45 A Soft Approach to Hard Teaching

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Act 1

By my second year of teaching, my theater classes that met on the old, raised stage at Dawson High, a school north of Chicago, were packed, and sometimes the auditorium filled with visitors as well. Visitors consisted of other students who either wanted to watch my class or to miss their own. When the classes functioned, kids did credible work that went beyond acting. One student, Lily, said to me, “In your class people can be themselves, it’s like a home.” My belief that students should be themselves had drawbacks too. In my afternoon acting class, on a Friday in the dead of winter, Antonio LeBlanc mooned me and I, enraged, charged after him down a series of hallways. Later, he and I ended up in a meeting with the dean and his parents in The Office. In my first year of teaching, I had the strange feeling that it was not Antonio who was in trouble, but me.

After all, I reasoned in my head, hadn’t I caused this? Sitting next to Antonio in undersized puke green chairs waiting to be called in, I wondered how we arrived at this place? If I only knew how to discipline properly, this would never have happened. This kind of thinking began at different starting points, but always ended the same way, with resounding finality. I am not a real teacher. What was I even thinking getting into the profession in the first place? We were called in. Antonio said, “I didn’t ever know you were mad, Mr. Lessing. You’re always grinning.” Really? I felt dumbstruck. I thought I had been mad as hell at this kid many times before, and yet here he was saying the opposite. The message came through only after yelling at the top of my lungs like a madman, disrupting classroom after classroom like a tidal wave as we ran by.

That kid taught me a something I would never glean from formal teacher education. Previously, I had thought I should develop a teacher–student relationship so that I can teach my students. Getting to know you exercises should not just be first day events but sprinkled throughout the year. Now I am convinced that the relationship itself is the teaching. For me, getting to know each other is the teaching. The teacher–student relationship must be authentic or else the student’s relationship to the material the teacher presents sours. The implicit message we teach students when our teaching identity differs from our real life identity is that their school person should be different from who they are at home. We are essentially modeling that school matters in only one sense—going to college, getting a good job—but not at all in other ways—as in the important business of figuring who one is and what one’s life means. The 13th century mystical poet, Rumi, spoke to this divide in the poem “Two Kinds of Intelligences”:

There are two kinds of intelligence: One acquired,
as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts
from books and from what the teacher says,
collecting information from the traditional sciences as well as from the new sciences.

With such intelligence you rise in the world. You get ranked ahead or behind others in regard to your competence in retaining information. You stroll with this intelligence in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one already completed and preserved inside you. A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness in the center of the chest. This other intelligence does not turn yellow or stagnate. It’s fluid, and it doesn’t move from outside to inside through the conduits of plumbing-learning.

This second knowing is a fountainhead from within you, moving out.

—Rumi

As teachers, I wish we could teach from this place of intuition, passion, the right brain thinking. Moreover, I wish this kind of talk wouldn’t elicit derisive laughter among colleagues.

With Antonio, I had the choice either to predetermine our relationship through a series of rules and expectations that I had largely stolen—this being my first year—from other teachers’ syllabi or trust that Antonio was speaking the truth when he said that he did not know I was angry until the chasing incident, and that it was our mutual responsibility to negotiate this relationship. This did not mean that I needed to change my teaching so that I frowned and yelled all of the time. The fact is, I do grin a lot. It also did not mean abdicating equal power to him; after all I was the leader of the class. What it did mean is that Antonio and I had to establish a genuine relationship by working through what I thought of him and what he thought of him, not between a list of expectations that I did not believe in, and which made no sense to him. A much stronger, but more complicated choice is to be open to my students, to be transparent about the way I teach, to say why I am doing what I am doing, and when I think I am right, and when I may have acted falsely or with less integrity than I would have liked. True, it would have been easier to silence Antonio through a series of rules. Fearing that he wouldn’t graduate, Antonio would probably shrink back into a corner. But easier to manage frequently deadens the soul of why I teach in the first place. I would never have gotten to see him improvise, or lead a class in a warm-up, or do hilarious, cruel things within the appropriate context of an improv scene. I have kept in touch for many years with Antonio. He was the most talented student improviser I have ever met and went on to study at Second City, the comedy training center in Chicago.

This kind of self-discovery, or self-admitting of my own ineptitude, fear, and doubt about teaching became a powerful tool for me, acknowledging that I did not have to have all of the answers was far more useful than pretending that I did. Despite all of my intentions to do good in the classroom, there was a great possibility for doing harm, and that
possibility increased when I made assumptions about who students were, and the ways they should act toward me. The possibility for misunderstanding increased when I taught students with backgrounds that were different from my own. I undoubtedly connected more easily to Jewish students that, like myself, grew up upper middle class; however, most of my students did not fit that narrow description. And yet, I realized early on that I saw color, and if people said they did not, I was suspicious of them. How do you not see color with the history of our country, with the present predicament of our cities, of the way our schools are de facto segregated? How can teachers and students cross the real divides that separate us?

Teaching theater was a way to opt out of a structure that seemed to grant the teachers all of the power and the students none. Kids like Antonio, who were on the edge of huge trouble, but were also hugely talented, fascinated me—their power, intelligence, and talent went widely unnoticed in a school structure that demanded compliance. It was a structure that could not risk even being perceived as not in control. I wanted to choose a play for the fall production of my second year of teaching that shifted power to the students and captured the voices of students who did not have a place in the school. The students that did care about grades were far more difficult to teach, because threats about grades made no difference, but I couldn’t help but admire their honesty, their insubordination in a system that historically held no promise.

Act 2

Anna Deavere Smith’s play, *Twilight*, followed the aftermath of the 1991 Rodney King riots, which followed a not guilty verdict of five White police officers, filmed beating a defenseless Black man on the side of the road. Devised entirely through interviews conducted with those most affected by or involved in the violence, the play speaks to this divide that separates those in power and those without, and how that line, especially in a crisis, gets blurred. The first line of the play, spoken by a mixed student at Stanford, is “Who’s they?” This little pronoun, they, indicates a serious problem we have with language. Especially explosive is its use when we apply it to race. And how about when we apply it to education? Who are we talking about when we talk about raising up their scores, or finding better ways to discipline them? If we keep lamenting that they are the source of problems in Los Angeles, and their test scores are not where they should be, aren’t we also saying that it’s their fault?

The play explores the way people are categorized, and yet in their voices, how each individual is peculiarly unique. Reading Ms. Smith’s play is like seeing people that have been hidden for centuries. The idea in her work is to discover a fuller version of We the People, and toward that end, the characters in her play are not characters, they are real people, who speak in their own language, no longer censored.

The play offers wonderful opportunities for a school with a diverse population of kids—the chance for Black and Latino students to act in a distinctly modern play, about issues we rarely talked about that mattered at our school. There also existed considerable obstacles—for one thing, for students of color, especially Black boys, it was taboo to act in a play. Also, the theater department largely consisted of White students even though they were the minority population at our school. Not to mention that as a White teacher directing a play with mostly non-White characters, I had to be sensitive not to step in and be the voice for a group that I could not claim membership in. Finally, the town had a race riot in the late 60s that had led to deep unspoken fault lines in the town. Many White families fled when the Latino population surged in the 80s, and many people thought
the school, in general, was going nowhere. The school was suburban geographically, but essentially urban, meaning, we worked with too many marginalized students with not nearly enough resources.

After each performance, we generated a dialogue with the audience and invited guests—a representative from the NAACP, social workers, scholars, the head of the police department, activists, and poets to begin a conversation with the audience and the actors. The intensity of the student performers (who, in many cases could directly relate to the text) forced the audience to turn the lens toward themselves about the issues in the play. They engaged in a conversation they wouldn’t normally enter with people they did not know. The students, in attendance, began to talk about their experience in the school, their feelings of exclusion, blame, and guilt. Nothing was solved by a play—this was no movie—but people spoke, at great risk, despite their uncertainty, and this uncertainty far from feeling threatening, actually offered a way to begin a larger dialogue. It was not about solving problems but rather admitting there was a problem in the first place.

After the play, the principal, Laurie Shula, who winced noticeably when one of the characters used profanity, came up to me and offered heartfelt praise. “This was special, Mr. Lessing.” I felt pretty good for about two weeks. The first day of theater class, second semester that year, only three minutes into class, I gestured over to a group of Black boys who wore Starter jackets, and said, “Guys, could you quiet down,” and then later, “Guys!” to which one responded, “What do you mean, you guys?” What did I mean? Here I was directing Twilight with an opening monologue asking the provocative question, “Who’s they?” and I essentially had labeled these three boys. But weren't they disturbing the class? Hadn’t I merely tried to get order? That rationalization blanketed an implicit assumption, however, that I had made prior to class even beginning. In truth, I came in with the expectation that those three students, the darkest and most typically male, the biggest in size, would be trouble. They had walked in the room, and I had shrunk back. That realization carries some shame for me even now, but it was also an open door to walk in. If I couldn’t see those boys properly, how could I teach them? And how much had their experiences been shaped by other adults who, in one way or another, also shrunk back, and thought, here comes trouble.

I did not have to look outside of the school for racism; it was right there, smack dab in the middle of myself. The next day, I apologized to those boys in front of the whole class. That did not clear me of my actions, and initially we all felt a little uncomfortable with my admission. One of my current students best describes that moment as “the time where you ask us to lean into our discomfort…it’s like we’re used to being hard in the world, but you want us to be soft in this classroom, and so the rules out there don’t apply here.” My vision of a perfect school is a place where teachers get to be human beings, students get to see teachers make errors, be sad, even go grocery shopping, without surprise or shock or embarrassment. A bad school is where teachers behave like automatons, or worse, classroom managers, which sounds like something out of Orwell, that dispense information to students. We’re inundated with information, but starving for experience. We can be real human beings not in despite of our work, but because our work demands it. What students most need—our humanness, our own moral dilemmas, our very real struggles, we somehow feel obligated to deny the opportunity to share. It is an untellable loss to the students and teachers.

One of those kids that I singled out for talking that first day of class, a talented football player named Tony Warren, ended up doing theater for the next two years, even appearing in the musical *Guys and Dolls*, as one of the gangsters, and later in a Beckett play. Another boy, D.C. Fryman, really was a tough kid, who had been arrested for carjacking, but he was also sweet, playful, and eager to please. Eugene Lincoln was the biggest kid in
the class but also the shyest. I don’t want to exaggerate or clean up these boys’ lives: they weren’t teacher’s pets. They were Black boys mostly in lower tracked classes in a public school system. Of course they weren’t ready to drink the Kool-Aid that I was serving. Yet, they were also not thugs, or troublemakers, or not interested in school. They were not they.

Each had a story to tell just as the people who suffered in the LA riots and populated Anna Deavere Smith’s play had stories to tell. My apology was a way of admitting that I make mistakes, a risk that makes teaching messier, but also richer. It meant that they got status, so they no longer had to play into the role of disinterested, bored students, and I did not have to be their programmatic, knowing teacher.

Of course, it wasn’t a perfect world: my classes frustrated students, some kids wanted me to take control, kick people out of class when things got out of hand, but better than any system were the real relationships I could now claim. Tony, D.C., and Eugene emerged as distinct separate people, who I got to know, whose lives became real to me, whose faces took on specificity beyond their race. Their names evoke their faces and their faces make me remember their mannerisms and their stories, and perhaps at the heart of teaching is a kind of caring, a tenderness for others.

Act 3

Of course, as often happens in teaching, you don’t just get your feet wet, you get drenched. My teaching tends to go that way, burst of praise followed by a torrent of intense scrutiny. My department head, at the school I now teach at, Barry Allison, told me that I’m the most polarizing teacher in the department. “Far more good than bad, though,” he added diplomatically. Of course, without Barry, I would have no chance to offer the elective course that I created—Experiments in Reading Literature and the World. I’m always thanking him, and he’s always laconically reminding me that I’ve thanked him enough.

Sometimes I’m amazed that he hired me at all. I showed up to our interview 45 minutes late, smelling like a campfire from the night before, wearing an orange colored button-down that I noticed midinterview had a large mustard stain on the right elbow. The week before I had spent way too much money on new clothes for a different interview, at a job that I coveted and prepared for, and didn’t get. Now, here was Barry, practically awakening me from my slumber to offer me a job. I think it was an instinctual decision that he could later justify. Our teaching styles are completely different: in more than 20 years of teaching he’s never received a complaint about his teaching. In six years, I am probably averaging three or four every year. I’m often more provocative than he bargained for.

At a casual glance, my second semester seventh period Experiments class, in now my sixth year of teaching has a similar demographic to my seventh period, first semester class. Both had a higher percentage of students of color than the two other classes combined; in both, about half the students did not identify as White. In the previous semester that class had been occasionally the hardest to direct, and the most unruly, but undoubtedly had the richest experience as well.

The challenging discussions we had about race the semester before were of little help to me the following semester. For one, in that first semester class, around half of the students of color occupied a middle or upper-middle class status in the school. They were in AP classes, they had mixed group of friends. They had enough status to venture into uncomfortable topics without risking everything. In the second semester class, there existed a class divide as well as a race divide. Attempting to acknowledge this divide, let alone bridging it, seemed like a foolish endeavor at times.
This particular class divided itself from the beginning. A friend of mine guest taught, and he aptly nailed the group as fragile. Midsemester, I was out sick on a Friday and the class got into a discussion about whether Barack Obama would be president someday. That ended with one kid storming out in tears and the rest of the class left with deep divisions.

Later in the semester, I brought in an exercise called the “Race to High Paying Jobs.” The exercise offered a series of statements that related to race and class, where students had to either step forward toward the finish line or backward further away from it. At the end of 50 statements, I pointed to the wall, and said this is the race to high paying jobs, “GO!” Two girls, one Puerto Rican, the other Black, found themselves all the way in the back, with their other classmates scattered in front of them. The students near the front, mostly White raced to the wall in front of them. The students in the back, mostly of color, either walked to the wall, or did not even bother touching it at all. The exercise, I thought, was a success. We could finally bust open this mythology that we all have an equal chance in our society. We could begin to deconstruct institutional racism. My ignorance to some important factors led to a series of missteps that dug the students in a deep hole regarding their conversation about difference. One, the students who were most affected by these obstacles, who found themselves backing up again and again, boiled with anger that the class and especially I had essentially humiliated them. Letrice Washington and Angelica Fuentes found themselves taking step after step after step backwards, until, as Angelica reminded the class many times in the weeks that followed, “I was completely out the door, out of the room!”

Obviously, the disparity in their starting positions for the race to high paying jobs was contrived. I thought its effect as a kinesthetic, silent activity, however, would trigger the students to challenge the notion that “we are all equal.” Instead, the students began to question my leadership, each other, and furthermore, refused, along with the frightened class, to question or even discuss the validity of the exercise.

What I did not count on was the explosiveness of responses. As is so often the case with my teaching practice, in theory or as a vision, I welcome discourse, discontent, and provocation in the attempt to create a genuine engagement in the classroom. When this reality hits, it’s often complex, scary, and leaves you, the teacher, in the ignominious position of feeling like an idiot. When this happens, my teacher alarm clock goes off, and the ever-present inner-critic inside me seems to self-implode. Great, now what, Avi? The kids you want to engage, you alienate. Why can’t you be a normal English teacher? When are you ever going to be prepared? Why weren’t you ready for this? How are you going to fix it? Perhaps I should become something else, start over, as say, a sports agent. Letrice, in particular, vented her anger with laserlike aim.

That exercise doesn’t tell you anything. I’m not behind anyone. And I’m tired of coming into the classroom and seeing that poster-board that your students from last semester made. Why do you always have to be talking about the achievement gap at this school? And Black students this. And Black students that. How do you know those statistics are even right? And even if they are right, how is that supposed to help me?

I had no answers for her—I did not know—and doubt, this trait I secretly admired in myself and encourage in students—did not inspire confidence in the room. I had admired Buddhist teachers who talked about the ability to rest in crisis moments. And yet I did not feel restful; I felt awful and conflicted and at the end of each day, until I dragged myself into the swimming pool for some much needed change in energy, utterly spent.
Wasn’t Letrice right? I hadn’t thought it through properly. An exercise like stepping forward and backwards was relatively easy for a White, upper-middle class male to lead. Had I done the exercise with the students, I would find myself near the front of the line. For those kids in the back, the exercise is not a game, it is their life, and to admit to its truth would be crushing. It could debilitate them in their quest to beat the very odds that I insisted in pointing out to them. And what was my purpose? Under the watch of their wary eyes, my noble ideas felt suddenly without merit, and utterly removed from their every day struggles.

Another dynamic that I would only grasp much later, is that Letrice and Angelica had also been incensed by one of the other students, Lisa, who they thought had given them a dirty look during the exercise. For weeks they harbored anger toward Lisa, who, perhaps not coincidentally, was the Whitest student in my class, and in addition, played violin. Skin color, no matter how much we all want to wish it away, still tears apart families, determines alliances between friends, and often influences the way human beings interact. Letrice talked in class about having a lighter skinned relative who wouldn’t speak to her because she was ashamed that she was so dark. Angelica thought of herself as Black in a school culture that often did not register the nuances of race, skin color, and ethnicity.

Yet, the trouble with skin color is that it only tells part of a story. Lisa was deeply troubled in her own way. Her boyfriend’s parents hated her, her mother had suffered a stroke that left her confined to the house, and she was getting rejected from colleges left and right, that, even had they had admitted her, she would not be able to afford to go.

Act 4

These were some of the confl uences that played out one day when Lisa gave an oral presentation investigating the phenomena of the world of ice-skating. In this particular project, students probed how people within certain worlds or phenomena made meaning in those places. Lisa belonged to the world she was looking at; she was a top-notch figure skater. In the course of her presentation, she lamented the lack of African Americans who skated. She cited the high cost of skates as one of the reasons for the lack of diversity.

During the presentation, I felt some discomfort from the class, but I would be lying if I said that I understood how the Black students, or poor students, might feel from the presumption underlying Lisa’s comment, or even that I checked in with students such a comment might affect after class. As so often happens in the case of dynamics that occur between students, I was almost completely blind to what was happening.

I did notice in the ensuing days that Letrice and Angelica became even more distant than usual. Andre, a mutual friend of theirs, increased the amount of times he checked his cell phone for text messages during class. And Kendrick, a student who initially wanted to understand the divide in the class, and had been a leader, now came in late with a great show of languor, and remained silent throughout class. It felt like the whole class, including myself, was slipping into quicksand.

The middle of the school year feels like the middle of your life: you’re too close to it to understand it properly. You desperately want to relax, and yet you can’t quite let anything go: it all wore heavily on me. I tried to focus on my other classes, lamenting that my seventh period was simply difficult, not motivated, and all of the other deferrals that we teachers are taught to dispense when conflict arises. The daily chime at twelve o’clock, 15 minutes before class would start, now sounded like a death knell.

Letrice meanwhile was steaming. She always had other books from other classes out. She said she didn’t like the class. She talked only with Angelica; her circle of vision seemed to blot out everyone else around her. When I pressed her in class to talk about
what was bothering her, she said, “Fine you want to know? One student in this class is a racist.” Then the bell rang.

The next day the class was tense; everyone was on edge. Who was it? Was there really a racist in the class? Reading Malcolm Gladwell, James Baldwin, Bill Ayers, and Peggy McIntosh could not prepare us for a moment quite like this. When Letrice finally recalled what Lisa had said during her skating report, the dam broke. Letrice directed her pointed criticism right at Lisa without looking at her. Lisa began to sob, Letrice looked sickened, and the class quickly scrambled to take one side or the other. I bumbled my way through something utterly diplomatic and neutral: “I can see why Letrice is angry and I can see why Lisa is upset right now and perhaps what we should do is....” Letrice interrupted: “Stop protecting everyone. She said it, OK she said it, she said it!” When the class rallied to Lisa’s defense, Letrice walked right out the door.

The next day, as we tried to reassemble what had happened, Letrice packed up early again and left again, this time deliberately, slowly, almost as if part of funeral procession. This time I followed her.

“What are you doing,” she said, whirling on me.

“I just wanted to see how you are.”

“Not good, if you can’t tell!”

“Yeah, I can see that. This was not my intention, to make your second semester of your senior year a total misery.”

“Well it is.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I can’t tell you,” she said, some tears beginning to roll down her face, “how much I wish that I was Lisa, with everyone gathering around me to see how I’m doing. But no, instead, I get kids staring at me. ‘Why is Letrice such a bitch?’ ‘Why is Letrice so fucking mean?’ Nobody knows how hard it is. I have to be hard. Nobody is going to mess with me.” She sat huddled, nodding her head up and down, as if saying yes to all of the resistance she needed just to make it through her days.

Something like a cold peace now descended upon the class. People exhaustively came in, and waited for class to be over. I helplessly muddled through. I brought in students from the semester before to talk about how valuable—“leaning into discomfort”—could be. The current class promptly told my former students to leave. Who are they to condescend to us seemed to be the general sentiment. At a total loss, I turned toward the more academic aspects of the class to focus on hoping a break from communicating with each other would help.

When we finally returned to storytelling, the main focus of the class, I thought we had achieved a small victory. The final project, inspired by Anna Deavere Smith, was a collection of their stories, acted out, with members of the class portraying each other. My first semester classes had produced startling results, with accolades from their audiences, and the students forging truly empathetic relationships with each other. One student had said that as she was performing the part of an exchange student from Thailand, she looked out at the audience and locked eyes with the girl who told the story. “And at the moment, I was her, Mr. Lessing. I have never felt that way in my whole life.” The difficulty with teaching this way though is that it is unpredictable and what happened first semester could not help me with what was happening in my class now.

Andre put away his cell phone long enough to tell his story. He talked about coming out to his mother and trying to balance the gay scene in Chicago with school and church. Students were visibly uncomfortable, not just by the admission that he was gay, but by the detail in which he discussed his forays in the particular gay scene he felt attached to. After his story concluded, few students came up to acknowledge him. Lisa, who knew
Andre strongly sided with Letrice in their previous encounter, was among the throng of students who left the room without looking at him.

The next day Andre unleashed a torrent of expletives on Lisa and others who he felt scorned him. His fury astonished the class and the oblivious observing education graduate school student who was visiting that day. What must he be thinking? I surmised he thought something along the lines of—is this teaching? And if this is teaching, then I want none of it. But this was more my projection than truth. Andre cursed, he threatened, he yelled. The fragile, cold truce had cracked and again the class, once again, lost its footing.

The following day, Andre felt remarkably better. He was smiling openly.

“You feel better today?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah, I’m straight. Why?”

“I don’t know, maybe because 24 hours ago you looked ready to attack me,” I half-jokingly poked at him.

“Oh that. That’s just how we talk. I was just talking.”

It’s difficult to generalize, but Andre again was echoing something that my mooning student, Antonio LeBlanc, years earlier had hinted at. I had thought Andre had lost control the previous day. I was close to telling him to settle down or even question whether I should be kicking him out of class. This was in direct proportion to my fear that I had let him take too much power. Yes, in the classroom, it is our job to make sure our students are safe, but too often our zero tolerance for swearing, misbehavior, and noncompliance also stops us allowing the students to actually grow up and solve problems that they have the ability to work through.

Act 5

From that day on, a state of grace seemed to fall on us. We all did acknowledge Andre the following day, and though it was slightly forced, he accepted Lisa’s hug. Letrice remained aloof and Angelica had bouts of disenchantment, but even those two would stage a remarkable recovery at the end of the year.

The first breakthrough occurred when Letrice, along with Angelica and others, insisted that I tell a story as well. “What story should I tell?” I asked, suddenly put on the spot.

“Like you say to us,” another student, Anna, chimed in, “something that teachers don’t usually share, something that makes you feel safe, but maybe uncomfortable.” “In intensity, from 1 to 10, pick a 5,” another student chimed in mocking my elicitations. I talked about how I had a bad temper and how it would sometimes come out. This surprised the class—the identity that I cultivated in front of them was one of laid back, rebel, an easy going, self-knowing, if not strange teacher. After class, I said to Letrice, “So, I’m curious. Does hearing my story deepen or lessen your respect for me.”

“Deepens,” she whispered.

“But what about what you said about being hard.”

“Yes, but of course what I want is to be soft too.” She paused and jabbed a finger into my chest. “Don’t tell nobody.”

I assigned Letrice to tell back Anna’s story and vice versa. Both told difficult stories about their fathers. In rehearsal, Anna was reticent, given the class’s history, to take on Letrice’s mannerisms—her gestures, cadence, volume, and accent. Presumably she did not want anyone to accuse her of mocking Letrice’s voice, afraid, no doubt, of being pegged as a racist. I urged her to listen to the tape, to let her story be her guide. Letrice moaned about having to memorize Anna’s whole story, and vowed to do the minimum required.
On the day of Anna’s performance, and the last day of the semester, Letrice sat in front of me. Her back began to quiver slightly when Anna first began to tell her story back to her. She beautifully conveyed the emotion of Letrice’s story, and, for the most part, nailed the intonation, pitch, and pace of her voice. Anna had obviously memorized and rehearsed the whole thing. Letrice’s reaction was unexpected: Anna’s portrayal moved her, and she cried openly. The fact that Anna saw her, and was able to become her, without judgment and little interpretation, made Letrice’s troubles seem more real, more shared by the rest of the class.

The most surprising event came last: Letrice returned the favor in a stunning performance of Anna’s story that left the two embracing each other at the end. Andre, too, not to be outdone, nailed his ending performance as well. The bell rang and the year ended; as seniors their high school careers were over.

This time Andre hugged Lisa whole-heartedly. Letrice was in line right behind him. They smiled and hugged and cried, and I hadn’t directed any of it. Frankly, I was too exhausted to do much more than watch.

Note

1. Except in the case of well-known figures introduced by first and last names, I have changed names of people and schools and other details in order to protect privacy.
2. Permission was granted by Coleman Barks Essential Run.