. He's not college material." (Joe)

Joe reacts with anger to this experience because he recognizes the similar extinguishing of this student's hopes for his future that Joe experienced before he dropped out.

What is college material? The GED college graduates were all categorized as "not college material" for different reasons. Is this another mold that schooldom has narrowly defined to limit the scope of their work? Is it a category that will neatly define those labeled as failures in the liberal arts "system of education [that] may have been useful during the industrial age, but will not be adequate to prepare our children for living together in the new millennium" (Lantieri, 2001, p. 11)? Here is Derrida's troubling of difference again. The categories must contaminate each other: one cannot exist without the other. By identifying one group as college material and the other as not, a privileging of one over the other occurs. To be "not college material" is to be less than.

What sort of material do colleges want? Etymology does not seem to help us much here since "material" comes from a Latin cognate *materialis* meaning related to matter, but do students who are designated as college material matter more? Since

schools reserve their highest honors for those who succeed with academic matter, does that communicate to those with other intelligences, such as those Gardner (1999) describes, that they do not matter? And if colleges work with only one kind of “material,” what does that imply about what matters to them or the strength of divergent thinkers they can produce? If high schools define “college material” as those who succeed in high school academics, and we understand how academic achievement is affected by socioeconomic and cultural accidents of birth, then it seems that “college material” means those students who have unearned advantages from birth. Is it still true that the landowner’s children are the only ones who matter? In the April 12, 2009 education issue of the *Washington Post Magazine*, the debate about the use of SAT/ACT scores for college admission is set within the biographies of two students: one rich, one poor. The student from the rich family “has had several thousand dollars’ worth of individual test prep tutoring” (Spivak, 2009, p. 11) while the poor student has had none. Because of such tutoring, “‘SAT scores rise by about 30 to 50 points for every \$20,000 in family income,’ says the nonprofit National Center for Fair and Open Testing,” and “Such small increases can make a big difference, especially at the top colleges” (p. 15). If high school believes that you do not matter because you are not college material, what effect will this have on your sense of implacement? If you feel you do not matter, how can you persevere? How dispiriting and displacing to absorb the feeling that ultimately you do not matter to this academic community.

The ultimate outcome, of course, must be deferred until the mortarboards are tossed into the air, and think what surprises await those attentive enough to see that some headgear comes flying off the craniums of those once categorized as “not college

material”! The hopelessness, though, is in the number who accept the label and so limit their engagement with Being. Their dispirited displacement will become in-corporated.

Experiencing the Bodily Dys-appearance of Difference

What happens to an adolescent’s body when she/he feels displaced in school? “Every thought known to us occurs to a flesh” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2004b, p. 261), and corporeal manifestations of displacement are not unusual. Parents often deal with the mysterious upset stomachs and headaches that plague students who are experiencing some sort of displacement at school.

Leder (1990), developing Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of the primacy of the body in perception, identifies this mode of perception as “dys-appearance.”

In dys-appearance the body folds back upon itself. Yet this mode of self-presence constitutes a *secondary absence* [emphasis in the original]; the body is away from the ordinary or desired state, from itself, and perhaps from the experienced “I.” (p. 90)

This awareness of the body is a “secondary absence” because it is “born from the reversal, from the *absence of an absence* [emphasis in the original]” (p. 91). The body normally functions as an absence through both focal disappearance, as the way the eyes can see but we are unaware of their functioning, and depth disappearance, which names the unobserved operations of heart, muscle and bone to maintain the sensory organs. Thus, a body works ecstatically, reaching out into the world through its senses but unaware of the other bodily functions that necessarily ground the perceptual abilities. Leder describes how physical pain can create a secondary absence when the body, which normally functions in the background, suddenly becomes the focus of attention and perception. In states of physical pain, strong emotion, or, and this is where his discussion intersects with the GED candidates, difficult experiences with the Other, the body’s

normal functioning can be disrupted. “My awareness of my body is a profoundly social thing, arising out of the experiences of the corporeality of other people and of their gaze directed back upon me” (p. 92).

Leder (1990) describes how, when two people communicate with each other “in mutual incorporation, each person’s capacities and interpretations find extension through the lived body of the Other” (p. 94). For example, when I listened to a book on tape with my husband, as we took our long road trips to speak with the GED college graduates, we deepened the enjoyment, understanding, and applications of the story because we were able to discuss it with each other.

Leder (1990) points out, however, that a *social* dys-appearance takes place when “The Other is interested in scrutinizing my intentions from the outside, not taking them within” (p. 95), or, as Leder quotes Merleau-Ponty (1945/2006), when “Each of us feels his actions to be not taken up and understood, but observed as if they were an insect’s” (p. 420). Leder goes on to identify specifically an aspect of social dys-appearance “initiated by a discrepancy in power” (p. 98).

When confronting another who has potential power over one’s life and projects—the patient with the doctor, student with professor, prisoner with jailer—there is a tendency on the part of the powerless to a heightened self-awareness. The difference in power often precludes the assumption of cosubjectivity. (Leder, 1990, p. 98)

I am struck by Leder’s conjoining of the experience of the doctor, the professor and the jailer. On one hand, the doctor and the jailer both have power over one’s body, but one should perceive their intentions as vastly different. Interestingly, the effect on the body, he suggests, is the same: a dys-appearance, the absence of the normal absence of my body. I become aware of my body as I normally do not when it is under the care of a

doctor or the coercion of a jailor. Inserting the professor, the teacher, in-between these seemingly disparate social forces emphasizes the dual role of the teacher. Teachers are in positions of care but also coercion. Teachers intend “to let learn” (Heidegger, 1954/1993e, p. 380), but they also function as society’s coercive instrument, forcing children into acceptable molds. “Their bodies have been taken away from them through the alienating projects of the Other” (Leder, 1990, p. 98), and “Social dys-appearance may lead to biological dysfunction” (p. 99).

I also note that Leder (1990) points out that “The difference in power often precludes the assumption of cosubjectivity” (p. 98). Cosubjectivity is vital for the type of implacement that supports learning. When “I become aware of myself as assumed into the Other’s project, not as cosubjectivity,” there is a “rupture in mutuality” (p. 97). The basis for a caring relationship that supports implacement has vanished. Teachers and students are not “placed freely in the clearing of Being” (Heidegger, 1947/1993c, p. 230). The following descriptions of the bodily displacements of Simon and Catherine dramatically demonstrate the bodily displacement of difference.

Simon clearly parallels the “eleven-month-old stallion” in his desperate desire to get out. “The beginning of my junior year for the second time, and I started having panic attacks. Where is this going? What am I doing?” (Simon). And later,

I started having panic attacks, I guess. I’d sat in class a couple of times, I’d look around, and people’s faces would change. I mean their . . . It was just total disorientation. I had no idea where I was in broad daylight. That freaked me out. (Simon)

Simon is not mentally unstable; he has a bodily manifestation of the alienation of his being. “Social dys-appearance may lead to biological dysfunction” (Leder, 1990, p. 99). He does not feel that he belongs; he does not feel implaced. Although he is trying to

conform to the desires of his parents, the dictates of society, and even his own intellectualized conception of the path his life *should* take, his embodied being has reached a breaking point: a point where normal perception is breaking down.

Perception, for embodied beings such as ourselves, is a co-existence. “We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2004b, p. 255). To understand the interrelatedness and reversibility of our own visibility and vision and the vision and visibility of the rest of the world, is to approach Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the flesh of the world. The flesh of the world is the Being of which the world and we are made.

The body unites us directly with the things through its own ontogenesis, by welding to one another the two outlines of which it is made, its two laps: the sensible mass it is and the mass of the sensible wherein it is born by segregation and upon which, as seer, it remains open. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2004b, p. 253)

This “intertwining” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/2004b, p. 247) of world and body honors the truth we know through our bodies. “What we take to be true in a situation depends on our embodied understanding of the situation” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 102). The truth of Simon’s situation was that he did not belong there. The dramatic visual distortions, which, in turn, caused such disorientation, reveal the truth known to his body. This was Simon’s fourth try at high school. “I should have been finished; I was ready to be finished. I saw no need in school at the time” (Simon). But he tried to ignore his truth, to force himself to comply with the wishes of his parents and the rules of society. His body, connected to the world in its flesh, made the truth of Simon’s displacement undeniable.

Catherine seems to incorporate both the displacement of being separated from her peer group as well as feeling alienated from the school place.

I smoked cigarettes, and at some point I started smoking marijuana which made me feel even more separated from the “straight” kids I had gone to [elementary] school with. . . . I think we were aware that we were “misfits,” so we grouped together and gave each other as much support as we could. This feeling of marginalization continued and grew with time. (Catherine)

Catherine sees her alienation, her outcast status, not as a function of her dropping out, but a separation, a rejection, an absence that occurred *prior* to her dropping out.

The absence Catherine seems to feel is the presence of something that should be absent. Because one’s implacement in society can be ignored when it is functioning properly, a quality identified as *Zuhandenseit* by Heidegger (1927/1996), its absence creates a presence: something is wrong.

When something at hand is missing whose everyday presence was so much a matter of course that we never even paid attention to it, this constitutes a *breach* [emphasis in the original] in the context of references discovered in our circumspection. (Heidegger 1927/1996, p. 70)

School should be a place where she and her friends are welcomed, where their projects become the concern of their teachers. The presence, which “awakens your life in order to free the wild possibilities within you” (O’Donohue, 1997, p. 19), is absent from her life. The presence of this absence creates a painful longing to be taken up into the being of school. She longs for this connection, and the “smoking marijuana” and escalating drug use is an attempt to ease this painful loss. “Pain exerts a *telic demand* [emphasis in the original] upon us. While calling us to the now, its distasteful quality also establishes a future goal: to be free of pain” (Leder, 1990, p. 77). Just as Simon’s body manifested his sense of displacement through the visual distortions, so Catherine’s body pushes her further into drug use to assuage the pain of the absence caused by the indifferent adults in her life. The sense of rejection becomes part of her story.

Once we have affirmed [our word of honor], we have something to tell, which is not just the anonymous and haphazard course of events beginning with the dumb fact of our conception and birth. We see and tell, first to ourselves, where we came from, how we came to be here, and how we came to be. . . . It is a story, not simply our life plan, that we tell ourselves. . . . (Lingis, 2007, p. 53)

These GED college graduates tell their stories in an effort to help us understand their dislocation, their lack of placement, and how that absence makes them feel. “Going to school was a job that I was required to do” (Reenie).

Experiencing the Bodily Displacement of Physical Abuse

Sharon’s story of displacement brings us full circle from Lee and Reenie’s “official” displacement, through the cliques of high school adolescents—socially constructed and sometimes school sanctioned—to the physical and mental manifestations of Simon and Catherine, and finally to the actual physical attacks suffered by Sharon. These physical attacks seem to be the inevitable outcome of school’s tolerance of displacement by difference.

It was terrorizing. Consistently. From the beginning. . . . they must have had such horrible problems themselves to have to be able to take all of that out on someone else. It doesn’t help at the time, when you are afraid to go to class. When you are afraid to go to school. When you are throwing up rather than think about leaving the house. I mean, it was so bad that after I quit, I stayed home on the couch for nearly two years. (Sharon)

Watching Sharon’s lips tremble from her effort to control her tears as she tells a fifteen-year-old story that has lost none of its power to infuriate and hurt her was a powerful experience. What is it like to go to school every day fearing a physical attack? Can we imagine what it is like to be fearful only because you are different? Perhaps the students’ physical attacks on Sharon because of her physical, social, and intellectual differences signal an ontological human dis-comfort with difference that has been smoldering beneath this whole discussion of difference.

Difference can make people uncomfortable. Greene (1995), citing Arendt, calls these “dark times . . . where everything there is ‘exists in an opaque, meaningless, thereness’” (p. 44). When the mass of information available to us becomes overwhelming, maintaining a critical orientation becomes a challenge. People can become weary of the effort to discern the truth on which to base an ethical stance, and they may seek refuge in simplistic guidelines that seem to offer direction without effort: fundamentalist attitudes and scapegoating that minimize complexity and offer a clarity so lacking in post-modern life. “Coercion today [is] a constriction of consciousness, a deformation of thinking and feeling, a distancing, and a privatism not often directly experienced as coercive” (p. 64). Difference becomes equated with danger, and protection is sought in offensive action.

On September 1, 1939, Hitler announced that the Polish armies had attacked Germany, and Germany was responding. It seems George W. Bush fabricated an equally phantasmagoric reality to stir Americans to support a war in Iraq. Is it easy for selfish leaders to exploit their people because of an inherent fear of difference? Did Sharon’s classmates find her repulsive or challenging? Were they afraid of her difference somehow threatening *their* place? Are the students and teachers who looked the other way complicit in Sharon’s physical attacks from the same fear? Are we, the school community, just as responsible for an atmosphere that allows the intolerance of difference to flourish?

W. H. Auden’s poem “September 1, 1939,” explores, in part, this human fear of difference. It is a long poem (Appendix D) through which the poet assails Hitler’s thinly disguised attack but actually uses the then-current event to explore intolerance. Using the

“Waves of anger and fear” that “Circulate over the bright / And darkened lands of the earth” this night, Auden begins his reflection on fear and difference by suggesting that the “psychopathic god” humans have imagined has “driven a culture mad.”

I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.
(Auden, 1939/2009, p. 1)

Explaining the “thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, i) as the work of an avenging god, humans have created themselves as victims “To whom evil is done.” Auden sees the result of this clearly: “Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return.”

Significantly, Auden gathers into his witness box, “schoolchildren.” “What all schoolchildren learn” is this result of the explanation of evil. Auden suggests, in the deft way he uses the schoolchildren to support his assertion about the public knowledge of the result of evil, that schoolchildren learn this fact of human existence early, inevitably, and well. Here is the sticking place for educators. What Auden selects as the most obvious support for a discussion of humankind’s deeply rooted understanding of “the error bred in the bone / Of each woman and each man” is the experience of school. It is in school that children learn that each of us “Craves what it cannot have, / Not universal love / But to be loved alone.”

This yearning for love, to be loved “alone,” is a basic human need. Auden suggests that schoolchildren learn early that they “cannot have” this fulfillment, and also learn to appease themselves with “blind skyscrapers [that] use / Their full height to proclaim / The strength of Collective Man.” This “Collective Man” creates a

“competitive excuse” for the intolerance of difference. If we are in competition to be “loved alone,” then we must *win*. Winners inevitably create the duality of losers; and we know, in the tradition of Derrida, how the losers will constantly play against the winners to keep them ever off balance and insecure. If you understand the world as a competition for scarce resources, then the breath of the hungry hoards will constantly blow on your neck from behind.

Heidegger puts this metaphysical dilemma into play in *Identity and Difference* (1957/2002) when he describes the “event of appropriation” which “is that realm, vibrating within itself, through which man and Being reach each other in their nature, achieve their active nature by losing those qualities with which metaphysics has endowed them” (p. 37). Although we are dealing with the translator’s word choice, the etymology of the word “appropriation” still offers a helpful insight into understanding this “happening” or “occurrence” (p. 36). The word emerges “from Late Latin *appropriatus*, pp. of *appropriare* ‘to make one’s own.’” The harmonic vibration of being and Being in Heidegger’s “event of appropriation” adumbrates a fusing of human being and Being to fashion an event of unique individuality, of fashioning a being that is “one’s own.” Interestingly, however, in Derrida’s tradition of playfulness, “appropriation” as an adjective also has come to have a “sense of ‘specially suitable, proper’”; and “*Appropriation*, ‘the making of a thing private property;’ in the “sense of ‘setting aside for some purpose’ (esp. of money, etc.)” takes us in a different direction of competitive selfishness. Perhaps it suggests the interwoven nature of *la différance*? Within this one word, appropriation, we can see both the opportunity to embrace Being in a unique expression of personal fulfillment that is open to all humans, as well as the

possessiveness, the fear of scarcity, the metaphysical duality that insists that we exist in a good/bad universe that requires competitive success to claim scarce resources of love. The “event of appropriation” is open to all; appropriation of resources, however, creates a competition insisting on winners and losers.

If humans can shed the fear-based understanding of themselves and Being that sets them opposite one another as Auden describes, then we might approach that “event of appropriation” where “man and Being are delivered over to each other” (Heidegger, 1957/2002, p. 36). Instead of thinking of ourselves in opposition to Being, as in the metaphysical good/bad, win/lose paradigm, we can construct our lives around the understanding “that Being belongs with thinking to an identity whose active essence stems from that letting belong together which we call the appropriation” (p. 39). Who we are, our identity, is vibrating with Being, not in opposition to it. We are embodied beings who can meet Being in a mutual pulse. It is not a paradigm of scarcity, but one of abundance. We need not fear difference because each of us can be “loved alone” for our uniqueness in the total embrace of Being that is our identity, that is the event of appropriation.

Auden asks to be the “voice / To undo the folded lie, / The romantic lie in the brain / Of the sensual man-in-the-street / And the lie of Authority.” And the message he believes that can “unfold” this lie is this:

There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.
(Auden, 1939/2009, p. 3)

The “State,” the structures created by humans to form society, can create a “shopping mall” existence, and a similar education system, “where everyone comes together only to mind their [*sic*] own business” (Jardine, 2008, p. 119). Auden suggests this humanly-fabricated focus on minding our own business leads to forgetting that “no one exists alone.” “Hunger,” whether physical, intellectual, or spiritual, “allows no choice / To the citizen or the police.” What are we to make of hunger here? It can mean the physical need, but can it also indicate the human thirst for knowledge and understanding? In the face of human hunger must “citizen” and “police” both respond generously? Or can it suggest a need for the safety to belong to a society that enables this fulfillment? “The hunger to belong is at the very heart of our nature” (O’Donohue, 1999, p. *xxii*). With this meaning in hand for hunger, then how can we understand the fecund paring of “citizen or police” who have “no choice”? The literal meaning for the poem may be the duplicitous role that citizen and police play in a foreign war. They each take orders from the State to accept and enforce the war respectively. Can it also suggest the isolation the “State” has created so war *can* be found acceptable? When threatened with hunger, do “citizens and police” feel they have “no choice” but to withhold resources, to ignore the claim by those who are different and in need because they threaten our existence? Does the creation of a “State” provide the illusion of safety from within which “citizen” and “police” can ignore “hunger”?

The physical abuse Sharon suffered is the worst outcome of this sort of unchallenged thinking about human existence. War must be waged against those who threaten our safety and opportunity for fulfillment by their difference. Sharon was physically attacked because she was different.

I didn't mean to be difficult. I never got in trouble for malicious intent. I just didn't like other people. I'm not a people person, and I was born that way. I'm not interested in a bunch of other people. Other people would say, "Why don't you go and do . . ." And I'm like, "I don't want to. Other people are annoying and make a mess of my plans. And I have a really nice life of the mind. If you were in here with me where I am, you'd be happy, too." So, I was never really social like that. And it was always disastrous to try it. (Sharon)

Sharon's lack of social skills "contributed to [her] vulnerability and, in some cases, defenselessness" (Hanson & Toso, 2007, p. 37). In elementary school, a boy pushed her down, stamped on her hand, broke two fingers, and was allowed to apologize behind the excuse of "an accident." Sharon fought back with an accident and apology of her own many months later when she pushed him down the stairs, illustrating Auden's warning about the results of doing evil to children. Her aggressive response, however, did not dissuade her fearful classmates. In middle school she was pushed to the ground, struck repeatedly, and chased home by a boy who called her a "dyke." The tearful Sharon begged her grandfather to come to save her before she killed her classmate, and to explain the epithet. By high school, she understood her differences, but the sheer physical disparity between herself and her attackers meant she had to hide rather than fight back.

It's like being the chicken with the funny feathers. They will peck you until you die. There's no hope. It was horrible. I . . . I . . . It's bad enough to be bored. But to spend every moment that you're bored terrified? Doesn't help. It just . . . Eventually it can get so bad and people can get so volatile, because it's not even that it's about you anymore. You're just a thing they can do. You can't make yourself any smaller; you can't minimize yourself any more. Because what they're reacting to isn't you. (Sharon)

Sharon's difference, her genius academic ability, was a blessing and a curse. Her academic achievement was exceptional, but her social skills were abysmal. She was different, and school does not tolerate difference well.

Sharon's displacement was so severe that it led her to choose suicide—even though she enjoyed her life outside of school—rather than go back into the school building one more time. Her terror was masked from schooldom by her excellent GPA, her perfect score on the ACT, and her participation in school activities. It was disregarded by teachers and students alike who witnessed it but felt too frightened or too powerless to help her. How can our students embrace Being in a place where they constantly look over their shoulders for the next attack? Bearing witness to Sharon's severe emotional trauma in the retelling of this experience more than fifteen years later, urges me to attempt to underscore the virulence of these attacks. I do not lightly make the comparison between her and the children of Afghanistan and Iraq who would understand this terror.

Students who feel the displacement of difference, as these GED college graduates did, suffer an undermining sense of physical and spiritual loss. They drop out because they cannot stay any longer and face the flaying of their beings as the society of school insinuates an insidious rejection in each interaction. How many of our nation's dropouts feel this displacement because they are different in some way that marks them for displacement? How many of them leave, as these people did, because they feel as if they do not belong in school?

The hunger to belong is at the very heart of our nature. Cut off from others, we atrophy and turn in on ourselves. The sense of belonging is the natural balance of our lives. Mostly, we do not need to make an issue of belonging. When we belong, we take it for granted. There is some innocent child-like side to the human heart that is always deeply hurt when we are excluded. Belonging suggests warmth, understanding, and embrace. No one was created for isolation. When we become isolated, we are prone to being damaged; our minds lose their flexibility and natural kindness; we become vulnerable to fear and negativity. (O'Donohue, 1999, p. xxii)

The embracing of difference must be more than a verbal commitment; it must change the atmosphere of the school to reach into the hearts of all students. As Reenie points out, “Being in school was an outlet for many students. For me it was a place where I went to get an education with very little success. . . . Although Braelock High School welcomed all types of students, it clearly felt the opposite” (Reenie).

O’Donohue says, “When we domesticate our minds and hearts, we reduce our lives. We disinherit ourselves as children of the universe” (O’Donohue, 1999, p. 100). Echoes of the palomino stallion, “fighting and pleading to be let out” (Nowlan, 1996/2009, p. 1), begin to bounce around in my head at these words. Perhaps we should coin a word to parallel “domesticate” to identify what school—with every good intention for the comfortable implacement of children within our society—wants to do to high school students. I shudder to think the word might be “educate.”

GED college graduates drop out of high school because of their feelings of displacement due to their difference. As they leave, this displacement is exacerbated by schooldom’s disregard for their departure.

Experiencing the Displacement of Disregard

GED college graduates did not, could not fit the mold. They could not bear the pruning of their being that would be required to fit into school. They couldn’t become “school children.”

We know that when curriculum includes only the plans teachers make to deliver instruction, the child who emerges is usually what we might call a “school child,” one who is either compliant with or defiant of the exercise of institutional power. (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2008, p. 17)

They were neither compliant nor defiant; they simply left. When asked exactly when they dropped out, they often cannot tell you precisely. It was not usually a defiant

gesture emblazoned on a calendar date as Sharon's thwarted suicide was; it was more often an act of civil disobedience, a passive/aggressive act of self-preservation, a slow fading away. They say things like, "I stopped going to school every day about seventh grade" (Catherine), yet she was still trying four years later before she finally stopped going completely. Simon says:

[I] started off eleventh grade, I should have been a senior. I should have been finished; I was ready to be finished. I saw no need in school at the time. I knew it was important, but I didn't make any . . . All I saw was . . . Where is this going? What am I doing? And I started looking for other options. (Simon)

In a study referenced earlier (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989), the authors assert, "Dropouts could be differentiated with 66% accuracy in the third grade" (p. 309). In a study of gifted students who dropped out of high school (Hansen & Toso, 2007), the *process* of dropping out is described with the same sort of early beginnings.

Most dropouts reported difficulties as early as elementary school. . . . They could pinpoint when underachievement, poor performance, and disruptive behavior began. Most noted that the patterns continued through middle school and into high school. (pp. 36-37)

Likewise, Christle, Jolivet, and Nelson (2007) conclude from earlier research on at-risk students that "Dropping out of high school culminates a long-term process of disengagement from school" (p. 326).

From the poem "Richard Cory" by Edwin Arlington Robinson, which chronicles the suicide of a rich man that astonishes his poorer townsfolk, to the shocking suicide of David Kellerman, acting CFO of the beleaguered Freddie Mac, we see the Procrustean nature of lives stretched to the breaking point. Perhaps it is an overly dramatic connection to draw between dropping out and suicide, but they have the same sense of

being stretched to the breaking point to conform and/or achieve. When people feel this disregard, do they drop out of their lives?

Dropouts sense that school has little regard for them. The presence of the school, “The atmosphere of spirit that is behind all [aspects] and comes through them” (O’Donohue, 1999, p. 53) displaces them, and communicates a subtle undermining of their being. As part of the *process* of dropping out, schooldom’s disregard has been a Iago whispering in their ear, reinforcing their feelings of displacement.

What is it like to feel so disregarded? How does Being tremble and fail to persist when it is so undermined? The word “undermine” itself suggests how the process works. It has grown from the root word “mine.” This noun form of the word, a hole dug into the ground to retrieve minerals, dates from 1303, coming from a Celtic source since “Italy and Greece were relatively poor in minerals, thus they did not contribute a word for this to English, but there was extensive mining from an early date in Celtic lands.” But the verb form of the word has a more sinister meaning: “‘lay explosives,’ 1630, in reference to [an] old tactic of tunneling under enemy fortifications to blow them up; from *mine* (n.). The sense of ‘to dig under foundations to undermine them’ is from c.1380.” So to undermine people or things is to work *secretly* for their destruction by destroying their support. And one would only “undermine” one’s enemies. It would be pernicious to suggest that schooldom *intends* this secret undermining of students’ beings, but it may be helpful to consider that the intentional molding, intolerance of difference, and ultimate disregard for them as beings may be accomplishing this malicious undermining. Perhaps the dropout never feels the shifting of the earth beneath her/his feet until it is too late; until there is no salvation for one’s being but to leave.

In *Paint Your Wagon*, some savvy prospectors realize that the local saloon is sloppily dropping gold dust on the loose floorboards as they weigh out the miners' payments. The prospectors tunnel under the barkeeper's position and happily collect the excess gold. They realize that this is happening all over town, so they create a network of tunnels to retrieve the wasted wealth. In a hilarious climax, the tunnels collapse and destroy the town's buildings just as an itinerant preacher prophesizes doom for the town's unrepentant sinners. Because it is a comedy, the people escape with their lives, and their lawless way of life is destroyed and reformed by a law-abiding citizenry.

The dropouts escape with their lives, but the way of life that is traditional school has been so undermined for them that they cannot stay. It is not a comedy. Their being feels the tunnels that have been dug under their feet collapsing all around them, and they become unable to persist. Sometimes they are able to find their footing for a moment or two when this teacher or that peer supports them, but by the time they are in high school, the undermining is so extensive that the whole edifice of traditional schooling collapses. They feel Being tilting away from them, bringing down questions of self-worth, survival, and even existence.

Dislocation

It happens in an instant.
My grandma used to say
someone is walking on your grave.

It's that moment when your life
is suddenly strange to you
as someone else's coat

you have slipped on at a party
by accident, and it is far
too big or too tight for you.

Your life feels awkward, ill
fitting. You remember why you
came into this kitchen, but you

feel you don't belong here.
It scares you in a remote
numb way. You fear that you—

whatever *you* means, this mind,
this entity stuck into a name
like mercury dropped into water—

have lost the ability to enter your
self, a key that no longer works.
Perhaps you will be locked

out here forever peering in
at your body, if that self is really
what you are. If you *are* at all.
(Piercy, 2006, p. 1)

Piercy cracks open her own poem with her last line: an apparent afterthought that is anything but, tacked on to the end, without a space or line of its own, a shocking *Vorhandenheit* (Moran, 2003, p. 233) experience. Suddenly, the musings about “whatever *you* means” and “if that self is really / what you are” fall into a void: “If you *are* at all.”

The meditation the poem presents is about “normal” feelings of displacement. It describes those odd moments of uneasiness when “your life feels awkward, ill / fitting.” This uneasiness can be pacified by those homey aphorisms, such as the one her grandmother used to soothe the speaker's moments of disquiet, telling the child that “*Someone is walking on your grave.*” But the poem only *starts* there; the ontological wind blows through the speaker's mind, eventually questioning her being. What if we do not exist at all? What if these momentary rifts in the *Zuhandenseit* (Moran, 2003, p. 233) of everyday life, are more than the rift: what if they are the very fabric? What happens to

being when it questions its very existence? Is this the ultimate displacement? This complete effacement of being leaves the reader teetering on the brink of nonexistence. Is this how the GED college graduates feel when they finally flee the place that holds them in such low regard?

Piercy describes the experience most of us have had of walking into a room and feeling suddenly lost as we cannot remember the purpose that brought us to this place, but she connects it to a deeper feeling of displacement. The metaphor of the coat that “is far / too big or too tight for you” captures the ill-fitting mold that high school students find pressed on them as the ideal. To “fit in,” you must “fit into” the role of ideal student: smart, athletic, active in extracurricular activities, and confident.

I didn't know what I wanted to do, what I wanted to be. I knew I wanted a car. Just so I could go out and run around. I wanted to fit in. The people I was running around with weren't the right people. . . . This is not where I want to be. This is not what I want. (Chad)

But Piercy forces us to reflect even further by setting this experience of the ill-fitting coat at a party. A party is for those who want to share in the conviviality of the group. If you don't fit in, perhaps if you are *leaving early* because you have sensed that you don't belong and that's why there are so many coats from which to choose, you lay yourself open to recognize that not only do you now feel cut off from the “in” crowd at the party in a temporary loss of “the ability to enter your / self, a key that no longer works,” you may also be facing the reality of a more severe disregard. Note how your / self is already coming apart, separated from one line to the next. “Perhaps you will be locked / out here forever, peering in / at your body.” And if school, this place where you *must* go almost every day, continues to make you feel displaced because you are different, you fear this situation might be permanent and you might question not only “if that self / is really what

you are,” but “If you *are* at all.” You may begin to feel the intensity of schooldom’s disregard for your being. As schooldom withdraws its support, you may experience the intolerable absence of regard.

Experiencing the Absence

When a student is absent, her or his absence is noted in attendance records and computers. With a stroke, we note and discard the absence. The body is absent, and we move ahead with our day. We call home to confirm the legality of the absence. We extract a written note to put in the files to be certain we are not held legally responsible for any activities in which the student may engage when she/he is supposed to be in our care. We count the absences; we report them; we make them part of the permanent record. Should we also reflect on them? We have recognized earlier that “showing high absence rates” is part of a “process of disengagement from school” (Allensworth, 2004, p.160) that leads to dropping out, so it would seem prudent to look more closely at this phenomenon. What does the absence of the body suggest about the school experience for some students? How should their absence trouble our understanding of school? Can their bodily absence be interpreted as a different way to understand the unmet needs of students?

The word “absence” comes from the Latin word “*absentem*” meaning “‘be away,’ from *ab-* ‘away’ + *esse* ‘to be.’” O’Donohue (1999) describes it as “to be elsewhere. Whatever or whoever is absent has departed from somewhere they belong” (p. 223). The absence suggests that being is displaced from somewhere it should belong. Something or someone that belongs somewhere is absent. Absence is linked inextricably to presence and both to being. Is there a regard for some students that is missing from

their academic lives? Does this present absence hand them a coat of disregard and lead them to the door to drop out?

The present absence. Casey (1993) explores the earliest creation myths and observes “that body and place belong together from the very beginning. Their fate is linked—not only at the start but at subsequent stages as well” (p. 45). In Western thought, however, “The virtual disappearance of this body [the one from which we understand our position in space] in favor of the rigid material body goes hand in hand with an abating of interest in place as distinct from space” (p. 45). Our blindness to the significance of the student’s absent body from a place we think of only as space is based in our cultural orientation to place, space, and body. “Only if explicit attention is given to the lived body in relation to its whereabouts does the importance of place in distinction to space become fully evident” (p. 46).

Students do not just come to school, they come to a specific school, a specific place and “My body continually *takes me into place* [emphasis in the original]” (Casey, 1993, p. 48). What is the student’s bodily experience of this place called school?

The body is an “it,” and it is in space or takes up space. In contrast, when we use the terms “man” and “world,” we do not merely think of man as an object in the world, occupying a small part of its space, but also of man as inhabiting the world, commanding and creating it. In fact, the single term “world” contains and conjoins man and his environment, for its etymological root “*wer*” means man. (Tuan, 2008, pp. 34-35)

What is the world of school? Is it the things or the experience? “We can *describe* [emphasis in the original] the ‘outward’ appearance of these beings [such as the things which make up the school world] and *tell of* the events occurring with them. But . . . the description gets stuck in beings. It is ontic” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 59). It is the *relation* of these beings with the being of individual students that constitutes the

being-in-the world experience, the experience that understands “itself as bound up in its ‘destiny’ with the being of those beings which it encounters within its own world” (p. 52). This world of school that disregards the implacement of some students can create a present absence for them. The relationship, the fitting-in, the flowering of being in place is missing, and the students feel its absence. The absence of this relationship is present and very real to them. “I can just remember walking in the halls and feeling completely different. Everybody thought I was weird. I thought they were weird. A few kids were kind of marginal, like me” (Catherine).

This small group of kids was marginalized from a place that should have been open to a relationship with them. “The human being, by his mere presence, imposes a schema on space” (Tuan, 2008, p. 36), but when students are marginalized, their effect on space is insignificant. “Place is security” (p. 3), and “compared to space, place is a calm center of established values” (p. 54). This calm center that would foster implacement, is absent, a present absence that the students sense in their marginalization from the larger school population, activities, and place. They feel as if they are “not connected to anything” (Simon) or “disconnected” (Joe). The students feel the displacing presence of this absence in their lives.

As discussed earlier, Leder (1990) speaks convincingly of the presence of an absence. Our bodies normally function as an absence: “As long as perception presents no problem my body disappears” (p. 85). When the body experiences pain, the body suddenly is a presence, and “such disruption . . . inaugurates a telic demand for repair” (p. 86). In much the same way, when students go to school, their bodies should be able to function as an absence, without pain, employing their various perceptual abilities to

engage in school activities. When students are displaced, they experience the presence of an absence: the pain of a disregard that should not be present. “Circumspection comes up with emptiness and now sees for the first time what the missing thing was” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 70). These students think they see most other students functioning unaware of this painful present absence because they seem to fit the school mold so comfortably.

I imagined that everyone was Polly Weddington, a girl I had gone to school with since the first grade. She played the piano. She was an only child; her parents doted over her, and she did well in school. The teachers loved her. I imagined everyone else had a Polly Weddington life, and I did not. (Catherine)

Catherine’s visceral understanding of the presence of an absence in her life compared to Polly Weddington’s life is painful to hear. But Catherine was able to fill the absence with other kids with the same problems. “When I hung out with kids who had no fathers at home, they weren’t going to bring up the fact that I had no father. When I hung out with kids who had no mother taking care of them at home, they didn’t give me a hard time about my mother’s absence” (Catherine). What happens when students cannot make any connection to others that will shatter the absence of the presence of connection? Would loneliness describe their experience of this present absence?

Moustakas (1989) suggests, “In loneliness, every experience is alive and vivid and full of meaning” (p. 54). Simon certainly illustrates the vivid effect of this present absence of connection and meaning.

Not feeling connected to anything. Everything looked familiar. It was a classroom and everything. It should have looked familiar, but it didn’t. It just felt . . . I guess I felt more mature than a lot of the eleventh graders at the time, and I guess I probably was. I didn’t feel like I had any connection with them. I didn’t want that. It wasn’t a place that I was going to stay. (Simon)

Could Simon have been lonely? Is he feeling the presence of the absence of connection, friends, and implacement? Moustakas (1989) also points out that “Loneliness is a creative experience when it emerges naturally from the individual self” (p. 43). Is this how Simon and perhaps the others are able to reject the present absence of school’s regard for them, leave the traditional programs, earn their high school diplomas through the GED Tests, and persevere through college? As noted earlier, “Pain exerts a *telic demand* [emphasis in the original] upon us. While calling us to the now, its distasteful quality also establishes a futural goal: to be free of pain” (p. 77). Is this why they leave this place called school? Is the presence of such disregard for them as beings the only absence they experience?

The absent presence. The GED college graduates speak of the ways school disregarded their experience with a dismissal of their being that was always already undermining their attempts to “be” in school.

There is an artistic principle known as an absent presence. Easy enough to understand intuitively, this is the theory that all works of art make implicit reference to. The absent presence is the idea that hides just beyond the margins of the canvas, of the tale, or of the symphony. The absent presence is invisible, but it is nonetheless the very thing which organizes a chaos of words and images into something meaningful—into a story or a painting. For example, we might say that the absent presence of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* is the American slave trade, or that the absent presence of the TV series *Star Trek* is the Cold War. We might even say that the absent presence of the crashing and searing rendition of the “Star Spangled Banner” that Jimi Hendrix played at Woodstock, was napalm. (Vinton, 2009, p. 1)

Vinton speaks of the positive effect of an absent presence, but could this force work to undermine implacement? What absent presence lurks in the umbra of the high school experience of students who drop out? Is it more than the absence of approbation, support, and encouragement to “be”? Is it more than the pressure to fit one of the

accepted molds for “good” students? The students feel the absence of support, but could an even more pernicious and insidious absent presence be undermining their sense of implacement?

O’Donohue (1999) describes absence as the place in your heart and soul “where longing still lingers” (p. 222). Longing only lingers when you have already experienced something, actually or vicariously, that is now an absence: an absent presence that shadows your life. How true this appears to be for the GED college gradates. When they reflect on their high school lived experiences, they describe the feeling of something missing that school once had for them. Once fully implaced in elementary school, Chad says that in high school “You were just kind of out there on your own.”

What is it like for them when they have been left “out there on their own”? Is there an absent presence, perhaps a judgment of their worth, that strews boulders in the paths of their lives? The absent presence is palpable in Lee’s case. The school would never explain to her the presence of the prejudice against married women that lurks behind their misogynistic decision to exclude her from school activities. The power of its presence, however, is evident in the freedom that the male English teacher feels to make derogatory comments to her. The expression of the absent presence of this prejudice was devastating: a student who “actually really enjoyed school” and “was part of the student government” and “did well” (Lee) is forced to drop out of high school in ninth grade.

Reenie’s experience as an ESL student uncovers the absent presence of racial/cultural biases.

No, they wouldn’t call home [if I didn’t do my homework]. The school I was in, I was like one of hundreds probably that didn’t do homework. So, I was like shuffled in the whole mix of everything. So there was no special attention. I didn’t feel I was getting any special attention. (Reenie)

Earlier, Reenie reveals that the school was a mix of white, Hispanic, and African American students. The ESL students were isolated and treated differently, and her words clearly point to her feeling disregarded by her school. More importantly, she suggests that the school had abandoned the pretense of creating a presence for “hundreds” of students who didn’t do homework. Being “shuffled into the whole mix of everything” suggests the absent presence of a disregard for certain students. “I believe that . . . becoming . . . is in a large degree dependent on membership in a community of regard” (Greene, 1995, p. 39).

Sharon, of course, experienced school’s absent presence in its unwillingness to protect her from the physical and emotional abuse she suffered at the hands of her classmates. “That [disciplining the students who assaulted her] requires paperwork. And police. They’re not going to do that” (Sharon). What must Sharon have felt when school made it clear to her that it would not protect her? Is this the same absent presence of disregard that Lee, Reenie, Simon, and all dropouts feel?

To begin with, of course, we need an understanding of the human body—and therefore an experiencing of the body, whether it be our own body or the body of another—which lets it *be* in its truth. What has made this letting-be so very difficult for us is our centuries-old “patriarchal” religion of shame, guilt, and remorse, which not only justifies, but even requires, the most vehement mortification of the flesh. (Levin, 1985/2003, p. 227)

Do we see this “mortification of the flesh” in schooldom’s determination to fit students into predetermined molds? Is it “so very difficult” to let some people be different without displacing them with our disregard?

And that’s how I feel a lot of times it was just never. . . Going back to the one word, it’s disconnected. There was never anyone there, except for a couple, that made me even wanna feel connected. There was nothing . . . And not that school

needs to have a big, fun circus day every day, but there needs to be some sort of overall spirit of “We care.” Other than, “You really need to do good on this test.” (Joe)

Which absence is created first? Do the students absent their spirit, effort, and commitment before they absent their bodies as a result of the school’s absenting its concern and commitment to them? It is almost as if the students find that “There are people we have to avoid lest they poison our lives with their authority or their cynicism” (Lingis, 2007, p. 116). Or does the school become absent only when the students declare their disinterest by their absence of effort? Should the difference matter to educators? “Presence to each other is the door to all belonging” (O’Donohue, 1999, p. 60). Is not the critical understanding here the point that students who drop out feel this sense of absence acutely?

The GED college graduates drive home the need to address this issue because of their civil disobedience *and* their later success. If we want students to stay the course of the traditional high school program, then one of the points we must address is the need to make school a presence in the lives of all students, not just those who fit the mold of our ideal. Perhaps one of the ways we could address this is by creating a stronger reality of care for them. Because when the GED college graduates finally do drop out, the reality that no one seems to care becomes blatantly obvious.

Caring Is a Heartfelt Presence

From the beginning of this engagement with GED college graduates and college students, their sometimes impassioned, often resigned reflections about the absence of a heartfelt, caring presence in their high school years has been prominent. Tanya, the college student in Chapter One, says that she dropped out because she was failing and

“No one cared.” In the 2006 report *The Silent Epidemic*, “dropouts . . . blame themselves for failing to graduate, [but] there are things they say schools can do to help them graduate” (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, p. iv). The first thing on their list is more engaging classes, and the second is access to supports for struggling students. Both of these school-based changes would involve an increased, quality presence of teachers and administrators who can care about their students.

Recent research has focused on the importance of this connection between teachers and students as a significant element in a student’s ability to persist. Lee and Burkham (2001) point out that although “school size, per se, is unlikely to directly influence the probability that students will drop out, . . . there may be other social features that accompany smaller size—including organizational trust, members’ commitment to a common purpose, [and] more frequent contact with people with whom members share their difficulties, uncertainties, and ambitions” (p. 25) that can increase the likelihood that students can persist. Croninger and Lee (2001) develop a similar theme while examining the social risks for students from “the negative consequences associated with poverty, low educational attainment by parents, minority status, or family composition. . . . Support and guidance from teachers increase the likelihood that socially disadvantaged students complete high school” (p. 570). In Davis and Dupper’s (2004) review of recent research on “Student-Teacher Relationships: An Overlooked Factor in School Dropout,” they cite five studies supporting the finding that “Students who dropped out of school claimed that teachers didn’t care about them, were not interested in their success, and were not willing to help them with problems” (p. 183). Finn (1993) confirms that most

students who leave school prior to graduation report feeling an extreme sense of alienation or disengagement.

Heidegger's (1927/1996) notion of care is "used to designate the being of *Da-sein* [standing out in my own existence] in general" (p. 114). But he distinguishes between taking care of things and "being-with" other beings.

Taking care of things is a character of being which being-with cannot have as its own, although this kind of being is a *being toward* beings encountered in the world, as is taking care of things. The being to which *Da-sein* is related as being-with does not, however, have the kind of being of useful things at hand; it is itself *Da-sein*. This being is not taken care of, but is a matter of *concern* [emphasis in the original]. (p. 114)

Heidegger seems to be igniting the fire that burns through the painful reminiscences of high school dropouts who complain that no one cares about them. If students are treated as objects, as "things" that need to be taken care of, then might schools get into the habit of making lists of tasks to be done, check them off as they are attempted or accomplished, and count the day done when the list is complete? Does the cramming of students into a lunchroom smack of this sort of care? Perhaps this is too harsh.

Heidegger (1927/1996) points out that care for others is "concern [which] has two extreme possibilities" (p. 114).

It can, so to speak, take the other's 'care' away from him and put itself in his place in taking care, it can *leap in* for him. Concern takes over what is to be taken care of for the other. The other is thus *displaced* [emphasis added], he steps back so that afterwards, when the matter has been attended to, he can take over as something finished and available or disburden himself of it completely. In this concern, the other can become dependent and dominated even if this domination is a tacit one and remains hidden from him. (p. 114)

Is this the sort of taking-over concern that we see in schools? When teachers teach this way, does it result in students' displacement? When teachers wrestle the learning away from the students and break it "down into isolated seemingly unrelated fragments, the

only work of the classroom seems to be monitoring and management” (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2008, p. 6). Are schools expecting the students to “step back” from their own learning and “afterwards, when the matter has been attended to,” take up the learning as their own? The students become “dependent and dominated.” This lack of connection and engagement is precisely the complaint of high school dropouts.

Heidegger (1927/1996) goes on to describe concern at the other extreme. In contrast to this [the concern that takes away the other’s care], there is the possibility of a concern which does not so much leap in for the other as *leap ahead* [emphasis in the original] of him, not in order to take “care” away from him, but . . . to give it back to him as such. This concern . . . essentially pertains to authentic care; that is, the existence of the other, and not to a *what* [emphasis in the original] which it takes care of, helps the other to become transparent to himself *in* his care and *free for* [emphases in the original] it. (p. 115)

In this leaping ahead to make way, to clear the path, to facilitate learning, do we hear described the ideal concern of a teacher? This concern can give students’ learning back to them and make them “free for” this learning. This is a demanding task for *Da-sein*. If schools seek to control teaching and learning, teachers and administrators might be encouraged to consider students from a technical perspective. Does this also urge them into the more efficient mode of concern that treats them like objects? “A poor life this, if full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare” (Davies, 2009, p. 1). How perfectly Davies’s words capture this tension of care. The noun care, as Davies uses it, identifies the burdens and responsibilities of life. The verb care can sing in this lower register of worry, too, but it also soars in a higher register of affection, expectation, and hope. This sort of teaching requires a heartfelt, caring presence that is “attuned to the care that calls from the very living with [our own] pupils” (Aoki, 1986/2005a, p. 161).

Godwin (2001) seems to be describing this challenge of the caring, heartfelt presence in schools today.

They're all around us: sinkholes of heart-absence. They blight the landscape wherever the heavy traffic of *getting there* [emphasis in the original] has undermined the value for us of simply *being there*—for ourselves, or for someone or something else. (p. 189)

The “heavy traffic of *getting there*” certainly seems to capture the frenetic pace of high school students’ and teachers’ lives as they race for course completion, AYP, college admissions, AP Exam grades, positions on sports teams, and the recognition, time, attention, and personal contact with their teachers, mentors, and friends. Plugged in does not equal connected in this heart-filled, “*being there*” way Godwin describes. These “pockets of heart-absence . . . pockmark the culture that respects and rewards nonheart values, a culture that regards ‘having a heart’ as a potential detour from the road to success and maybe even a downright foolish waste of time” (p. 189). Yet this is the connection and attention of a heartfelt, caring presence that may increase the chances for persistence and achievement for potential high school dropouts.

This ancient connection between heart and mind, especially for the young, begins in the mother’s womb. The heartbeat is the first sound the child hears. “Before that child draws breath, tastes food, or places her feet upon the earth, the child hears the heartbeat of her mother” (Bruchac, 2001, p. 85). “To an older mode of thinking, thought begins below, in the heart” (Appelbaum, 2001, p. 5). The heartfelt presence in school comes primarily from the teachers. For the GED college graduates, the heartfelt, caring presence was usually weak.

The caring, heartfelt presence. Simon was the only one of the GED college graduates who felt the warmth of a caring relationship. When he started his second

eleventh grade year, his fourth school and fourth year of high school, two Guidance Counselors shepherded him into the work world.

I had two wonderful guidance counselors. . . . Rather than lecture me, or, say, try to figure out what was going on, they would take me out to coffee. . . . So I probably spent a week just bumming around with them. . . . So that was very helpful. (Simon)

His parents were also supportive. “They didn’t get it,” his displacement from high school, but “They didn’t disown me or anything” (Simon). Interestingly, Simon’s transition from high school, through work, to college was the smoothest of all seven of the GED college graduates.

Joe also recalls two teachers who expressly tried to reach out to him. One was a business teacher, the other a Driver’s Ed teacher.

I had one teacher, Miss Clark, . . . The only teacher who called my house. It wasn’t even her job. She’s not a guidance counselor; she’s not a principal. She’s not a truancy officer. She’s a teacher who cared. . . . I remember the Driver’s Ed teacher. . . . She said, “If you can come to class five days in a row, the Monday after the Friday of your fifth day in a row, I’ll let you drive.” And I remember I never drove in Driver’s Ed. (Joe)

The heartfelt caring apparent in these two young men’s lives illustrates Heidegger’s leaping ahead to allow the students the space to “be” in their own way. Yet, the essence of the activities of Simon’s counselors and Joe’s teachers suggests an interesting difference. Simon’s counselors are helping Simon find his way; Joe’s teachers are trying to call Joe back into the fold of schooldom. Is this why the guidance counselors’ efforts were effective and those of Joe’s teachers were not? No one, I think, can criticize Joe’s teachers for not caring, not having a heart for Joe and his circumstances. They allow themselves that “uncompensated grace note” of heart-felt care in an otherwise jammed teachers’ schedule “where there’s an hour penciled in for everything except reflection”

(Godwin, 2001, p. 189). But is schooldom's insistence on fitting into the mold just too strong for them? Even in their heartfelt caring, are they seeing only the child who needs to come back and fit in rather than a unique human being? In responding to the pressure of test scores and dropout statistics, are they able to meet their students with "*considerateness and tolerance*" [emphasis in the original] (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 115)?

Heidegger's word "tolerance" has a unique role to play here. Tolerance has a long road to travel between its two meanings of "forbearance" and "acceptance," and it might founder anywhere along the way. Do Simon's guidance counselors accept him and Joe's teachers "forbear" his iniquities and promise salvation if only he will return to the place that displaced him? Is this the heart-felt difference? In the rest of the stories, the beat of this caring heart gets fainter and fainter.

The weakened heartfelt presence. Sharon, with her excellent grades, stellar extracurricular activity list, and perfect ACT scores should have been a faultless fit for the high school ideal, except, as she tells us, she didn't fit in at all. Was schooldom happier to help her because she seemed to fit the mold so perfectly? Apparently not. Her guidance counselor seemed not to see or hear the heartfelt pain of the student in front of her.

I told her [my guidance counselor], "Can I just sign? . . . Can I just sign the paper. I quit." And she's like, "Well, if you quit, you'll never come back." And I'm like, "That's my idea. I will never, ever, ever do this again." And she's like, "You've got so much potential. You can go to college." And I'm like, "I can go to college anyway. I just want out." She's like, "I don't think it's a good idea." I'm like, "I wanna die! I hate this! I just want out."

[She didn't believe you?]

Nooo. Because kids who really want to die do horrible stuff like have bad grades and do drugs. I made a mistake. I had great grades and did drugs. (Sharon)

The guidance counselor seems to be trying to help, but offers Sharon only *schooldom's* picture of what would be a successful outcome for Sharon. Unlike Simon's guidance counselors who invested themselves in Simon's goals, which Noddings describes as "motivational displacement": "the 'feeling-with' that leads the one-caring to act as though for herself" (Noddings, 2003, p. 177), Ms. Black tries to cajole Sharon into accepting schooldom's goal for her, disregarding the student's cries for help.

Chad's situation was far different from Sharon's, but it seems to have elicited the same sort of schooldom response. He was bored with school, wanted "money in [his] pocket," and defied his mother by dropping out. He recalls that some of his teachers tried to encourage him, but it was done in an effort to "push" him into something *they* saw as important, not what *he* felt he wanted.

A lot of my teachers when I was in high school, when I reflect back, I went back and talked to a few of them, they really pushed me to go to college. And that push, to me, was felt just the opposite of what they intended. They just kind of pushed me away and out, instead of encouraging me. (Chad)

Chad captures the teachers' intentions to "leap in" for him rather than "leap ahead" to create a space for him to be. Noddings (2003) makes it clear that the one-caring must yield to the one-cared-for's hopes, dreams, and desires.

The one-caring reflects reality as he sees it to the child. She accepts him as she hopes he will accept himself—seeing what is there, considering what might be changed, speculating on what might be. But the commitment, the decision to embrace a particular possibility, must be the child's. (p. 60)

This motivational displacement, as Noddings calls it, puts the student's desires ahead of the desires of schooldom. It shifts the heart of care from one-caring to the one-cared-for. Chad, like Sharon and Joe, did not have the blessing of a caring adult who had the time or the awareness to come to know and understand his dreams and enter into the heartfelt,

caring relationship that would have honored his desires. Instead, unlike Simon who did have this sort of caring guidance, these students will move into life on their own.

The authoritarian presence. The caring presence in Catherine's young life tended to carry an authoritarian tone. Lost in junior high and high school without a caring presence at home or school, Catherine used drugs to assuage the pain. Eventually she was hospitalized.

The hospitalization gave her a clean start, but did not provide the heartfelt caring a human being needs to regain her health. In fact, Catherine was forced to mutilate her hands, reminiscent of Sharon's slicing of her wrists, because the hospital was going to send her to school on the psychiatric hospital's bus. Doesn't this come under the heading, "What were they thinking?" Catherine remembers realizing, "This is great!" It's not enough that they [her classmates] all think I'm a weirdo, now they'll know that I'm a weirdo."

How do caring professionals, such as doctors, nurses, and teachers, come to be such devoted disciplinarians? Are the institutions within which they work, devoted themselves to bottom lines and test scores, instrumental in creating "heart-absent" rule enforcers?

What the institution has done to willful eccentric children, it must do first to its willful, eccentric teachers. What we are taught to revile in children's inability to be institutionally normal we first learn to revile in ourselves. What we strive to modulate, dampen, tame and obliterate in children's energy, we first modulate, dampen, tame and obliterate in ourselves. (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2008, p. 82)

How does this authoritarian presence come to be construed as heartfelt caring? This is the discipline and management role of caring that insists on the rightness of the view of the care-giver, not the heartfelt caring that gives a human being a sense of belonging,

where “The cared-for ‘grows’ and ‘glows’ under the perceived attitude of the one-caring” (Noddings, 2003, p. 67). Catherine must be forced to behave.

Noddings quotes “Urie Bronfenbrenner when he claims, ‘In order to develop, a child needs the enduring, irrational, involvement of one or more adults in care and joint activity with the child.’ In answer to what he means by ‘irrational,’ he explains: ‘Somebody has got to be crazy about that kid!’” (Noddings, 2003, p. 61). It seems clear that not even Simon, much less Sharon or Catherine, felt that somebody was “crazy about” them. If this authoritarian presence, which squeezes students into a limited number of prescribed molds “for the child’s own good,” is the schooldom model, what do we understand when no one seems to care at all?

The un-caring presence. Perhaps one of the reasons that dropouts claim that “Nobody cared” is because nobody does.

Nobody ever contacted us. Nobody ever called and said, “We miss you. You need to come back to school,” or anything thing like that. Nobody seemed concerned that we weren’t there. And I think that’s an important thing, because if you have somebody that’s kind of staying after you, it makes the difference. You know, if somebody cares. (Lee)

Reenie tells a similar story. Because she was pregnant, no one seemed to care what happened to her.

You know, I didn’t have any follow up. Even when I stopped going to school, when I became pregnant, I didn’t get any phone calls from the school counselor saying, “Hey, Reenie, where are you? What’s going on? It’s OK . . .” I didn’t see any of these follow-ups. . . . I needed somebody to encourage me. To say, “You can still do it.” (Reenie)

How much of Lee and Reenie’s dropping out of school can be attributed to their perception that “No one cares”? Yet, how can we criticize the school for not caring when we know the overwhelming nature of their work?

The courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require. (Palmer, 1998, p. 11)

Palmer captures the heartfelt caring that is the nature of teaching to which many aspire.

“Those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able” are the moments when courage is most needed. Palmer is speaking from the podium of a classroom teacher struggling to create community in a classroom, and this heart-filled classroom must be replicated again and again, implacing all sorts of students and teachers. Would the students feel more implaced with teachers who ascribed to Palmer's belief? Would more teachers ascribe to his belief if they had the time for reflection and connection that Godwin sees as the prerequisite of a heart-filled life?

The experiences of the GED college graduates were not without some measure of personal warmth. Some teachers tried to make a difference, but their voices seem to have been smothered in the vacuum created by the school's overwhelming absence from the lives of these students. “When we are rejected or excluded, we become deeply wounded. To be forced out, to be pushed to the margin, hurts us” (O'Donohue, 1999, p. 4).

The GED college graduates seem to be telling us that a heartfelt regard for them as people, as beings with worth and value and contributions to make, was absent from their school experience. There was little caring, no proffering of a heartfelt presence. “There is something deeply sacred about every presence. When we become blind to this, we violate Nature and turn our beautiful world into a wasteland. We treat people as if they were disposable objects” (O'Donohue, 1999, p. 76). When these GED college graduates left school, “No one cared.” How much more simply can the problem be stated; how much more complex must the response be!

When students are displaced by schooldom's resistance to and rejection of their differences, they can become further displaced by the disregard school seems to have for their discomfort. The schools try to mold, and the students resist. As both sides become disappointed in each other, the vicious downhill cycle of absenteeism and failure may escalate to withdrawal and dropout.

Experiencing the Displacement of Disappointment

In the telling of all these stories of displacement, disappointment stirs restlessly in the background. My GED college graduates are successful and integrated adults, but when they tell these stories, tears come to their eyes, their voices vibrate, and they take deep breaths to calm themselves. They twist their fingers, look out the window for long moments, or offer me helpless gestures of incomprehension. Remembering and describing their displacement means feeling the disappointment again, and it is painful. Why was school so disappointing? We know that dropping out of high school can begin far earlier than ninth grade, and it is usually not a majestic exit but a slow bleeding out of interest and enthusiasm. Understanding the difference that pinched them and the disregard that belittled them, how do we understand the disappointment that runs underneath? What sense of loss pervades these stories?

Elizabeth Bishop's (1979/1988) poem "One Art" captures some of the pain of loss.

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:

places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.
(Bishop, 1979/1988, p. 764)

Her poem instructs the reader that “The art of losing isn’t hard to master,” but then goes on to show exactly how devastating loss can be by listing increasingly terrible losses. “Lose something everyday,” she advises, starting with “door keys” and “the hour badly spent,” then moving on to losing “where it was you meant / to travel” and “two cities.” She may miss these losses, but none of “these will bring disaster.” By the end of the poem, she has wound us up to a frenzy of loss, claiming that “Even losing you” can be mastered, “though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.” The irony that rises from mundane to gigantic, imaginary proportions reaches its climax when the speaker is faced with the loss of a beloved. The repetition of the word “like” in the last line reveals the tremendous force of will the speaker must use to accept the loss, and the parenthetical insertion of the command to “(*Write it!*)” belies all her assertions of insouciant acceptance. This loss, this heart-stopping loss of a beloved, is definitely *not* the same as other losses; losing is *not* “One Art” that can be mastered. All losses are *not* the same.

What have students lost *before* they drop out of high school? Have they lost the place where they *should* belong? What is it like to lose this place? In “Death of the

Hired Hand,” Robert Frost (1915) writes, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.” Then, after a stanza break, “I should have called it / Something you somehow haven’t to deserve” (p. 1). This captures the essence of the problem of being displaced from school. School is somewhere you “have to go” and the ubiquitous “they” should “*have* to take you in.” And perhaps far more importantly, it is an implacement that “somehow you haven’t to deserve.” In the poem, the old man who has come “home” to die, has actually not come home. He has shunned his blood relative in favor of the home of a family for whom he once worked as a “hired man.” He hasn’t gone home, he has gone where he once felt worthy. He knows how to “build a load of hay,” and for this accomplishment, he was rewarded with a small measure of respect and payment in this place. But the narrative undercuts even this modicum of worthiness by pointing out that the implacement that is home should not be something that is “earned.” Just so school. Students should not have to earn their right to be there; implacement in school should not be a reward for fitting the school mold.

In a compelling poem of social justice, Etheridge Knight captures the painful plight of the placelessness of some African Americans.

The Warden Said to Me

The warden said to me the other day
 (innocently, I think), "Say, etheridge,
 why come the black boys don't run off
 like the white boys do?"
 I lowered my jaw and scratched my head
 and said (innocently, I think), "Well, suh,
 I ain't for sure, but I reckon it's cause
 we ain't got no wheres to run to."
 (Knight, 1968/1988, p. 787)

The poem's powerful social critique speaks poignantly through the irony, contrasts, and characterizations, but its theme of loss of place is equally forceful. Leaving the capital letter off his name to underscore the warden's disrespect, the speaker also signals an altered state, urging the reader to examine such textual clues carefully. The uneducated "why come" of the warden in the next line introduces the ugly question that sets black against white, yet it also connects the two groups of people by the rural dialects. The speaker's assertion that the conversation is "innocent" plays on each side to create a patina of manners that both men create and yet, at the same time, suggests the mistrust and disregard that this charade conceals. The question did not need to be asked. Both conversants know the answer, and both know that the question and answer exchange is designed solely to humiliate "etheridge" into admitting his lack of place. The placelessness easily climbs a ladder of meanings from literal to symbolic without the need for the poem to further catalogue society's destruction of the Black man's place in American society. Much of the power of the poem rests in Etheridge's refusal to let the white warden see the pain of being forced to admit to this displacement and the cruelty of the warden to ask for it. Do these emotions have a parallel in the GED college graduates' stories of their lived high school experience?

Perhaps the comparison of high school and prison is too facile, but I think it may be illustrative. They have several things in common: required attendance, restricted movement, compulsory activities, no choice of work, place of work, or colleagues, and poor accommodations. The theme that runs through the comparison is compulsion. Both groups of "attendees" must attend. What Knight's poem reveals to us through the comparison is the placelessness of some students who have no other resources. They

have “nowheres to run to” to feel implaced. Even students with family support, like Simon or Reenie, suffer from displacement in high school because they recognize their impending adulthood and leap ahead into a tenuous maturity rather than return home for guidance and support.

Lareau (2003) suggests that middle-class children’s parents are at once more supportive and more demanding of schools, while working class and poor children’s parents’ “lack of [social] capital takes the form of an ongoing feeling of the threat of a looming catastrophe. This gap in connections between working-class and poor families and schools . . . undermines their feeling of trust or comfort at school” (p. 231), and older children learn these ways of being with school. Yet, at least two of my GED college graduates came from middle-class families, and they, too felt the disappointment of school’s withdrawal of interest, support, and approval. What is it like to feel this disappointment? Another comparison may prove helpful. Consider Hostovsky’s poem about a childhood experience.

Little League

When the ump produces
his little hand broom
and stops all play to stoop
and dust off home plate,
my daughter sitting beside me
looks up and gives me a smile that says
this is by far her favorite part of baseball.

And then when he skillfully
spits without getting any
on the catcher or the batter or himself,
she looks up again and smiles
even bigger.

But when someone hits a long foul ball
and everyone's eyes are on it

as it sails out of play . . . the ump has dipped his hand
 into his bottomless black pocket
 and conjured up a shiny new white one
 like a brand new coin
 from behind the catcher's ear,
 which he then gives to the catcher
 who seems to contain his surprise
 though behind his mask his eyes are surely
 as wide with wonder as hers.
 (Hostovsky, 2009, p. 1)

Hostovsky captures the delight children can take in the ordered world adults can provide. Not only does the little league baseball umpire maintain the order and perfection of the game, from his stopping “all play to stoop / and dust off home plate” to his magical production of a new baseball when one is hit foul, but the parent is sitting beside her, drinking in her pleasure like a thirsty man at a well. The perfection of this picture of engrossment and motivational displacement is illuminating.

Understanding Engrossment and Motivational Displacement

Noddings offers a description of a caring relationship that is characterized by both engrossment and motivational displacement. “Apprehending the other’s reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring” (Noddings, 2003, p. 16). The parent in the poem, totally absorbed in the delight her/his daughter is feeling, embodies engrossment. “For if I take on the other’s reality and begin to feel its reality, I feel, also, that I must act accordingly; that is, I am impelled to act as though in my own behalf, but in behalf of the other” (p. 16). This is motivational displacement. The parent in the poem helps to create the perfect baseball experience because she/he knows how much joy the child finds in the experience and, therefore, helps her toward its fulfillment. Together, engrossment and motivational displacement describe the one-caring as someone who inhabits the feelings of the other

and strives to “leap ahead,” in Heidegger’s terms, to clear a space where the other’s dreams can become reality. “The one-caring sees the best self in the cared-for and works with him to actualize that self” (Noddings, 2003, p. 64).

How interesting that Noddings uses the same word “displacement” to describe what she sees as *positive* for one-caring, and Casey and O’Donohue see as *negative* for life. It is the “dis-“ prefix of the word that creates folds in the meaning that can be illustratively explored. Probably the most common meaning of the prefix is “lack of” as in “dishonest,” i.e., lack of honesty. The concept of “displacement,” meaning a “lack of place,” drives the whole understanding of the GED college graduates’ lived experience of high school: they experience a “lack of place” in high school. Their teachers take their differences to be errors, and the students are asked to conform. When they cannot fit the offered molds, they experience a “lack of place.” There is no place for them at school. On the other hand, teachers embracing motivational displacement actively foster a “lack of place” for their own motivations and seek, instead, to commit their energies to the students’ projects. The key, of course, is in the choosing. The students are forced to experience a “lack of place”; teachers consciously—and conscientiously—choose to set aside their own motivations to become engrossed in the projects of the student.

This is always a tricky endeavor to understand how motivational displacement works for teachers. Lareau (2003) speaks of the motivational displacement of middle-class parents who subvert their own activities to support their children’s “involvement in activities outside the home . . . to acquire skills and dispositions that help them navigate the institutional world” (p. 39). This could only be perceived as parental motivational displacement, according to Noddings’s definition, if the children were the ones who

desired the outside activities. When parents, and, by extension, schools and teachers, make choices about learning without allowing the needs, dreams, and desires of the students to direct their decisions, then the adults have not displaced their motivation.

The key point Noddings reinforces in her discussion of motivational displacement is the *dual* role of this displacement. “The teacher as one-caring needs to see from both her own perspective and that of the student in order to teach—in order to meet the needs of the student” (Noddings, 2003, pp. 66-67). So much of school is predetermined by those who do not consider “the specific life contexts of specific children” (van Manen, 1997, p. 55), but the teacher, according to Noddings, must care about *this particular* student. So engrossment and motivational displacement provide an orientation to student first and curriculum second. Motivational displacement asks the teacher to displace the priority of curriculum for personal connections to the particular students in her/his care. Holding both the student and the curriculum as equal partners in the classroom displaces the hegemony of the former to allow the latter at least equal expression.

So, in this way, [the teacher] indwells between two horizons—the horizon of the curriculum-as-plan as she understands it and the horizon of the curriculum-as-lived experience with her pupils. . . . She is asked to give hearing to both simultaneously. This is the tensionality within which [one] inevitably dwells as teacher. (Aoki, 1986/2005a, p. 161)

The displacement of the school goals to a partnership position with the needs and projects of the students gives students and teacher the space to engage in work that “covers” the curriculum in ways that encourage the student in her/his own goals. Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen (2008) speak extensively of practical applications of motivational displacement describing classrooms where the students’ questions are taken as the lesson plans for developing curricular concepts.

Noddings, of course, is suggesting that when teachers' motivation becomes displaced from curricular goals and desires and implaced onto the goals and desires of the cared-for, a caring relationship is burgeoning. What the GED college graduates seem to find in school is the opposite of this engrossment and motivational displacement. I have explained above how the then-students felt that "no one cared" about whether they stayed or left school. But a more basic cause for their deep disappointment in school may have germinated in the disregard high school had for them as people with goals and desires that were ignored in planning what would be taught to them.

I went to high school, and I dreaded getting out of bed each morning. . . . All I could think of was, "When can I leave this place?" I was bored and was not interested in most of the classroom activities. Most of the time I did not feel challenged. They had a set thing they were going to do in class each day, and it felt like they had done this many times before. It felt like I was in the movie *Groundhog Day* where Bill Murray relives the same day over and over. (Chad) What does it mean when students claim they are bored? I certainly heard this frequently when I was teaching, and I have heard from my intern teachers that students still claim to be bored despite the introduction of new technologies into the classroom. How can we more fully understand this assertion of boredom?

Heidegger calls mood "attunement," and attunement is partner with understanding in *Da-sein*'s disclosure of being-in-the-world. "Attunement is an existential, fundamental way in which *Da-sein* is its there" (Heidegger, 1957/2002, p. 131). But while "'mere mood' discloses the there more primordially, . . . it also closes it *off* more stubbornly than any *not*-perceiving [emphases in the original]" (p. 128).

Attunement discloses Da-sein in its thrownness, initially and for the most part in the mode of an evasive turning away. . . . Bad moods [emphasis in the original] show this. In bad moods *Da-sein* becomes blind to itself, the surrounding world of heedfulness is veiled, the circumspection of taking care is led astray. (p. 128)

Can students' boredom, then, be understood as a "turning away" from the revealing of being-in-the-world that results in their not caring, to put it ontically, about their schoolwork? Could it be that faced with the impending adult world where the relative safety of childhood, which usually does not need to look at being's essential impermanence and finitude, must be left behind, students disengage to avoid "growing up" in this way? "It [boredom] is an emotional and spiritual paralysis that arises from the repression of anxiety or fear" (Thiele, 1997, p. 492). Hamlet's soliloquy in Act II, when he is frozen in his indecisiveness, shows us a man who claims, "How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable/ Seem to me all the uses of this world." He is bored because he is turning away from the decision he must make. Are students claiming they are bored partly because to do otherwise throws them into a thoughtful state that demands caring about the world and their relationship with it? Do they want to hide themselves in the everydayness of existence and reject the thoughtful reflection that education likely demands?

Is there another aspect to students' claim of boredom? Thiele's (1997) discussion of boredom, recalling Heidegger's reflections on modern technology, suggests that

Despite technology's vast capacity for generating novelty, it largely operates in collusion with boredom. The drive for endless economic growth and technological innovation that characterizes much post-modern life, Heidegger's work suggests, is a product of boredom with the human condition and its worldly limitations. (p. 491)

Have students become satiated by the ever-faster images of a technological world that promise fulfillment but only deliver entertainment? When we "seek a permanent escape from our existential homelessness and the anxiety it engenders" (Thiele, 1997, p. 501) in economic and technological consumption and entertainment, are we "turning away" from

essential engagement with Being? Thiele takes this posit about postmodern life a step further to offer that “We no longer believe that we have an ethical obligation not to be bored. More likely, we believe that we have a ‘right’ not to be bored” (p. 495). Are students like Chad, experiencing the displacement of a school that disregards them and their differences, “turning away” from facing the meaning of school’s displacement by claiming to be bored?

High school is focused on content curriculum, grades, and the statistics that prove how well the school is doing: test scores, attendance, graduation rates, and college admissions. Chad and students like him, perhaps in collusion with a post-modern world that has seduced him into thinking that “a more proficient means of combating boredom today is conspicuous consumption” (Thiele, 1997, p. 494), leave school for work and pay. They claim to be bored by the slower, pedantic pace of school and its demand for an intimate engagement of self in academic reflection. But perhaps Chad and the other GED college graduates have something important to tell schools about how to improve some of those statistics by attending to Noddings’s description of how to create caring relationships through engrossment and motivational displacement and the students’ descriptions of finding school irrelevant and boring.

Finding School Irrelevant

Students and their families may find high school irrelevant depending on what they and their families expect from school. If you are among the 34 percent of the U.S. young adults 18-24 years old enrolled in college (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008, p. 6), then high school apparently was relevant enough to fulfill

your goal of college entrance. But what about the other 66 percent? If these students are not going to college, what role should high school fill for them?

At this other end of the scale, Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) report, “In 2003, 3.5 million youth ages 16 to 25 did not have a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school” (p. 1). They report that “81 percent” of “four focus groups” and “467 ethnically and racially diverse students aged 16 through 25 who had dropped out of public high schools in 25 different locations [who were individually interviewed]” (p. 2) said, “There should be more opportunities for real-world learning. . . . Students need to see the connection between school and getting a job” (p. iv).

The GED college graduates speak of how a lack of connection between school curriculum and their goals increased their disengagement. Simon recalls, “I didn’t feel like I was where I wanted to be. And it felt . . . I really didn’t feel like I was learning any skills” (Simon). What skills did Simon want to learn? It seems he is focused on acquiring relevant workplace skills, seeing school as an individual good that should accrue to him. Catherine’s expression is more virulent about her teachers’ competence, but expresses the same sense of high school content’s irrelevance. “I felt that many [teachers] didn’t know what they were talking about, in some instances, or that what they were teaching me was irrelevant to my life. I did not see the value in math, for example” (Catherine). Catherine’s own absent and resented father was a teacher at the high school, so Catherine’s acerbic comment may be motivated by more than her experience with school, but her feelings about math are clear. Lee expresses an almost identical assessment of school content. “School doesn’t seem real lots of times. And a lot things

that you do in school . . . doesn't . . . you can't see where it's really gonna make a difference in your life" (Lee).

Sharon voices a more philosophical description of the same displacement of students' goals for those of schooldom from her perspective as a GED college graduate.

High school's built to make workers. I know that sounds Marxist and proletariat, but it's true. It's not built to make people who make a difference or change anything. It's built to make solid citizens who pay their taxes and who hopefully understand how to fill out forms. And really that's the best they're hoping for. You can read, so you're not cheated. You can understand certain things so you can manage to take the medicine the doctor gives you. And you'll go to a job that is dumbed down as much as it can be for you, and you hopefully won't make any trouble. It doesn't make members of the senate; it makes citizens. (Sharon)

The contrast between these GED voices and the avowed purposes of high school identifies one of the fundamental differences toward designing curricula and schools. Is school to make citizens, workers, or individually successful or morally-upright people?

Who decides? Gutman (1987) describes a democratic education:

A democratic state is therefore committed to . . . provide its members with an education adequate to participating in democratic politics, to choosing among (a limited range of) good lives, and to sharing in the several sub-communities, such as families, that impart identity to the lives of its citizens. (p. 42)

For me, two of the disturbing parts of Gutman's description can be found in the word "adequate" to describe education and limiting the choices for a good life. If education is only "adequate," then how will we create critical and creative thinkers who can address the issues of equity and freedom, health and prosperity in a global world? If education limits choices, where is the "fundamental interest in emancipation and empowerment to engage in autonomous action arising out of authentic, critical insights into the social construction of human society" (Grundy, 1987, p. 19)? As Berman (1998) suggests, "Our task as horizontal persons is to find in solitude what we can do and be as an

individual self, but in community and communion with others” (p. 177). This sort of debate about the purpose of education expresses itself in how classrooms function.

Berman sounds much like Linda Darling Hammond who criticizes the technical approach to education that underpins Sharon’s perception of the educational philosophy she inferred from her high school experience.

Modern schools were designed as highly specialized organizations—divided into grade levels and subject matter departments, separate tracks, programs, and auxiliary services—each managed separately and run by carefully specified procedures engineered to yield standard products: the students. . . . This might work if students were car doors to be assembled. But they are not, and the results of treating them this way are widespread disengagement and alienation. (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 86)

The result of this approach to schooling is what Jardine, Clifford, and Freisen (2008) call “basics as breakdown.”

I think a lot of times, you break it down and break it down for the slowest ones in the class, and the ones that aren’t having a problem then have to sit and [whistling], and then high school becomes a boring, monotonous thing. (Chad)

Content is packaged into small bites for teachers and students. If the students ask questions, the questions are seen as problems to be solved, not opportunities to engage in a discussion.

An image that is often invoked here is one of “breakdown.” In order for something *to be itself* and not be unwittingly mixed up with other things, it is necessary to *break it down* into its component parts. . . . Moreover, if students in a classroom encounter difficulties in understanding some phenomenon we have broken down, we must *break it down even further*. . . . We contend that under the inherited image of “the basics,” breakdown has become no longer a *response* but a *premise*. . . . [And] once things are broken down into isolated, seemingly unrelated fragments, the only work of the classroom seems to be monitoring and management . . . and there is nothing to hold students’ or teachers’ attention in place and, of course, attention wavers. (Jardine, Clifford, & Freisen, 2008, pp. 4-6)

In other words, our efforts to simplify content, to start from basic ideas and build to more complex ones, has become the acceptable and unquestioned procedure. Rather than present a problem or discover a project, the whole notion of classrooms filled with ranks of students who will be taught has pushed us toward a more efficient, cleaner, clearer, more easily measured procedure of inductive thinking and learning. Memory is privileged over understanding. This efficiency takes a toll in high school, especially in “basic” courses, where students who have already begun to feel the displacement caused by difference, disappointment, and disregard, are given “basics” that have been “broken down” into easily assimilated bits that neutralize the engagement of more complex problems, projects, or concepts. The students have been co-operators in this high school process because of their disengagement and absence.

The more you don’t go the worse it is. I remember sitting in class, and I had no idea what was going on. Homework, my report card in eighth grade science class said for science class, “This child does nothing.” (Catherine)

This pernicious downward spiral of students’ absence and disengagement and schooldom’s response of basics as breakdown resulting in students’ further disengagement contributes significantly to their displacement. This is a dance that requires partners, as Derrida might point out. How might school be otherwise? How might high school choose a different tune and draw the students into a different dance? How might high school challenge and engage complexity rather than *always* think that the answer to problems in understanding is to “*break it down even further*”?

Taylor (2009) offers a similar criticism of universities. Instead of the traditional content-identified departments offering individual courses, he advocates “problem-focused programs” (p. 2) that would increase collaboration within and among universities

and focus on solving the problems of the global community, creating graduates who can not only implement the solutions but also apply the critical thinking skills they have learned to the broader panoply of life. This approach is reminiscent of Kilpatrick's "development and advocacy of the 'project method'" (Beyer, 1997, p. 1), and Dewey's insistence "that students must be involved in the construction of objectives for their own learning; that they must seek and formulate problems; . . . [and] they should work together in schools as they would later work in most workplaces" (Noddings, 2005b, pp. 10-11). Taylor says he advises his students, "Do not do what I do; rather, take whatever I have to offer and do with it what I could never imagine doing and then come back and tell me about it" (p. 2).

How could school be otherwise? How might Taylor's injunction to do "what I could never imagine" work in a democratic society? Even the TV show *Star Trek*, a creative science-fiction vision of the future, still shows students and teachers confined to a classroom, admittedly full of technology, but still the same basic concept that we have today: isolation from the real world to master skills before being released into your real life. Why do we all carry in our hearts that memory of sweet release when we were let out of school early? "The whole school was turned loose an hour before the usual time, bursting forth like a legion of young imps, yelping and racketing about the green, in joy at their early emancipation" (Irving, 1809/1961, p. 344). When snow would delay the opening of high school by two hours, I used to marvel how happy the high school teachers were when they would arrive. Gone were the grumpy, even ill-mannered facades I sometimes encountered: universal relaxation was the norm. I do not think it was just the extra hour of sleep; I think it was the change in routine, the freedom they felt

facing a day that had already been “wrecked” by the destruction of the regimen. It was, as some pointed out, a “wasted” day. Sometimes I would see a creativity that “wrecked” stodgy teachers’ lessons into vibrant exchanges as they released themselves and the students from convention into a day that, already “wasted,” could be used for alternative experiences.

How might high school capture some of this release? Can we take a lesson from the arts? Consider the description of school from *Chorus Line* as Mike describes how he came to be a dancer.

I'm watchin' Sis go pitterpat.
Said, "I can do that. I can do that."
Knew ev'ry step right off the bat.
Said, "I can do that. I can do that."

One morning Sis won't go to dance class.
I grabbed her shoes and tights and all,
But my foot's too small, so,
I stuffed her shoes with extra socks,
Run seven blocks in nothin' flat.
Hell, I can do that. I can do that!
I got to class and had it made,
And so I stayed the rest of my life.
All thanks to Sis, (now married and fat),
I can do this.
That I can do!
I can do that.
(Kleban, 1985, p. 1)

Recalling Lingis’s (2007) description of how a dancer “instinctively head[s] for the studio and feel[s] restless and tied down if [she/he] is prevented from going” (p. 38), Mike’s instinctive appropriation of Sis’s dance shoes and dance lessons is born of watching her go “pitterpat” and knowing “ev’ry step right off the bat.” More exciting, as a model for education, Mike’s exuberant “I can do that!” resounds with implacement. He “got to class and had it made” because he was experiencing “the homecoming that

matters most . . . getting back into place” (Casey, 1993, p. 314). Does Mike experience an engrossment and motivational displacement by the dance school that becomes a partner with him in the achievement of his goals and projects based on his talents and expressed interests? “The shelter of belonging empowers you; it confirms in you a stillness and sureness of heart” (O’Donohue, 1999, p. 5). What might a model of such schooling feel like?

When we domesticate our minds and hearts, we reduce our lives. We disinherit ourselves as children of the universe. Almost without knowing it, we slip inside ready-made roles and routines which then set the frames of our possibilities and permissions. (O’Donohue, 1999, p. 100)

Can we hear our “school children” in the words of this description of O’Donohue’s “prisons in which we choose to live”? Notice the domestication of minds and hearts and recall the palomino stallion “fighting and pleading to be let out.” Notice, too, the “ready-made roles and routines which set the frames of our possibilities and permissions” and recall the difficulty and final failure of the GED college graduates to fit the mold of those prescribed and proscribed roles. Worse, can we feel the trueness of this description of personal prisons in the limits we place on our vision of what school might be?

O’Donohue (1999) asks, “Why do so many of us reduce and domesticate our one journey through this universe? Why do we long for invisible walls to keep us in and keep mystery out? We have a real fear of freedom” (p. 100). Alastair Reid’s poem “Curiosity” describes this fear of freedom as the difference between cats and dogs. My apologies to dog lovers because dogs are portrayed as the fearful status quo defenders in this poem. The cats “ask odd questions, interfere in dreams” and this “does not endear cats to those doggy circles / where well-smelt baskets, suitable wives, good lunches / are the order of things, and where prevails / much wagging of incurious heads and tails”

(Reid, 1988, p. 598). The poem goes on to associate cats' nine lives with their willingness to embrace living, understanding that "Dying is what the living do, that dying is what the loving do, and that dead dogs are those who do not know / that dying is what, to live, each has to do" (Reid, 1988, p. 599). Does our form of schooling imbue our children with this fear of living? Do we subtly instruct them that conformity, rectitude, and only little sips from the cup of life will keep them safe? Is this what we want for them or for ourselves? How far must we take our responsibilities to the young to keep them safe?

Some of the nostalgic reminiscences that my husband, Kenn, likes to entertain are stories of the rock climbing club and the backpacking club he formed in the middle school where he taught thirty years ago. The experiences of friendship, challenge, silliness, self-esteem, excitement, self-discovery, self-confidence, and courage that the students had on overnight wilderness trips are always heart-filling. But, at the same time, I hate to hear him tell these stories. They describe a time when schools and teachers were far freer to imagine and then create, from their own talents and interests, experiences for children that might ignite their hearts. I saw a grown man put his head down on Kenn's shoulder and hug him to his heart when he encountered him at a wedding: he was a former rock climber whom Kenn had tutored in mathematics and life.

Reenie's description of school is perhaps the most condemning because of the matter-of-fact acceptance she sees in the school's minatory stance.

But as far as high school . . . Teachers weren't—and we had very good teachers then—but it was just . . . Going to school; you had no choice but to go to school. But it was more like a routine kind of thing. . . . (Reenie)

It was the school that mattered, not these students. The students found the curriculum irrelevant; the school found the students' goals irrelevant. Examining Reenie's high school experience using Noddings's concept of engrossment and motivational displacement suggests that the lack of caring in *this* relationship may have led to the irrelevance of the school's curriculum for *these* students.

Aoki (1996/2005c) speaks of the curricular in-between space, "a space of generative interplay between planned curriculum and lived curriculum" (p. 420). He suggests that instead of focusing on the "things" of curriculum, we focus on this "inspired site of being and becoming" (p. 420), echoing Heidegger's description of being's relationship with Being as an "*existentially dialectical process* [emphasis in the original]" (Levin, 1985/2003, p. 27). Teachers are called upon to make the planned curriculum relevant for students as a lived curriculum in their "concretely situated live classroom[s]" (p. 419). Yet all teachers and students come from their own thrown positions in the world, and each side will contribute unique elements to this in-between space. When these elements weave and blend in an almost seamless texture, school experiences might be confirming, and students may feel the freedom to pursue their own projects generated by their teachers' engrossment and motivational displacement. When the goals, desires, and projects of teacher and student conflict, the seamless fabric of school can be rent, allowing students to fall through the tears while tears of frustration on both sides of the desk burn home the message of displacement. School content, its curriculum, its goals and objectives, its lesson plans are all created without direct reference to particular students in particular classrooms, and at a particular moment in life. Teachers struggle to understand these students who are different and to share their

regard for their talents and projects. But when the in-between curricular space is barren, when students feel so disappointed, how do they find where they belong?

Staying Connected Through Drugs

As Disney rewrites history and literature, so it repackages mythology. The animated feature *Hercules* presents a couple of decidedly un-Hellenic characters, but the young hero typifies some of the struggles of young people who are trying to find a place where they can belong.

I Can Go the Distance

I will find my way.
I can go the distance.
I'll be there some day,
If I can be strong.
I know every mile
Will be worth my while.
I would go most anywhere
To feel like I belong.
(Zippel, 2009, p. 1)

Hercules expresses his determination to find the place where he can belong, and the lyrics are designed so the audience can feel the inspiration of his quest. He is willing to “find his way” and vows that he “can go the distance.” He believes that he will “be there some day / If [he] can be strong”: “Every mile / Will be worth [his] while.” Up to this point, the similarity between Hercules’s search for place and that of the dropouts seems unrelated. Hercules is a hard worker, willing to persevere to work toward his goal—and from the conventional viewpoint, the dropouts are not. Hercules is a “good student,” determined to be the hero; the dropouts are turning their backs on conventional roles and taking an alternate route. Hercules is fitting into a mold, a role that elicits adulation from the populace of strict status quo adherents; the dropouts seem to be rejecting all well-

intentioned advice and instructions. But what happens if we look at the desire behind these seemingly disparate choices? Does the explanation of Hercules's source of motivation make sense for the dropouts as well? Could they be the opposite sides of the same coin, complicating each other *à la différence*?

Hercules says, "I would go most anywhere / To feel like I belong," and, in a later verse will say, "I would go most anywhere / To find where I belong." Here is the link: Hercules and the dropouts are both searching for implacement. Hercules has, somehow, been given enough encouragement, support, self-esteem, drive, ambition, dreams, or courage not only to link him to the conventional wisdom of achievement but also to propel him forward in the pursuit of this dream. The dropouts have not received this blessing.

The source of Hercules's strength is not explored in the film, but the alchemy of this implacement in society's dreams is so elusive that no one has yet isolated the elements that can be turned into the gold of implacement. Maslow's hierarchy has codified and put in priority order the physiological, safety, and psycho/social needs of humans to reach self-actualization, but this knowledge has not motivated society to rectify the injustices of poverty, abuse, or abandonment, nor has this technical paradigm given control of the outcomes for children and students to parents and teachers. Even more puzzling, however, is the different outcomes that can be obtained from similar situations. One year during my teaching career, I had one obnoxious, rebellious, drug-addicted student who seemed to come from a loving, healthy home with two caring parents, and another high-achiever, in the same class, who did not need any tickets for graduation because he had no one to invite. For me, observing the disparity, there were

no easy answers. As I listen to the stories of the GED college graduates, I am again swimming in a miasma.

All of the seven GED college graduates had at least one parent; none lived in poverty although two describe themselves as poor; and only one, Catherine, sees her parents' lack of caring as a significant contributor to her dropping out and using drugs. Why do all but Lee find themselves ensnared in the siren call of drug use? The constant in all the stories is the abiding need "To feel like I belong," and drug use provided this womb. Catherine explains,

It [drugs] made me a part of a group of people who accepted me and wanted me to be a part of them. I had value in that group, but I could not find that same sense of purpose and belonging in the "straight" world of school. (Catherine)

Sharon's description is nearly identical. "That's why I got into drugs. . . . Cuz you could belong with those people."

The need to belong is so strong that the students sometimes ignore their own moral compass in order to "find where [they] belong." Joe recalls,

If you're in this little tug-of-war with your values or your moral standards, and you have this one group that is gonna skip school, is gonna party that day, gonna hang out with some girls, whatever. And then you have this other group that's untouchable, at this point. (Joe)

Joe credits his mother for the strong moral upbringing that causes the "tug of war" in his heart, but he implies that the choice between a place where you could fit in and a place where you could not is no choice at all despite a strong sense of right and wrong. Simon, on the other hand, is able to extricate himself from Joe's dilemma by withdrawing from the situation. His family's wealth gave Simon more options. Unlike Joe who was pretty much stuck in his local high school, Simon had been experimenting with one high school situation after another, and his search for placement did not require that he address the

use of drugs; he was able to move away. “There were some drug issues. Pretty prevalent there. I told my parents, ‘I’m not going back’” (Simon). Reenie, whose low family income meant she attended a low-performing, local high school like Joe, was saved from becoming involved with drugs by a friend.

He protected me. He would say, “No, no. You’re too smart for this. You need to go.” And he never allowed me to get involved, and I never did. So I never can say it was because I hung out with the bad kids and did drugs. (Reenie)

Reenie implies that if she had “hung out with the bad kids and did drugs,” it could be an excuse for dropping out. This, perhaps, is the conventional way schooldom and society look at drug use: as the *cause* of dropping out. Could we have it backwards? Does the intensity of Hercules’s motivation “To find where I belong” suggest that displacement is a ferocious, undeniable need?

Bachman, O'Malley, Schulenberg, Johnston, Freedman-Doan, and Messersmith (2007) conducted empirical statistical analyses of data from the University of Michigan’s *Monitoring the Future Project* that followed students from ages 14 to 22 to consider the seeming conflicting claims that “Doing well in school protects your teenager from drug use” and “Drug use threatens your teenager’s success in school” (p. 1).

Both claims can cite, as supporting evidence, a large body of research . . . showing negative correlations between adolescent substance abuse and success in school. . . . Either assertion can be seen as consistent with the correlations; indeed, both may be true to some extent. This already complicated story does not end there; the correlations may also arise, perhaps in large part, because educational outcomes and substance use share common prior causes. (Bachman et al., 2007, p. 1)

Their findings indicate that the two different outcomes do share common prior causes, especially academic achievement by 8th grade, but the authors conclude that success in school can preclude drug use. This is interesting because all of the GED college

graduates *were* academically successful before they dropped out; yet, they all also report feelings of displacement due to their differences, the disregard school showed for their projects, and their disappointment in school. In their cases, academic success did *not* protect them from drug use. Was a stronger force impelling them out of school and into drug use? Do empirical analyses fail to capture this feeling that is difficult to codify?

Godwin (2001) suggests that “Heart is the indwelling companion on our dark journeys and it may be that heart is the goal at the end of them” (p. 201). Perhaps the GED college graduates had to make this journey into their own heart of darkness by dropping out and using drugs in order to have the heart to appreciate the joy of implacement they eventually found in work and/or college.

Rejoicing in the Difference Between High School and College or the Workplace

When the GED college graduates entered college or the workplace, they flourished. When they are describing their lived high school experience, they often screw up their faces, hunch forward, avert their eyes, and twist their fingers. When they turn to the tale of their college or workplace experiences, the escaping tension nearly blows open the doors of the room. They describe an implacement there that was an aching absence in high school.

It [work] felt like I was doing something more meaningful. It was good. . . . I felt . . . Socially I didn’t feel out of place; the people were older than me. I didn’t feel . . . I felt comfortable, I didn’t feel like I was being annoying to them, I didn’t feel like I was . . . They knew I was young, but I didn’t . . . I wasn’t treated like I was really young. . . . I felt like I was seriously contributing. I thought the senate was something important. (Simon)

What a difference here for the young man who was experiencing panic attacks when he tried to attend high school! Working seems to free him. He felt “comfortable” and not “out of place.” The work he was doing was “more meaningful,” and he felt as if he “was

seriously contributing” by doing work that was “important.” The work situation provides a place for Simon that high school had not, and his implacement seems to come from his perception of the work he was doing. Simon was working as a page in the state senate. One of his duties was to replace the large bottles in the office water coolers, so it was not work that was intellectually challenging. Yet, his enthusiasm and sense of personal worth are unmistakable behind his words. Are the clues to his implacement in the words “meaningful,” “seriously contributing,” and “important”?

Earlier Simon had revealed that he didn’t think he was learning any skills in high school. He wondered aloud, “Where is this [high school] going? What am I doing?” The opposite is true of his work experience. Now he seems to understand that he is “contributing” to something “important.” What does this suggest about the “work” we give to students in high school?

One of the conundrums of this comparison is the indignation society might experience at the suggestion that a student such as Simon be given the job of replacing bottles in the water coolers. He is clearly “college material,” as I have discussed earlier. He is a student who “should matter” because he has the academic ability to go to college. Which should “matter” more: the student’s implacement or the academic challenge? Simon’s embodied answer advocates for the former priority. Until he felt implaced, he could not overcome the panic attacks that could have effectively prohibited his ever pursuing an academic degree. Can we imagine a school system that would have multiple paths toward and through graduation to implace all students? Might some of these alternate paths include entry-level jobs with “meaningful” work that makes a

“contribution” to society? Can we, as educators, parents, and society, relinquish the control over these students’ lives to allow them to pursue their own projects?

The idea of control emerges from a technical approach to education. The word “control” has meant “dominate, direct” since the 15th century, but came from the Latin prefix *contra* and the root *rotulus* a diminutive form of *rota* meaning wheel. So control meant something akin to pushing against a wheel to restrict its flow or movement forward. This image pushes against the ideal of an education that provides skills and knowledge to propel a student forward in life. Does high school’s curriculum sometimes get in the way or even push against the development of its students? How could we argue “against an ideology of control” and “in favor of shared living and responsibility . . . in which the capacities of all children must be developed” and “the special cognitive capacities or ‘intelligences’ of all children” must be nurtured (Noddings, 2005b, p. 62)?

What sort of work, then, can we imagine for high school students? Chad’s feelings about working contribute another facet to this discussion. What Chad discovers at work is a love of learning that he had never experienced before.

When I was in the coalmines, I worked every job that you can do. I was studying to be an electrician, I tried every . . . I started to realize that learning was fun, which I never experienced until that time. (Chad)

Chad spoke earlier of how easy school had been for him: he did not have to work hard to get good grades, but the subjects did not interest him and the grades were no incentive. Some of his teachers “really pushed me to go to college. And that push, to me, was felt just the opposite of what they intended. They just kind of pushed me away and out, instead of encouraging me” (Chad). Noddings (2005b) speaks clearly to this issue, pointing out that the liberal arts education through which these GED college graduates

waded unsuccessfully in high school is “a curriculum designed for the capacities of a few,” and its “association with power and privilege” has made it the cry for “equality” (p. 31). Chad, like all the other GED college graduates, walked away from passing grades in this college- prep curriculum that is recommended for all students in the name of equality. It did not spark his interest, engage his imagination, or connect him with any meaningful future. Finding work that he found challenging and stimulating finally taught Chad “that learning was fun.”

Catherine went to work after dropping out of college, but her minimum-wage job did not ignite her intellect or provide the implacement that Simon and Chad’s jobs had done for them. What it *did* provide was the incentive to go back to school.

And then I needed to give in because society requires a degree. I realized at some point that it was necessary for me to go back. But I can’t say that I felt like I was slow in catching on. But I was slow in catching on to what you needed to do in life . . . to be successful. (Catherine)

It was college that worked magic on Catherine. Below is one of my favorite images evoked during our conversations.

You know, it was funny. It was like right. . . . while I was going to school, it was a totally different experience for me going to a junior college. Because then I was on my own, and it was me who wanted to go. It wasn’t anybody telling me I should go. . . .

I remember sitting in the library at the community college and looking at all the books, and thinking, “Wow, I have a lot of books to read.” It’s just like somebody just turned the light on. I was just . . . I couldn’t get enough. I was like a sponge. I was just . . . I just wanted to learn everything. Because I had the capacity. It was never that; that was never the problem. But I was just . . . I just hated the system so much. I was just so rebellious against authority and the system. It just didn’t work for me. (Catherine)

Catherine’s epiphany was evoked by her minimum-wage job in a grocery store, and it propelled her into college through the GED Tests. Underlying Catherine’s sense of

implacement in college was her freedom. The authority of schooldom was oppressive to her, and when she was finally implaced, she “just wanted to learn everything.”

Catherine, like Chad and all the rest of the GED college graduates save Simon, was a few years older when she finally took the GED Tests, got her high school diploma, and went to college. Part of their story, then, is maturity. As one GED college senior remarks earlier, “Just because your child can’t focus on their future when you want them to doesn’t mean they can’t far surpass your expectations when they really do focus” (Berger, 2006, p. 1). What must their success mean to us? What clues are they giving us about their work and college implacement?

It seems that a bit of maturity acquired doing a few years of authentic, perhaps even meaningful, work is one anodyne for high school displacement. Feeling free to pursue their own projects, finding their own way, feeling independent and perceiving their responsibility for their own lives brings them a sense of implacement.

Our gestural capacities bear within their motility an ingrained destiny: a bodily sensed potential we are called upon to make our own. And we appropriately own up to “destiny” as we begin to realize the extent of our commitment to the maintenance of Being. (Levin, 1985/2003, p. 139)

The students, it seems, needed to respond to their own ingrained destiny. Their bodily displacement called upon them to make their own way in the world: to find the place where they belonged. With the implacement came the maturity to assess their situations and turn back to education—but not back to high school. The GED Tests allowed them to retain their nascent adulthood and move ahead with their own projects.

Perhaps high school needs to work with students and their parents and even the community to explode the single-focus, college-bound conception of high school.

“Whether we are stomping the life out of children with authoritarian rigidity (as school

seemed to Simon) or smothering it with gooey praise (as Chad perceived the teacher's pushing him toward college), we chill the life from the spirit and kill the soul of all but the most bloody-minded" (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2008, p. 88). Must students really become "bloody-minded" to escape the control of school? We know that many students flourish within the walls we have built, but some are bloodying their wings trying to get out.

from Sympathy

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
 Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
 For he must fly back to his perch and cling
 When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
 And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
 And they pulse again with a keener sting—
 I know why he beats his wing!
 (Dunbar, 1899/2009, p. 1)

Paul Lawrence Dunbar, one of the preeminent, early twentieth century, African American poets, speaks of the effects of slavery; yet how could the caged, controlled, displaced GED college graduates' lived high school experience be described any better? They "must fly back to" their seats in the classroom and "cling" there when they "fain would be on the bough a-swing" in the world outside of the school cage. And despite their compliance, the "pain still throbs in the old, old scars" caused by schooldom's rejection of their difference, disregard for them as individuals, and the eventual disappointment of their dreams by the institution designed to care for them. Dunbar's caged bird never gets out of the cage, but the GED college graduates did, and their work and college experiences suggest the importance of opening the doors to this cage. Students who cannot find a place in high school may need alternative opportunities to grow toward post-secondary education. If college is the avowed purpose of high school in the post-

modern world, then true equality in education would offer all students the chance to find a way to implace themselves in this world.

Where is the place for students like these in our high schools? What sort of school can we envision that would meet their needs for implacement? Can we imagine a high school that provides spaces for meaningful work for students who seek that opportunity as part of either a transition to college or work? Can we imagine a K-16 continuum that eases some of its control over molding students into a limited number of ideals and develops multiple exit and re-entry points so students need not turn to drugs or drop out to find a place that accepts them? Can the GED Tests or some similar process give those displaced by a traditional high school experience another place to be? These GED success stories provide the opportunity which “allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meanings, its conditions, and its goals” (Foucault, as cited in Greene, 1995, p. 190).

Once in college, these people flourished. Most of them have almost perfect GPAs, embracing college the way they never embraced high school. All of them were a little bit older; all of them had been in the workforce for anywhere from one to seven years before using the GED Tests to jumpstart their interrupted educations. College gave them space to be themselves. As Lee points out, “And that may be a big difference between college. Cuz you actually can see where you’re going in life. . . . Starting to live life.” The courses seemed relevant, perhaps because the students had set their own goals. School felt relevant the way it never had before, and they felt implaced.

Suddenly these “difficult” students who refused to be “schooled” and molded, who could not find a place in high school, happily submitted themselves to the rules of

work and the programs of study at college or university because they felt implaced. Can we imagine high school as a place that might offer space for all students, other than just the ones who can fit the mold?

Finding a Place to Begin Again

“A public school—it starts in the beginning. They send you in there and whatever shape you are when you go in, they want you to be a shape when you come out” (Sharon). If you do not want to be shaped to fit the mold that school has in mind, then you are likely to feel the effects of difference, disregard, and disappointment. You are likely to feel displaced.

Can we hear what the GED college graduates are telling us? To acknowledge their displacement in school may lead us to re-vision high school in drastic ways. “When schools forget they are liminal spaces, they forget that schools are places for inquiry, not indoctrination” (Grumet, 1998, p. 144).

from September 1, 1939

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.
(Auden, 1939/2009, p. 1)

The GED college graduates have shared their “ironic points of light” and await our response. Will we, who are “composed like them / Of Eros and of dust. / Beleaguered by the same / negation and despair” find the will to “Show an affirming

flame” and make the changes that we can within our own spheres to implacate all our students in high school? In the next chapter, I shine this light into some of the places where these students’ stories might make a difference.

CHAPTER FIVE: DREAMING THEM IMPLACED

Addressing the dropout problem in the United States is a nettlesome issue.

Dropouts stand on the periphery of our school system, giving mute testimony to its failure, while the educators and the public persevere in the fiction that everyone is invited equally to participate.

Nettles

Like neighbors not invited to the wedding
These show up anyway: fat stalks
Dull hairy leaves
They stand at the edge of the garden and cry *I burn!*
Ugly, but tenacious,
They make themselves useful: in teas,
Poultices, cures for baldness and rheumatic complaints.
From us, such homely uses are all they can hope for,
But they have their dream:
To be the chosen food for their beautiful loves
The peacock
Small tortiseshell
And red admiral caterpillars.
(Pollitt, 1994, p. 41)

“Like neighbors not invited to the wedding,” dropouts—before they are dropouts—“show up anyway.” They come to high school even though it does not offer them a place. Oh, our society gives verbal homage to the philosophical ideal that all children can learn, but we have not established the socioeconomic supports or designed the curriculum, the instructional day, and the school buildings themselves to insure the implacement of these “dull hairy leaves” that do not fit into the Dick and Jane, middle-class system. We are confounded by the cries of those who “stand at the end of the garden and cry *I burn!*” Recall that the etymology of the word adolescent bears the meaning “to burn.” The GED college graduates’ stories suggest that adolescents, who feel the burden of difference,

disregard, and disappointment, burn for a place to be in our educational system. Perhaps we tolerate their lack of success because we really do need these “Ugly, but tenacious” young people to grow up, understand their reduced status in our society, and be resigned to “make themselves useful” as disenfranchised people. “From us,” the schools designed to teach them, “such homely uses are all they can hope for.” If we choose to understand that “they have their dream: / To be the chosen food for their beautiful loves,” and if we choose to be engrossed in and motivated by those dreams, perhaps we can allow their feelings of dis-placement to uncover a different path for their education and our living and learning with them as their teachers.

Dreaming Of Different Paths Through High School

What the GED college graduates have uncovered for me is the suffering some of our students undergo in pursuit of their high school diploma. All of the participants in this study scoff at the adage that the four years of high school are “the best years of your life,” and, ironically, my six successful brothers and sisters all feel the same way. If we can use the participants’ stories as guides for imagining a different way of being in high school, what characteristics of these alternate paths would be constant? How might we address the problem of implacement by embracing students’ differences, eschewing disregard for their word of honor, and easing, perhaps even erasing, mutual disappointment?

Dreaming Of Smaller Schools and Greater Caring

Probably the most obvious characteristic of these imagined alternatives would be their smaller size and greater teacher/student contact. “There is now strong evidence that schools, especially high schools, should move toward smaller, more organic structures in

order to do a better job” (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995, p. 9). High school “interdisciplinary teams [working] with groups of 40 to 80 students” (p. 642), as reported by Darling-Hammond, Aness, and Ort (2002) in their review of the successful Coalition Campus Schools Project, creates a vision of a small community in which students are well-known. This does not insure that they are well liked or well-cared-for, or even implaced, but it increases the chances exponentially. “In smaller schools, students, teachers, and school administrators all have more personal relationships with each other” (Fletcher, 2002, p. A03). Additionally, if the small school is created to revolve around the needs, interests and/or talents of a small group of like-minded students and teachers, and they have the flexibility to create unique learning opportunities, then the chances of a student feeling displaced by difference or disregard for their “word of honor” (Lingis, 2007, p. 40) are smaller.

Small size alone, however, will not achieve either caring or academic success. “Not all small schools are successful. Those that incorporate fewer personalizing features and less ambitious instruction produce fewer benefits. Some school-within-a-school strategies have reinforced academic stratification, producing greater success for some students and less for others” (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002, p. 642). Another factor working against small schools’ emphasis on caring relationships is state and federal policy shifts toward a narrowly focused system of accountability based on standardized test scores—“a trend that some feel is forcing administrators to make cultivating positive student attitudes less of a priority” (Fletcher, 2002, p. A03).

Smaller schools, however, have the clear advantage in making students feel connected.

On average, students in smaller schools feel more attached to school than students in larger schools. This finding contributes to mounting evidence that very large schools are not good for students. Several researchers suggest that school size negatively affects school connectedness because, in such settings, teachers cannot maintain warm, positive relations with all students. (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002, p.145)

Maxine Greene (1995) suggests, “To see things or people big, one must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and peculiarity instead” (p. 10). Paradoxically, the implementation of this “big” vision that allows us to “see” students requires a level of human contact more easily achieved in smaller schools. Seeing school smaller in size simply offers better odds that the individual can be seen “big”. To be seen “big,” and to feel the resulting emplacement, a student must feel some degree of care, welcome, or even safety.

In “The Hobbit Effect,” Jimerson (2006), who names her work after J. R. R. Tolkien’s small but large-hearted characters, identifies ten characteristics of smaller schools that indicate an increased likelihood of achieving these larger personal goals. The first three characteristics capture some of the effects of a small school on personal relationships.

1. There is greater participation in extra-curricular activities, and that is linked to academic success.
2. Small schools are safer.
3. Kids feel they belong. (p. 7)

Although it would be difficult to refute the fact that with fewer students in the school, the chances of your being elected class president or participating on the basketball team are greater, the next two findings, “Small schools are safer” and “Kids feel they belong,” could be countered with thoughtful criticisms.

Maxine Greene (1995), for example, might criticize the smaller school, where kids feel safer and have a greater sense of belonging, as an enclave that does not allow children to become “acquainted with—and . . . able to accept—the enormous variety of human lives, the multiplicity of faiths and ways of believing, and the amazing diversity of customs in the world” (p. 21).

To come to terms with such additional realities always involves a risk, one many adults are still unwilling to take and to see their children take. If those children do have the imagination to adjust to what they gradually find out about the intersubjective world as they move further and further from the views of their original home, they are bound to reinterpret their early experiences, perhaps to see the course of their lives as carrying out the possible (among numerous possibilities) rather than the necessary. . . . When nothing intervenes to overcome such inertia, it joins with the sense of repetitiveness and uniformity to discourage active learning. (Greene, 1995, p. 21)

Small schools whose mission is to inculcate students into a small vision of the world *can* succeed in limiting their view. But small schools whose goal is to emphasize humanity, caring, and responsibility through deeper human relationships have at least an equal chance to graduate more of their students and significantly reduce the dropout rate (Wasley, Fine, Gladden, Holland, King, Mosak, & Powell, 2000), and to instill in their students a sense of community and personal responsibility. My sense is that these smaller schools where students feel safe and have a sense of belonging provide a sense of emplacement. The responsibility for this human contact falls largely on teachers.

Logically, teachers in smaller schools have more contact and more regular contact with the students in the school and, thus, a greater opportunity to make students feel cared for.

I would have to say that the institutional application of Nel [Noddings]’s caring concept to schools suggests that it does not respond well to the realities of children and of the teaching task. But I am very much interested in caring teachers, and in trying to frame a conception of caring that could shed light on

the elements of teacher caring. How might that be done? . . . We [can] attempt somehow to restore a personalized caring within public institutions. I am very much committed to this and have been focusing for the last several years on a form of education specializing in it: alternative schools. The single most prevalent feature of alternative education is its emphasis on interpersonal relationships within the school. . . . No other kind of institution can be healthy for—or even minimally injurious to—children. Moreover, claim alternative educators, human relationships are themselves among the most educative features of a school. . . . The explicit purpose is to promote a very personal kind of caring among all the members of the group. My observations of alternative schools suggest many succeed at this to a remarkable degree. (Raywid, 1981/1999, pp. 65-66)

The invaluable caring relationships depend primarily on the teachers. “Large school size negatively affects school connectedness because, in such settings, teachers cannot maintain warm, positive relations with all students” (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002, p. 145). This study also found that “Teachers who did the best job of fostering a welcoming environment were not necessarily the most experienced nor the holders of advanced degrees—a finding that flies in the face of many accepted notions of teacher competence. . . . ‘It doesn’t matter whether a teacher has a graduate degree,’ Blum said. ‘What matters is the environment that a student enters when he [*sic*] walks through the classroom door’” (Fletcher, 2002, p. A03).

Tenth-graders in Maria DePina’s English class at Burke High School, one of Boston’s 30 high schools that recently reorganized into smaller learning communities, say they never once skipped or showed up late, and most mornings they arrived before their teacher. . . . [DePina] builds trusting relationships with students as they “interweave their personal lives—what they care about—with academics.” (Black, 2006, p. 20)

It is the opportunities created by a small school that allow teachers like DePina to cultivate the individual relationships that counteract the claims of the GED college graduates in this study that “No one cares,” and research findings that report, “Of the sixth to twelfth grade students included in a large-scale study by the Minneapolis-based

Search Institute, only 24 percent said, “My teachers really care about me” (Black, 2006, p. 21).

Creating smaller schools seems to begin to address this problem. But, as noted above, the small size must translate into “communitarian schools [where] students are better known and faculty develop a more collective perspective about the purposes and strategies for their work” (Darling-Hammond, Aneesh, & Ort, 2002, p. 641).

Envisioning Smaller Lessons and Bigger Projects

Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen (2008) open Chapter 2 with a quote from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The Gryphon and the Mock Turtle are describing their unusual schooling to Alice who learns ““That’s the reason they’re called lessons,’ the Gryphon remarked; ‘because they lessen from day to day’” (as cited in Jardine, Clifford & Friesen, 2008, p. 11). The *Online Etymological Dictionary* offers that “lesson” by circa 1225, meant “a reading aloud from the Bible,” also “something to be learned by a student.” The word originally comes from the Latin word *lectionem* “a reading.” The pun Carroll creates connecting lesson and lessen is funny in the painful ways puns often are because it highlights a connection we dislike to consider, much as Alice dislikes seeing the side of life she is shown in her travels.

Lessons, perhaps, retain more of their original meaning of “reading from the Bible” than we might think. Students are often given “lessons” to be learned rather than questions to be pondered or real-life quandaries to be explored. The emphasis is on rote learning, not critical thought. Information is prepackaged in lessons that lessen their messy, real-life nature and curtail opportunities for independent thinking. Jardine, Clifford and Friesen (2008) call this “basics as breakdown” and claim that “Under this

inherited image of ‘the basics,’ breakdown has become no longer a *response* but a *premise*” (p. 6). In other words, although “*sometimes* breaking things down is *precisely* what is pedagogically required in the day-to-day work of schooling, or in dealing with specific difficulties of particular children” (p. 6), teachers are taught to lessen the difficulties of the topic before the students have a chance to engage the topic as a whole and formulate their own questions. Ultimately, the lessons not only lessen the difficulty, they also lessen engagement, a search for meaningful connections, and a personal interest in the subject. Is this why students *can* sit and sop up a 45-minute lesson in chemistry, pop up when the bell rings, march down the hall, sit down when the bell rings, and open a book to read a chapter on the Civil War and answer the questions at the end without ever actually engaging in any thought? Perhaps this is why my intern teachers complain that the students do not want to think. “They get angry when I won’t give them the answer,” they tell me.

“The difficult task for the teacher is to devise situations in which the young will move from the habitual and the ordinary and consciously undertake a search” (Greene, 1995, p. 24). How do we ignite the imagination and natural inquisitiveness of students? Noddings (2005b) points out that “Teachers these days are expected to induce a desire to learn in all students. But all students already want to learn; it is a question of what they want to learn” (p. 19). How can we create a balance or an in-between space where the interests of students and the goals of education can live together?

The alternate paths available in small schools might employ, for the most part, the “project method” described by William Heard Kilpatrick, a colleague of John Dewey’s at Columbia University Teacher’s College at the turn of the last century. Kilpatrick’s major

contributions to education were his interpretations of John Dewey, especially as expressed in his “project method.” The progressive education Kilpatrick espoused rested strongly on Dewey’s democratic ideals combined with Kilpatrick’s own belief in the individual and the individual’s ability to learn from interacting with the environment. Schools should nurture the development of students who learn to formulate ideas, think independently, draw conclusions, and defend and explain their conclusions as participants in a democratic society. School should achieve this end by allowing a student to pursue her/his own interests and ideas: the “project method” (Beyer, 1997, pp. 473-478).

Most teachers today are familiar with the idea of giving students projects to do as a method of either pursuing an individual line of thought growing out of a teacher-led unit of instruction or, more often, as an evaluation of a student’s mastery of a topic. Kilpatrick’s concept of “project learning” does not come *after* the learning; it *is* the learning. It involves a loosely constructed four-step process that starts with a student brainstorming with a teacher or a guide around a topic of study until the student identifies a research question or a line of inquiry. What does the student want to know? This is purposing, step one. This leads to step two, the planning of the project, followed by step three, the inquiry or research. Step four asks the student to evaluate the answers or results she/he has discovered, which can lead back to step one with the formulation of another question or step two, the planning of a second project. The Center for Artistry in Learning (2000) describes a five-step process whereby students develop a research idea, conduct the research, prepare a rough draft, receive teacher and student feedback, and prepare and present a final project to share their knowledge. The Sudbury model develops this concept of student-directed learning to its fullest extent, espousing a

completely democratic school environment where all learning is student initiated. “In practice this means that students initiate all their own activities and create their own environments. The physical plant, the staff, and the equipment are there for the students to use as the need arises” (Sudbury Valley School, 2009, p. 1). Kilpatrick believed that “The ability and determination to engage the world through such acts [as outlined in the project method] allows people to control their lives and to act with care in bringing to fruition worthy activities; these traits, in turn, allow people to exercise their moral responsibility” (Beyer, 1997, p. 481).

Always, though, Kilpatrick saw it as the teacher’s responsibility to get to know the students, to help them build on their strengths, and to guide them to develop as deeply and completely into fully-functioning adults as possible. The alternate paths we might imagine can employ Kilpatrick’s project method because two key elements are in place: the smaller number of students for whom the teacher is responsible and a thematic focus that has preselected students with similar needs, interests, and/or talents. The students may not be able to formulate their own, personal research questions, but given their location in a space of shared needs, interests and/or talents, teachers and students are far more likely to develop and explore mutually satisfying questions.

It is the questioning inherent in the project method that has the potential to create interest and motivation on the part of the student. The students and teachers create questions that have meaning for them.

This is why understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else’s meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one’s own thinking on the subject. Only in an inauthentic sense can we talk about understanding questions that one does not pose oneself—e.g., questions that are outdated or empty. (Gadamer, 1960/2006, p. 368)

The outdated or empty pre-processed questions, like the questions at the end of the chapter in a textbook, may lead to *learning*, but the greater goal of the project method is *understanding*.

Kilpatrick presupposed an interdisciplinary approach to the project method because he did not come shackled with the Carnegie unit credit (the high school equivalent of university credit hours) courses described and proscribed by the current Program of Studies for high schools. Catherine, one of the participants in this study, captures the naturalness of an alternative, interdisciplinary approach. Catherine describes it herself.

Well, here's an idea that I had, and at one point I said to myself, "You know, it's really too bad that someone isn't more interested in me and could say to me, 'Oh, you like theater. Let's make theater the context in which we're going to teach you everything else. We're going to teach you math in the context of building a set, and we're going to teach you everything else. History, we're going to do everything in the context of theater because this is what you love.'" That would be great. That would have made it relevant to me if they'd found that one thing and taught me . . . As a teacher, I believe in that contextual learning. Sometime in my life, I thought that would be the way to teach me. If I could go back and teach me, I would have taken me out of the school building. I would have taken me down to that theater, and everything would have happened there. 'Cuz that's where I was comfortable and happy, and that's where I wanted to be. So I guess you would make the place the child chooses to be and work there. You want a job? Let's give you a job, and we're going to teach you in the meantime. (Catherine)

This is a truly child-centered approach unlike a more technical orientation adopted in Colorado for this Fall, 2009, that proposes to group students "based on what they already know and [they] will move up only as they master new material" (Webber, 2009, p. 7). This means that older students experiencing challenges in one subject area may be grouped with younger, more capable students. The older ones will likely be passed by younger students as they struggle with their bodily dis-placement, dealing with a situation

and academic material to which they have no connection. Worst of all, they will spend more time with this alienating material than with questions that excite and please them. If Colorado is going to take the extra time, effort, and money to group students by their needs, would it not be more humane and educationally sound to group students *and teachers* by their interests, and approach curriculum as it runs through these subjects?

The bigger goals that might be accomplished through the project method in thematic groups of students and teachers would be primarily this sense of implacement. Students and teachers would be gathered around topics, plans, projects, and activities that they enjoy. The smaller, thematic groups may provide the underlying sense of implacement that was sorely missing from the experiences of the GED college graduates, and this may help to re-excite students about understanding their world outside of “getting to the next level on whatever video game you’re playing” (Joe). It certainly seems more educationally sound than treating students as if they are malfunctioning systems that need re-mediation. Perhaps a truer re-mediation would be to allow students’ needs, interests, and/or talents to engage the wider academic world.

Daydreaming of Fewer Yardsticks and More Growth

When Nel Noddings (2005b) argues against both organizing the instructional day around discrete content areas and then assigning all students equally to study each area, she argues against Adler’s concept of equality in education.

In the *Paideia Proposal* (1982), Mortimer Adler argues that true democracy demands equal education for all children. . . . Few of us would argue against Adler if he meant that all children—regardless of race, gender, economic status, or ethnicity—should have access to whatever forms of education are available. Most of us would also agree that access means more than a formal legal right to education; it involves decent schools, adequate coaching, encouragement, and advice.

But Adler construes equal to mean identical. . . . Forcing all students through a curriculum designed for the capacities of a few cannot be done in the service of equality. . . . As a result of its association with power and privilege, liberal education has become a form of privileged knowledge. . . . It is privileged because privileged people claim it as their own. (Noddings, 2005b, pp. 28-32)

And here is where any concept of alternative education risks condemnation. If schools are designed around middle-class values and social skills, as I have discussed earlier in this document, then working class and poor students may fail *by design*. The politically popular technical agenda's answer to their failure is to give them more of the same. Students are forced to, as Reenie said, "Get a double-dose of what I didn't like" (Reenie). For example, the Maryland High School Assessment (HSA) testing program offers a "Bridge Plan" for students who cannot pass the required, timed, multiple-choice tests to graduate, but they *require* that the students have *failed* the test *twice and* have attended remediation courses to prepare for the test.

MSDE recognizes that there will be some students who will struggle on the HSAs, even after they take the tests several times and take advantage of academic remediation. The Bridge Plan for Academic Validation is an instructional intervention which provides students who are having difficulty on the HSAs an alternative means to meeting the graduation requirement. The Bridge Plan is for students who have passed the HSA-related course but have not passed an HSA after two or more attempts. To be eligible for the Bridge Plan, the student must also be making satisfactory progress toward graduation; have participated in locally administered or approved assistance; and have demonstrated satisfactory attendance as determined by local standards. (MSDE, 2009a, p. 1)

I want to applaud MSDE for recognizing "that there will be some students who will struggle on the HSAs," but my hands are stilled midair by the callous attitude they take toward students' experience of dramatic, dis-placing *failure*! In other words, they *require* that students experience failure before they can turn to an alternate way to demonstrate their knowledge, and they *require* that students suffer further dis-placement by being

placed in an “assistance” program with the other students labeled *failures*. I have taught these classes; I have seen how the students slink into the room, duck their heads, and otherwise demonstrate their shame. Why must they be labeled so thoroughly as failures before their needs, interests, and/or talents are acknowledged?

Consider also the demographics of the Maryland HSA passing rate. The “% of students who have taken all 4 tests and have met the HSA requirement by passing all 4 or by the combined score option (i.e., balancing poor performance on one test by outstanding performance on another)” (MSDE, 2009b, p. 1), show that African-American students, LEP (Limited English Proficiency) students, and FARMS (Free and Reduced Meals) students (i.e., poor students) have more than a 25 percent lower passing rate than white students (MSDE, 2009b, p. 1).

Two inescapable conclusions seem important when considering the necessity and appropriateness of alternative educational approaches. The first is that the original instruction, the test, and the remediation are failing some students. Second, these students are poor and different from the white, middle-class students. It does not seem to be educationally sound to continue to force students to experience failure as a means of helping them succeed in life, or even to graduate from high school. GED college graduates have told us that, despite their intellectual acumen and willingness to work at challenging academic material, their *failure* to fit into the mold of schooling resulted in such bodily displacement that they could not stay.

One immediate problem, though, with creating alternative paths, will be the possible limitation of life chances such instruction may force onto students.

Studying noncollege topics does not have to doom anyone to an inferior occupation or an undeveloped mind. Such results are artifacts of a false

hierarchy, not the inevitable outcome of a course of study. To be sure that all groups of children receive a high-quality education means, first, that the needs and talents of individual children are considered in educational planning, and, second, that no children are excluded from a form of schooling from which they might profit. (Noddings, 2005b, p. 41)

If Catherine's imaginary theatre-centered program described above does not carry the same cachet and value in her work or college applications, then her participation in an alternative program may only initially mask and later exacerbate the discrimination society will continue to impose on those who are displaced by difference, disregard, and disappointment.

Creating implacing high school situations for displaced students would require tremendous effort and perseverance on the part of the visionary teachers, tremendous faith and flexibility on the part of school systems, and tremendous economic revisioning of school budgets. Could this vision be accomplished more easily by creating charter schools designed for students and teachers with particular interests, needs and/or abilities? Could parents/guardians and teachers expand a home-school situation into an alternative path along these dream lines? Is it possible that all we need is to reclaim our adult understanding of how *we* can best lead our young people into productive lives as citizens and parents, friends and lovers? The GED college graduates' stories suggest some possibilities for future exploration.

Dreaming of Implacing Alternatives

Alternative high school programs may not appear, at first, to be dramatically different from the traditional model in terms of a basic course of study. What would be dramatically different would be the degree to which the students would be able to affect

the space. In alternative programs, students and teachers could dwell together, creating their shared learning space by listening to each other.

Building and thinking are, each in its own way, inescapable for dwelling. The two, however, are also insufficient for dwelling so long as each busies itself with its own affairs in separation, instead of listening to the other.
(Heidegger, 1954/1993b, p. 362)

If students and teachers are encouraged to build a school by listening to each other's thinking, then perhaps students will be afforded real opportunities to dwell in school: to feel implaced. What might these alternative places look like?

As stated previously, we might imagine a change in the context: smaller, more personal situations using students' needs and interests as the basis for designing an implacing curriculum for some students. Three possibilities might be explored. One may be simply re-thinking the traditional timeline of high school that envisions only one entry and one exit point with students sitting in classrooms in-between. Another possibility may be to gather together students of similar interests and/or abilities with like-minded teachers, provide them with an appropriate learning space related to their areas of interest, and allow them to learn the content through the lens of that particular discipline. A third might be to allow specific groups of students and teachers to follow a traditional program of studies with an overarching principle that formulates and organizes their basic questions about the world in which they live.

The first type of alternative path might involve a hiatus in traditional academic work while students hold a full-time job. We saw how well this worked for Simon who simply dropped out of high school, worked for a year, then used the GED Tests to go to college. What was the key for him? It was the mentor with whom he was blessed who warned him that she would fire him after a year to force him to go on to college. Could

high school provide a job placement service and mentors to imitate Simon's success for some students? Students like Chad, who, you recall, only wanted money in his pocket, might be implaced in a similar alternate employment path that would allow him to work full time apprenticed, perhaps, to a union worker to acquire a family-supporting skill and still allow him access to a full academic course of study for college preparation if and when he desired it. Why must K-12 education be an uninterrupted line? Chad's interest in learning was awakened in work-related learning; his interest in furthering his classroom knowledge emerged after he had acquired more maturity and responsibility. Perhaps the worst horse *is* the best horse.

In our scriptures, . . . it is said that there are four kinds of horses: excellent ones, good ones, poor ones, and bad ones. The best horse will run slow and fast, right and left at the driver's will before it sees the shadow of the whip. The second best will run as well as the first one does just before the whip reaches its skin. The third one will run when it feels pain on its body. The fourth will run after the pain penetrates to the marrow of its bones. You can imagine how difficult it is for the fourth one to learn how to run. . . .

You will find the worst horse is the most valuable one. In your very imperfections, you will find the basis for your firm, way-seeking mind. . . . But those who find great difficulties in practicing Zen will find more meaning in it. So I think that sometimes, the best horse may be the worst horse, and the worst horse can be the best one. . . . It is true in life. (Coyote, 1988, tape #1)

The text suggests that the worst horse is the best one because to acquire its knowledge requires tremendous diligence, perseverance, and faith. What comes so easily to the "best" horse is painfully learned by the "worst" horse. The "worst" horse "will find more meaning in" the learning because of the effort acquired to attain it. So it seems to be with Chad. His teachers might have called him the "worst" horse, but when he found himself implaced, he was willing to make a much larger effort to acquire the academic learning he desired than would have been necessary if he had just stayed the course in high school.

A second alternative path we might explore would be interdisciplinary experiences taught from a single focus of interest. “Many of the academic skills we deem important can be learned as adjuncts to their [the students’] central . . . interests” (Noddings, 2005b, p. 50). Previously, Catherine has outlined a theatre arts program that would teach all her subjects through a focus on drama: a small school setting of students and teachers with similar interests who could study all the traditional academic subjects through the lens of the stage and all its historical, artistic, and practical relationships. In a similar way, Joe, who sorely missed the camaraderie of athletics once he entered high school, might find placement in an outdoor environmental science-based program that partners with the county’s recreation department and a nonprofit group, such as Defenders of Wildlife, to provide volunteer services for hiking trail maintenance and free educational classes on topics such as habitat preservation. The students’ classroom would be the outdoors, and the cohort of students, working and learning together in a physically challenging environment, might replace Joe and others like him the way a traditional classroom could not.

Simon and Chad’s positive work experiences might also inform this sort of gathering of students and teachers around a single focus of interest. Work experiences, sought by some students and provided by local employment, might form a focal point for a group of students and teachers with similar interests. With enough flexibility, students might work and study concurrently, especially when academic projects are directly related to the work they find stimulating and fulfilling. If the more permeable K-12 stream discussed earlier is also in place, these students might return to the academic environment with more maturity and focus, or they might earn a vocational/technical

diploma and continue their employment. Many possibilities for combining work and vocational/technical education might be possible once the binary choices of school or work, high school or vocational/technical training are dissolved.

Some traditional high school models might need only a narrower focus on a particular group of students' interests to provide a third alternative. As noted earlier, "By and large, interests—not tested capacities—should determine placement" (Noddings, 2005b, p. 46). Reenie, an ESL student, might find a sense of implacement and value in a small traditional setting limited to Latinas. The young women might study with teachers who could value both the Spanish-speaking and English-speaking cultures competing for ascendancy in these girls' lives, address the particular challenges of growing up in this in-between space, and foster personal and academic achievement. Gifted students, like Sharon, might finish their high school Carnegie credits at a local community college. The school system could provide a "homeroom teacher" to meet regularly with the high school students enrolled in college courses to provide counseling, social activities, and a sense of implacement that might go begging if the high school students were left on their own to interact with an older, more sophisticated student body. Likewise, students like Lee, who have deviated from the traditional path of adolescence by getting married or becoming pregnant, might find more implacement in an alternative setting that offers a re-visioning of content, scheduling, and extra-curricular activities that provide a place for them to envision and create themselves as successful, implaced adults.

In alternative settings, released from Carnegie unit courses and rigid schedules, students and teachers may be able to rediscover or recover or uncover our innate human

interest in learning. The freedom to choose a field of learning and structure one's own projects might be the best sort of emplacement.

Ancient painters used to practice putting dots on paper in artistic disorder. This is rather difficult. Even though you try to do it, usually what you do is arranged in some order. You think you can control it, but you cannot; it is almost impossible to arrange your dots out of order. It is the same with taking care of your everyday life. Even though you try to put people under some control, it is impossible. You cannot do it. The best way to control people is to encourage them to be mischievous. Then they will be in control in its wider sense. To give your sheep or cow a large, spacious meadow is the way to control him. So it is with people: first let them do what they want, and watch them. This is the best policy. To ignore them is not good; that is the worst policy. The second worst is trying to control them. The best one is to watch them, just to watch them, without trying to control them. (Suzuki, 1970/2006, p. 19)

In alternative school settings, teachers and students might be given “a large spacious meadow” to explore. Teachers can watch the children, without trying to control them.

Using Noddings's terms of care theory, teachers can develop their engrossment and motivational displacement toward their students' interests and projects. Teachers might become true facilitators of learning, providing guidance, resources, and faith in the students' own abilities to find their place.

If we can break the restrictive molds we cherish in the name of equality, we might find places where all students can have an equal chance. One of the challenges, though, will be to teach the teachers to be part of the dream.

Remembering the Influences Beyond the School Halls

Smaller schools using project-based instruction in a variety of alternative settings and achieving curriculum goals and objectives without subjecting students to endless testing is not a panacea. As I explained at the beginning of Chapter Four, powerful social, economic, community, and interpersonal forces will always play a pivotal role in a student's ability to persist in high school.

High school is a socially constructed entity. Casey (1993) asserts “Body and place belong together from the very beginning. Their fate is linked” (p. 45). Since each high school place exists in a specific community, that community’s unique characteristics will come to school with the students. The advantages or disadvantages of the students’ socioeconomic status, health care, and social and/or political connections that exist outside the school’s walls are clearly present within them, embodied in the students who walk the halls. Attending school in Winnetka, Illinois, one of Chicago’s wealthiest suburbs, is far different from attending school in the inner city. Similarly, attending the Minnesota New Country School, where students are using self-initiated project learning (Olson, 2009), is far different from attending the Bethany Baptist Academy, where “Students interact almost exclusively with born-again Christians” (Peshkin, 1986, p. 85).

School is also a construct of the community’s families. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University issued a report on *The Importance of Family Dinners V*. ““The magic of the family dinner comes not from the food on the plate but from who’s at the table and what’s happening there. The emotional and social benefits that come from family dinners are priceless,’ said Elizabeth Planet, CASA’s Vice President and Director of Special Projects” (2009, p. 1). Some children, however, can describe frightful family dinners, full of the same shame, guilt, and fear that some people use to describe their experience of schooling (Olson, 2009). The “magic” CASA tries to measure is the love children might experience at family dinners. “But to some extent, all families are dysfunctional. No family is perfect, and most have serious problems” (Moore, 1992, p. 26). Further, family experiences can affect different children differently. In my own family, my sisters and I have quite different memories of growing

up in the same household. This alchemy of family life is another outside influence over which school has no control yet profoundly affects a student's ability to persist.

Finally, each human being is unique. Experiences that wound one child harden another and have no effect on a third. My participants have told us how school offered them no place to be, and their solution was to leave. Other students have brought guns to school and killed fellow students and themselves as a means of escape. The two examples highlight not only the extremes of possible behavior but also imply the panoply of possibilities in-between. How do we, as teachers, schools, and a nation, learn to recognize and to respond to these unique individuals?

I am thrown back to the opportunities offered by smaller schools where adults and students have greater opportunities for intimate relationships. Perhaps if students can find an adult who can care for them in school, the various influences of community, family, and individual chemistry can be honored and implaced.

Teaching the Teachers to Be Dreamers

Can you hear and
Do you care and
Can you see we
Must be free to
Teach the children
To believe and
Make a world that
We can live in.
(Nash, 1970, p. 1)

When I was a first-year teacher, which was over thirty years ago, I had a lively group of tenth graders for English right after lunch. I was wound tighter than an old pocket watch and just as likely to spring, but my students were wonderfully carefree, iconoclastic, and irreverent. I would *never* have used the word “wonderful” to describe

them at the time. I cannot remember any of their names, but I will call the liveliest of them Tom. Tom knew a sitting duck when he saw one, and I was the perfect target for his uproariously imaginative nature. I wish I still had a copy of the three-page, single-spaced classroom rules I gave them the first day of class. He knew he could meet my challenge.

My favorite memory of Tom—favorite only now, you realize—was the day he came to class with a straw and proceeded to shoot surreptitious spitballs through it at his classmates. He became bolder and bolder until I finally caught him in the act. I was too involved in *me* to see anything about *him*: his love of mischief, his desire for me to see him as a person, his dislike of my distance and rigidity, or how my “lessens” made no connection with his life’s goals. I took the straw away from him; he protested; I ignored the protests. The next day he came to class with a pocketful of straws. When I tried to confiscate them, he pointed out that he had not done anything with them, and he claimed he needed them for science class. I will just let you laugh your way to the end of this story as I performed like a well-trained new teacher, rigidly playing my technical role as rule-enforcer.

Seeing Myself As Part of the Problem

In my application to the University of Maryland PhD program, I said in my essay that, “I wanted to understand” the high school dropout problem, and “I wanted to be part of the solution.” What I did not realize at the time—and what this hermeneutic phenomenological journey with my GED college graduates helped me to understand—is that I was part of the problem. I needed to understand my complicity in perpetuating a system of education that has adopted such a technical approach to the art of teaching and

learning that the people in it expect and accept that some human beings can be labeled as failures.

Rilke asks, “Can we be moved by anything except / by what helps and by what wounds us?” (Rilke, 1926/2009, p. 1). When I was in high school and college, I never asked to be moved by what I learned; it didn’t matter if it helped me or wounded me. The only thing that mattered was whether it was the “right” answer. I unwittingly passed on this cerebral orientation to the world to my students until the insistence of students to have their own say broke through the dykes and created unsettling puddles in my mind. Their hearts and souls were seeping in. Phenomenology allowed the dams to break, and I found I was swimming, not drowning as I had been taught to fear.

Learning to swim in this new sea was not easy. Accepting a phenomenological way of understanding cannot be accomplished in the teacher’s heart and mind without some of it puncturing some of those air pockets that keep “good girls” afloat, “equat[ing] receiving, retaining, and returning the words of authority with learning” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997, p. 39). Success, I had accepted, comes from this masculine discipline, not from the messy feminine. I was pretty good at that—until the GED college students dipped their hands into my sea, swirling their visions around me in endless eddies of light until I emerged, breathless, into a new understanding. Phenomenology offers the life-preserving awakening that does not lead to the despair that causes Edna Ponteliver to walk into the sea (Chopin, 1976); it allows me to swim toward an understanding of Being that releases my bodily understanding of my life and my experience of school and teaching.

Changing

I have undergone a sea change. I have gone on a voyage with these adults and felt my feet leave the ocean floor and swim with them in their memories of a school system that did not help them navigate their individual worlds successfully. I am trying to find my way back to some sort of solid ground from which I can launch a new understanding of how school might work better. How did I shed the anchors of reason that I had so willingly tied to my feet throughout my education in order to swim through the seas of memory, story, and soulful understanding to acquire the fins of imagination?

Phenomenology released the longing in my teacher's heart that I had learned to quash in reverence for a more reasoned, scientific, technical understanding of my life and my life's work. In my first class with Dr. Hultgren, I felt as if I were coming home. We uncovered the reality of the larger school curriculum that teaches a white, middle-class understanding of society and each student's place within it. I doubt I ever was the same after that. After similar experiences with Dr. Selden and Dr. Valli exploded my narrow views of social justice and teacher training, phenomenology gave me the freedom to structure an understanding founded on a bodily-implaced, imaginative understanding of classrooms that could examine the uneasiness I had felt dealing with students from a technical perspective.

Several fundamental assumptions have been washed away. I no longer accept organizing the breadth of human existence into discrete bits of information that can be fed into students. As Jardine points out, the fascinating explorations, worries, dreams, and problem-solving that led human beings to uncover all the understandings about our world are threatened with irrelevance when organized into daily "lessons". To excite

students about the knowledge we, as a human society, treasure, they must have the chance to experience the excitement themselves. This might be accomplished by encouraging teachers and students to explore their common interests in learning/working communities.

I also have come to believe that students who are dropping out of our high schools are not choosing to go. It is not a choice. Early in this study, one of my committee members alerted me to this possibility, and her observations were completely born out in the waves of displacement these students suffered. To co-opt the anti-abortion campaign slogan, which seems to me to be more concerned about having those babies come out than taking care of them afterwards, “It’s not a choice; it’s a child.” It may be hard to think of high school dropouts as children, but it was easy for me to see how their dropping out was not a choice. Society tries to think of it as a problem of poor choices, but the GED college graduates easily re-captured the sense of difference, disregard, and disappointment that displaced them. They do not drop out; they are forced out.

Joe, one of the GED college graduates, wanted to re-vision school as an “eight-lane highway with CD lanes” instead of the “straight and narrow path” that seems to have been imposed on education from a moral, paternalistic, colonial understanding of school, knowledge, and child rearing. As Catherine points out, this system “works well for a lot of people.” If so, then changes need not be wholesale; they can be offered in pilot programs that can demonstrate their effectiveness on a small scale before a broader implementation. How can *all* high school students be offered a place to be? How can schooldom create Joe’s eight-lane highway toward high school completion?

Many students are finding success in the traditional high school, and their placement probably should not be threatened where no community or personal need exists. We can recognize, however, in the stories of the GED college graduates, that even in communities where many, if not most, of the students are feeling sufficiently placed to carve success from the high school program of studies, many silent sufferers endure the displacement of difference, disappointment, and disregard. We can read the statistics of those who drop out; how many more simply slog their way through the displacing program, get their degree, and flee? If we understand the GED college graduates' stories as those of the few who either found the courage or gave up the struggle, how many more are suffering without reprieve?

Perhaps one of the initial changes to be made is to follow Noddings's suggestion of opening the curriculum to all areas of human knowledge and understanding rather than the restricted concept of a liberal arts education. Could we change the concept of a high school diploma to indicate any number of programs of study much as colleges and universities have conceptualized their diplomas? A change of designation, I believe, would be imperative to avoid the persistent belief that the traditional liberal arts program is somehow *better than* any other program of high school study. Perhaps we could award a high school certificate indicating that a student has met the requirements for a particular program's certification of completion.

Teaching the Teachers

These days I have the terrifying responsibility of learning with new teachers at Johns Hopkins University how to teach in today's schools. The program accepts adults with bachelor's degrees in English, biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, or a

language into a Master's in the Art of Teaching program, and I prepare them in the summer to begin teaching adolescents in the fall. It is a frightening prospect—for all of us. They come equipped with little more than a desire to teach, and they will be given a full-time teacher's schedule in the fall. And because they are new and because the teaching profession is one of those that eats its young, they will likely have several of the most challenging classes and probably be asked to sponsor an extracurricular activity as well. I tell them stories, and I give them advice about how to accomplish tasks of tremendous value to the administration, such as how to take attendance. I listen to their fears and try to help them imagine a classroom of connection when all they ask for is how to enforce the rules. I do my best to model for them a classroom that fosters critical thought and personal connection, but they ask for demonstrations of how to control the class. I try to balance their need for answers and structure and my desire to set them—and, by extension, their students—free.

The GED college graduates speak warmly of the teachers that set their minds and imaginations free. They tell of leaders (Joe) and of listeners (Simon). They describe people who had conversations with students (Lee), and instructors who challenged them and would not accept anything but the greatest effort (Chad and Lee). How did these adults find their way to become great teachers? “Can [we] hear, and do [we] care, and can [we see that they] must be free to teach the children”?

Noddings (2005b), harkening back to Dewey, imagines re-structuring education from the point of view of what every parent wants for her or his children. But in a country as diverse as ours, why are we looking for consensus? In the re-imagined situations for the GED college graduates, individual needs, interests and/or abilities

suggest, nay demand, imaginative solutions. Perhaps Dewy and Noddings's idea of parents lies not in restructuring schools but in releasing educators to work with individual communities to discover what is best for their children.

Becoming

I have come full circle, then. I asked to be part of the solution, discovered how my educational system and I are part of the problem, and have found a measure of understanding. Am I to be left at the beginning? Of course. All life is a beginning.

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is often to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

...

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this
Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(Eliot, 1942/2009, p. 1)

What must all this mean, then, for me, for my work as an educator, for the ethical and moral call these insights place upon me? I feel deeply obligated to my GED college graduates who spoke so valiantly about a time in their lives that was often painful. They told me their stories because they hoped it would make a difference for another student. I hope I can be as brave in my future as an educator. I hope I can be part of a re-visioning of education that truly does believe not only that all children can learn, but also that all children can learn differently. I hope I can urge my new teachers to imagine a future for education that changes and grows toward a future of true equality.

Appendix A

Mary Grace Snyder
 13537 Walnutwood Lane
 Germantown, MD 20874
 301-972-5792
marygracekenn@yahoo.com

Dear Potential Co-researcher:

I am a former member of the General Educational Development Testing Service National Staff, and I am currently soliciting co-researchers in a study of the lived high school experience of GED college graduates. I am motivated to conduct this study by the incredible stories of courage, resourcefulness, and perseverance I have heard from GED graduates.

I would like to talk to you about your high school experience before you earned your GED certificate and graduated from college. As you know, the nation is facing a dropout crisis with more than 1 million students a year leaving high school before graduation as reported by America's Promise, sponsor of a new dropout prevention program headed by Gen. Colin Powell. You hold a piece of the solution to this problem in your memories of what high school was like for you before you chose to leave.

Your involvement in the study would consist of

- an initial telephone or email contact;
- two to three conversations with me about your high school experience;
- preparation of a short, informal, written reminiscence of high school;
- possible follow-up questions.

Your confidentiality will be paramount. No documents or recordings will bear your name or any other identifying information. An alias can be used to further mask your identity.

Revisiting this time in your life may be uncomfortable or even painful, but potentially fulfilling. After all, you know better than anyone else how the high school experience failed to meet your needs. Your story can be used as the basis for policy change at a time when so many students need help persevering in their traditional high school programs.

I am eager to talk to you about participating with me in this study. Please call me at 301-972-5792 or email me at marygracekenn@yahoo.com. I will be happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have, and you entail no commitment with this initial contact.

Sincerely,
 Mary Grace Snyder
 Ph. D. Candidate, University of Maryland

Appendix B

Draft of a Typical Response to an Initial Email Contact by a Co-researcher

Thank you for your interest in participating with me in a study of the high school experience of GED®-credentialed college graduates. I appreciate the potential time commitment you are willing to make as well as the personal risk you are willing to take to tell your story. I chose to limit my study to GED-credentialed college graduates because this eliminates any question of whether or not you had the academic potential to complete high school in a traditional program. If intellectual acumen was not the challenge, then what was? This is the story I believe has the potential to change the high school experience for many future students.

I would like to schedule a face-to-face meeting with you at your convenience to answer all your questions, to obtain your signature on a consent form, and to begin our conversation. I will ask you to tell me what high school was like for you. With your permission, I will record our conversation. My work will be to reflect on your story, and the recording will allow me to quote your words accurately.

After our first meeting, I will ask you to engage in some quiet reflection and reminiscence writing. This is not any sort of organized, professional paper; it should simply be your memories, feelings, thoughts, emotions, or stories about high school. It will probably look most like a diary or journal entry: perhaps somewhat disorganized but full of feelings and ideas. This written preparation will make our second conversation more fruitful and provide us with a starting point for our further work together. Once I have had the chance to read and reflect on your writing, we can schedule a second conversation.

At our second meeting, we will continue our conversation, ensuring that you have ample time to tell me your whole story without feeling rushed or pressured in any way. Again with your permission, I will record our conversation.

We may feel we want to have a third conversation. You will always have the opportunity to contact me at any time to add to your reminiscences.

Once my writing about your stories and the stories of our other co-researchers is complete, I will share my analysis with you. You will have an opportunity to give me feedback about how well I have captured your high school experience. If you wish, I will also return to you both your writing and the tape recording of our conversations.

Please suggest possible dates and times when we might meet at a coffee shop or a restaurant. I would be happy to offer you some refreshment while we talk.

Thank you for your interest in helping me to help future high school students.

Appendix C

Page 1 of 2

Initials _____ Date _____

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project Title	Exploring the Lived High School Experience of GED®-credentialed College Graduates: A Phenomenological Study
Why is this research being done?	This is a research project being done by Mary Grace Snyder in the Department of Education Policy Studies in the College of Education at the University of Maryland, College Park. The purpose of this research is to describe the high school experience of GED-credentialed college graduates.
What will I be asked to do?	<p>You will be asked to contribute approximately six to seven hours to the project.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You will be asked to have two or three conversations with me about your high school experience (five to six hours total). 2. You will be asked to write a story about your high school experience (one hour). 3. You <i>may</i> be asked to add to your answers at a later date (probably by phone or email) to clarify something for me (one-half hour). 4. You will be offered the <i>opportunity</i> to review the final report, but you will not be <i>required</i> to do so (one-half hour).
How will my identity be protected?	First, you will choose a pseudonym that we will use when we talk about and record your high school experiences. Only I will know your real name, and I will not use it to identify you in any written or recorded information.
What are the risks and benefits of this research?	It may be revelatory to relive some of your high school experiences, discovering new meanings in old memories. You may also take some pride in the possibility of improving the high school experience for other people in your circumstances. Other than that, the research poses no particular risks or benefits.
Do I have to be in this research? Can I stop participating at any time?	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary; you may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time.
Is any medical treatment available if I am injured?	The University of Maryland does not provide any medical, hospitalization or other insurance for participants in this research study, nor will the University of Maryland provide any medical treatment or compensation for any injury sustained as a result of participation in this research study, except as required by law.

Page 2 of 2

Initials _____ Date _____

What if I have questions?	<p>If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact me at 301-972-5792 or at marygracekenn@yahoo.com.</p> <p>If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail) irb@deans.umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0678.</p> <p><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i></p>	
Statement of Age of Subject and Consent	<p>Your signature indicates that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • you are at least 18 years of age; • the research has been explained to you; • your questions have been answered; and • you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project. 	
Signature and Date	NAME OF PARTICIPANT	
	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	
	DATE	

Appendix D

September 1, 1939

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offence
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad,
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god:
I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

Into this neutral air
Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain

Competitive excuse:
 But who can live for long
 In an euphoric dream;
 Out of the mirror they stare,
 Imperialism's face
 And the international wrong.

Faces along the bar
 Cling to their average day:
 The lights must never go out,
 The music must always play,
 All the conventions conspire
 To make this fort assume
 The furniture of home;
 Lest we should see where we are,
 Lost in a haunted wood,
 Children afraid of the night
 Who have never been happy or good.

The windiest militant trash
 Important Persons shout
 Is not so crude as our wish:
 What mad Nijinsky wrote
 About Diaghilev
 Is true of the normal heart;
 For the error bred in the bone
 Of each woman and each man
 Craves what it cannot have,
 Not universal love
 But to be loved alone.

From the conservative dark
 Into the ethical life
 The dense commuters come,
 Repeating their morning vow;
 'I will be true to the wife,
 I'll concentrate more on my work,'
 And helpless governors wake
 To resume their compulsory game:
 Who can release them now,
 Who can reach the dead,
 Who can speak for the dumb?

All I have is a voice
 To undo the folded lie,
 The romantic lie in the brain

Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.
(Auden, 1939/2009, p. 1)

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