TEACH LIKE YOUR HAIR’S ON FIRE

The Methods and Madness Inside Room 56

RAFE ESQUITH

© 2007
PART ONE

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

How Room 56 Creates a Safe Haven, and Provides Children with Shelter from the Storm
The parents want one of the teachers arrested. I have been summoned from my room by a mother who has known me for years. Some of the parents are demanding that the teacher be fired. I listen to their complaints and try to calm them down. I do the best I can to defend the teacher with whom they are furious, but it isn’t easy.

Alex is a third-grader with a messy backpack. In fact, it’s more than messy—it’s a virtual nuclear holocaust of crumpled-up papers, folders, and candy. Here’s an opportunity for his teacher to teach him something valuable. Instead, he began by yelling at Alex and dumping his backpack all over his desk in full view of his peers. Then he called on a student to go to his car and retrieve a camera. He took a picture of the mess and told Alex that he would hang it up during Back-to-School Night to show all the parents what a slob he was. Then the teacher added the final touch: He told Alex’s classmates that for the rest of the day, when they had trash to discard, it should be thrown on Alex’s desk instead of in the garbage can.

Now the boy’s parents are in my room demanding that the authorities be called.

After enormous effort, I calm them down and beg them to let our principal handle the situation. The teacher must be given the chance
to explain his actions, although it’s clear that if his behavior was as cruel and humiliating as it sounds, no explanation can justify it.

Days later, after several meetings with the principal, the young teacher emerges from the office, face tear-stained and posture slumped with contrition. Yet he comes to me and bitterly defends himself: “But I’m right. It worked... Alex’s backpack is neater now.” And I realize the real tragedy here is that the teacher has missed a terrific opportunity. He had a chance to help Alex learn the value of organization and become a better student. Instead, he forever marked himself as a cruel ogre to Alex and his classmates. It would take months to undo the harm of such a moment, and the teacher did not even comprehend the damage he had done.

The larger problem here is that many teachers are so desperate to keep their classrooms in order that they will do anything to maintain it. This is understandable—an “End justifies the means” mentality is at the heart of many explanations of how children are handled these days. Given some of the practically impossible situations confronting teachers today, it seems reasonable.

But let’s be honest. It might be explicable. It might be effective. But it is not good teaching. We can do better.

I know this because I’ve been there. I’ve fallen into the same trap. The simple truth is that most classrooms today are managed by one thing and one thing only: fear.

The teacher is afraid: afraid of looking bad, of not being liked, of not being listened to, of losing control. The students are even more afraid: afraid of being scolded and humiliated, of looking foolish in front of peers, of getting bad grades, of facing their parents’ wrath. John Lennon got it right in “Working Class Hero” when he sang of being “tortured and scared... for twenty-odd years.”

This is the issue that overshadows all others in the world of education. It is the matter of classroom management.

If your class is not in order, nothing good will follow. There will
be no learning. The kids will not read, write, or calculate better. Children will not improve their critical thinking. Character cannot be built. Good citizenship will not be fostered.

There is more than one way to run a successful classroom—from using the philosophy of Thoreau to the philosophy of Mussolini. Over the last twenty-five years, I’ve tried practically everything to deal with the often maddening behavior of children in a school environment that accepts graffiti-covered walls and urine-soaked bathroom floors as normal.

Visitors to Room 56 never come away most impressed with the academic ability of the children, the style in which I present lessons, or the cleverness of the wall decorations. They come away shaking their heads over something else: the culture of the classroom. It’s calm. It is incredibly civil. It’s an oasis. But something is missing. Ironically, Room 56 is a special place not because of what it has, but because of what it is missing: fear.

In my early years, I actually planned to frighten the kids the first day of school. I wanted to make sure they knew I was boss. Some of my colleagues did the same, and we shared our supposed successes in getting the kids in order. Other classes were out of control, and we foolishly congratulated one another on our quiet classrooms, orderly children, and smooth-running days.

Then one day, many years ago, I watched a fantastic video featuring a first-rate special education teacher who told a story about his son and the Boston Red Sox. He had inherited a priceless baseball signed by all the players of the legendary 1967 Sox. When his young son asked to play catch with him, of course he warned the boy that they could never use that ball. Upon being asked why, the teacher realized that Carl Yastrzemski, Jim Lonborg, and the rest of the 1967 Sox meant nothing to his son. Instead of taking the time to explain, however, he simply told the boy they could not use the ball “because it had writing all over it.”
A few days later, the boy once again asked his father to play catch. When his father reminded him that they could not use the ball with the writing, his little boy informed him that he had solved the problem: He had licked off all the writing!

Of course the father was ready to kill his own son. On second thought, however, he realized his boy had done nothing wrong. And from that day forward, the teacher carried the unsigned baseball with him everywhere he went. It reminded him that, when teaching or parenting, you must always try to see things from the child’s point of view and never use fear as a shortcut for education.

Painful though it was, I had to admit that many children in my class were behaving the way they were because they were afraid. Oh, lots of kids liked the class and quite a few learned all sorts of wonderful lessons. But I wanted more. We spend so much time trying to raise reading and math scores. We push our kids to run faster and jump higher. Shouldn’t we also try to help them become better human beings? In fact, all these years later, I’ve recognized that by improving the culture of my classroom, the ordinary challenges are navigated far more easily. It’s not easy to create a classroom without fear. It can take years. But it’s worth it. Here are four things I do to ensure the class remains a place of academic excellence without resorting to fear to keep the kids in line.

Replace Fear with Trust

On the first day of school, within the first two minutes, I discuss this issue with the children. While most classrooms are based on fear, our classroom is based on trust. The children hear the words and like them, but they are only words. It is deeds that will help the children see that I not only talk the talk but walk the walk.

I use the following example with the students on their first day. Most of us have participated in the trust exercise in which one per-
son falls back and is caught by a peer. Even if the catch is made a hundred times in a row, the trust is broken forever if the friend lets you fall the next time as a joke. Even if he swears he is sorry and will never let you fall again, you can never fall back without a seed of doubt. My students learn the first day that a broken trust is irreparable. Everything else can be fixed. Miss your homework assignment? Just tell me, accept the fact that you messed up, and we move on. Did you break something? It happens; we can take care of it. But break my trust and the rules change. Our relationship will be okay, but it will never, ever be what it once was. Of course kids do break trust, and they should be given an opportunity to earn it back. But it takes a long time. The kids are proud of the trust I give them, and they do not want to lose it. They rarely do, and I make sure on a daily basis that I deserve the trust I ask of them.

I answer all questions. It does not matter if I have been asked them before. It does not matter if I am tired. The kids must see that I passionately want them to understand, and it never bothers me when they don’t. During an interview, a student named Alan once told a reporter, “Last year, I tried to ask my teacher a question. She became angry and said, ‘We’ve been over this. You weren’t listening!’ But I was listening! I just didn’t get it! Rafe will go over something five hundred times until I understand.”

We parents and teachers get mad at our kids all the time, and often for good reason. Yet we should never become frustrated when a student doesn’t understand something. Our positive and patient response to questions builds an immediate and lasting trust that transcends fear.

Children Depend on Us, So Be Dependable

Far too many times, an adult promises a child a reward for good behavior. This in itself is a problem, which will be discussed in the next
chapter, but even more problematic is when the adult breaks his or her promise.

I know a well-respected teacher who once told her class, on the first day of school, that at the end of the year she would take them on a very exciting trip. Practically every day, students who were not behaving properly were threatened with the punishment of not going on the special trip. Many students even did extra work to make sure they would be included. During the last week of school, the teacher announced to the children that she was moving away and would not be able to take them after all. I wish she had stuck around long enough to hear the bitter comments of her students. This betrayal not only ruined anything good she had done with the kids that year, but soured many of them on school and adults in general. I can’t blame them. A broken trust has to be avoided at all costs.

Parents and teachers have to come through. If I tell the kids we are beginning a special art project on Friday, I have to deliver, even if it means running out to a twenty-four-hour Home Depot at 4:00 A.M. to get extra wood and brushes. Being constantly dependable is the best way to build up trust. We do not need to lecture the children about how we came through on a promise; let them figure out that they can trust us. It’s a cliché, but our actions truly do speak louder than our words.

A nice bonus here is that, if trust has been established, the kids are far more understanding on the rare occasion when a promised activity needs to be postponed.

Discipline Must Be Logical

You need to maintain order in your classroom. However, never forget this basic truth about discipline: Children do not mind a tough teacher, but they despise an unfair one. Punishments must fit the
crimes, and too often they do not. Once the kids see you as unfair, you’ve lost them.

Over the years, children have related to me their pet peeves regarding unjust punishments and illogical consequences. It usually goes something like this: A child is acting up in class; the teacher decides the entire class will miss playing baseball that afternoon. The kids take it, but they hate it. Many are thinking, *Kenny robbed the bank—why am I going to jail?* Another classic example: John does not do his math homework; his punishment is to miss art during the afternoon, or sit on a bench at recess. There is no connection here.

In Room 56, I strive to make our activities so exciting that the worst punishment for misbehavior is to be banned from the activity during which the misbehavior occurred. If a child is misbehaving during a science experiment, I can simply say, “Jason, you are not using the science materials properly, so please stand outside the group. You can watch the experiment but you may not participate. You will have another chance tomorrow.” If a child is a poor sport during a baseball game, he is asked to sit on the bench. It’s logical, and I make sure that when a child plays correctly, he will be allowed back on the field.

A few years ago, my group of Hobart Shakespeareans—a group of young thespians comprised of students from different classrooms who work with me each day after school—was asked to give a performance at one of the most prestigious venues in Los Angeles. They would have to miss two hours of school for the performance. All but one of the students’ teachers were thrilled their students were given the opportunity. The lone objector was the same teacher who never wants his children to join orchestra or chorus. You’ve met the type: He believes his children can learn only from him. In this case the students eventually prevailed—their parents demanded that the kids be allowed to perform—but upon returning to school they were forced to write the following sentence one hundred times a day for a
week: “In the future I will make more responsible choices about my education.” By the end of the week, the children’s disgust with this teacher’s illogical actions prevented them from hearing anything he had to say for the rest of the year (even when it was something worthwhile). He was not fair. Game over. Mission not accomplished.

You Are a Role Model

Never forget that the kids watch you constantly. They model themselves after you, and you have to be the person you want them to be. I want my students to be nice and to work hard. That means I had better be the nicest and hardest-working person they have ever met. Don’t even think of trying to deceive your kids. They are much too sharp for that.

If you want your kids to trust you, it takes consistent caring and effort on your part. Some of my students laugh bitterly at a teacher they once had. They discuss her in the most unflattering of terms. She often comes to school late. She doesn’t even realize it, but she’s lost them. Why would the kids listen to her lessons when her constant tardiness tells them they are not that important to her? When she lectures them, they smile and nod their heads. Inside they are thinking, Screw you, lady.

This teacher talks on her cell phone constantly. Even when the kids are being taken somewhere, their fearless leader walks in front of them gabbing on the phone. Of course there are family emergencies and situations in which a teacher legitimately needs to take a call, but this woman is on the phone with her boyfriend. The same teacher thinks she is “secretly” shopping online while the kids do their science assignments. She believes the kids do not know what she is doing. She is very much mistaken.

There are thousands of role-modeling moments during a day of
teaching, but a few of them are opportunities waiting to be seized. In my youth, I had days like the young teacher with the child’s backpack. My behavior was never that extreme, but I would become angry and frustrated. I was wrong to do this. I hadn’t learned that if you become angry over little things, the big issues are never even addressed. As a role model, the students need us to be advocates, not tyrants. I played the dictator enough as a young teacher to understand the futility of the role.

But that’s the beauty of the job: You can learn from your mistakes. You can get better. In the process you may even stumble upon precious moments that can allow your students to soar higher than they ever thought possible. I had such a moment just recently.

Lisa was a very nice little girl in my class who struggled with all her work. She was not the sharpest knife in the drawer, and she had a father who got angry when I wrote on her papers that I felt she could do better.

One day I was walking around the room collecting a homework assignment. The children were supposed to have finished a simple crossword puzzle about Chief Crazy Horse, but Lisa could not find hers. It was early in the year and she desperately wanted to do well. I watched as she furiously searched several folders in her desk. Knowing I was behind her, she continued her desperate hunt for the missing page.

Rafe: Lisa?
Lisa: Rafe, give me just a second. I have it. I did it. Please—
Rafe: (Gently) Lisa?
Lisa: Pleeease, Rafe. I really did it (still frantically looking).
Rafe: (Practically singing) LEEEessa?
Lisa: (Stops the futile quest and looks up) Yes?
Rafe: I believe you.
Lisa: (Silence—a quizzical stare)
Rafe: I believe you.
Lisa: You do?
Rafe: (Gently, with a smile) Of course I do, Lisa. I believe you did the assignment. But you know what?
Lisa: What?
Rafe: I think we have a bigger problem here.
Lisa: (Meekly, after a long pause) I’m not organized?
Rafe: Exactly! You need to be better organized. That’s exactly right. Now, how about picking two friends here whom you trust.
Lisa: Lucy and Joyce.
Rafe: Okay. Today after lunch, how about having your friends help you reorganize your folders? Would that be all right?
Lisa: (Relieved) Okay . . .

These are the opportunities to seize upon. Of course you’re frustrated, but you can take potentially bad moments and turn them into good ones. In the course of a few minutes, I went from Lisa’s potential nemesis to her trusted teacher and friend. The class, watching my every move, saw me as a person who was reasonable. These are the moments when you build trust.

Lisa never missed a homework assignment for the rest of the year.

It’s harder to follow this path. Hey, you can point a rifle at the kids and they will listen to you, but is that all you want? These days I know better. By creating a firm but friendly refuge, the kids have the opportunity to grow into confident, happy human beings. It’s not easy, and not all the children will ever earn such faith. Some will betray your confidence. Yet if we ask great things of our children, we must show them we believe great things are possible. Make every effort to remove fear from your classroom. Be fair. Be reasonable. You will grow as a teacher, and your students will amaze both you and themselves as they flourish in the safe haven you have built.

Trust me.
Searching for Level VI

With experience, patience, and lessons learned from failure, you can create a classroom based on trust. The students know you to be fair. You're dependable. The kids know that with you around, they're safe and they are going to learn something. A classroom based on trust and devoid of fear is a fantastic place for kids to learn.

But a foundation of trust is not an end result. It is not even a middle ground; it is only a good first step. We've all seen this time and time again: Students do a terrific job with a fine teacher, but one day the teacher calls in sick or has to attend a meeting. A substitute takes over, and the classroom that had previously functioned so well turns into a scene from *Animal House.*

Sadly, I've actually encountered teachers who are proud of this. They think it shows what wonderful teachers they are—that they can control kids when others cannot. Recently, I heard a teacher brag, "My kids only watch films with me. They say it's not good if I'm not around." This is a teacher who has forgotten that we may lead the class, but the students determine if a class is outstanding or mediocre.

Over the years, I have tried many different ways to develop a classroom culture in which students behaved well for all the right
reasons. This alone is a tall order. Given a school environment in which kids urinate all over the bathroom floor, write on desks, and quite frankly don’t want to be in school at all, it is difficult to find a common language by which to develop morality.

And then I found it. Most teaching victories come as a result of years of difficult and painful labor—there are very few “educational eurekas,” where the lightbulb blazes over your head and you know where to go. But one glorious evening it happened to me.

I had been planning lessons around my favorite book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and was reading a study guide that analyzed the novel’s characters in relation to Lawrence Kohlberg’s Six Levels of Moral Development. I just loved it. The Six Levels were simple, easy to understand, and, most important, perfectly applicable to teaching young people exactly what I wanted them to learn. I quickly incorporated the Six Levels into my class, and today they are the glue that holds it together. Trust is always the foundation, but the Six Levels are the building blocks that help my kids grow as both students and people. I even used the Six Levels in raising my own children, and I am extremely proud of how they turned out.

I teach my students the Six Levels on the first day of class. I do not expect the kids to actually apply them to their own behavior immediately. Unlike simplistic approaches that tell us, “If you follow these twenty-seven rules, you too can have a successful child,” the Six Levels take a lifetime of effort. They are a beautiful road map, and I am constantly amazed at how well my students respond to them.

**Level I. I Don’t Want to Get in Trouble**

Most students are trained from the minute they enter school to be Level I thinkers. Practically all of their behavior is based on the fact that they want to avoid trouble. “Quiet down!” they frantically tell
one another. “The teacher’s coming!” They do homework to stay out of trouble. They walk in a line to keep the teacher happy. They listen in class to stay in the good graces of their instructor. And we teachers and parents reinforce this constantly by promising them trouble if they don’t toe the line. “Wait till your father gets home,” indeed.

But is this good teaching? Level I thinking is based on fear. Eventually we want our children to behave well not because they fear punishment but because they believe it is right.

On the first day of class, the kids are quick to admit that they have spent most of their lives at Level I. Of course, some have moved on, yet all of the children admit that “not getting in trouble” is still a guiding force in their behavior. Think back to your own childhood. How many of us really finished homework assignments (particularly the mindless ones) because it was the right thing to do? More often than not, weren’t we simply trying to stay out of trouble?

I remember vividly my first year of teaching. One day I had to attend a math training meeting, and my class fell apart when I was away. The next time I had to miss class, I wanted to be sure the kids wouldn’t “make me look bad” again. I promised them with ferocious certainty that those who did not listen to the substitute or do their work would suffer dire consequences upon my return. It worked superficially, but the children had learned nothing except to fear my anger and power. It took time to realize that this strategy was not really effective. Like many veteran teachers, I am embarrassed to think about the foolishness of my early years.

Now, on the first day of class, I begin a partnership with the children. After I request their trust and pledge my own, I ask the children to leave Level I thinking behind them. They’ll never get anywhere in life if their prime motivation is so misguided. And I certainly won’t make the mistake of fueling Level I thinking ever again.
Level II. I Want a Reward

Eventually children begin to make decisions for reasons other than avoiding trouble. But teachers are especially guilty of enforcing what in our class is identified as Level II thinking. I guess too many of us read B. F. Skinner in college. We learned that if children are rewarded for good behavior, they are more likely to repeat behavior we deem acceptable. There is, of course, truth in this. Whether the reward is candy, toys, or more time for sports, a dangling carrot can be a powerful inducement for good behavior.

I have visited middle school classrooms in which teachers use Level II thinking to encourage their students to finish homework. One history teacher I met pits his classes against each other in a competition to see which of them can complete the most homework. The winning class gets a prize at the end of the year. Apparently this teacher has forgotten that a knowledge of history is supposed to be the prize. When I spoke to the class that did the most homework, I learned that they were terrific at completing assignments and turning them in, but their understanding of history was shockingly limited.

In my early years of teaching I foolishly bought into the reward syndrome because it “works.” If I needed to miss class and was terrified that my kids would give the substitute a bad time, I knew how to handle the situation: I’d tell the children, “If I get a good report from your teacher, we’ll have a pizza party on Friday.” The next day I would return to find a nice note from the sub: This allowed me to trick myself into believing I had done a good job with my students. After all, it was certainly better than scaring them, and the kids “liked me” more. Okay, go easy on me. I was young and inexperienced.

Parents also need to be wary of encouraging Level II thinking. It’s great to give a child allowance money for doing chores. That’s how
our capitalist system works—you are paid for doing your job. The danger, however, is giving children gifts or money for behaving the right way. We need to show our children that proper behavior is expected, not rewarded.

These payoffs are common in classrooms across the country. As someone who is on the front lines every day, I am well aware that getting kids to behave is one of the toughest jobs in the world. We’re all working way too many hours, and if a homework chart with gold stars gets kids to do their work, that’s good enough for many. But it is no longer good enough for me.

I think we can all do better.

Level III. I Want to Please Somebody

As they grow up, kids also learn to do things to please people: “Look, Mommy, is this good?” They do the same things with teachers, chiefly with the charismatic or popular ones. They sit up straight and behave the way we hope they’ll behave. But they do it for all the wrong reasons.

Young teachers are especially susceptible to this phenomenon (and I speak from personal experience here). When kids want to please you, it gives your ego a jolt. It’s nice to have students show you what you think of as respect, to have them jump when you say jump.

In one instance, when a teacher returned from a day of absence, something also sadly funny happened. The substitute left a note and the teacher was thrilled to learn that the class had been fine, but one student in particular, Robert, was fantastic. He helped run the class. He showed the substitute where everything was kept. He was an assistant teacher. But here comes the ironic part. The teacher was so proud of Robert that he offered his prize student a reward—perhaps it was extra points for a test or a piece of candy. Robert refused it. He
didn’t do it for a reward. He was thinking above this. He did it for the teacher. He was proud of himself. And the teacher was proud of himself too, because he had a little guy worshiping him. They were both proud of themselves and felt good.

Of course it’s nice that Robert did a good job, and it’s sweet that he did it to please his teacher. This is far better than the situation in most classrooms. We can cue the music and maybe Lulu can sing “To Sir with Love.” But we can still do better. This is a point on which I simultaneously tease and challenge my own students. Do you brush your teeth for me? Do you tie your shoes for me? Do you see how silly that sounds? And yet many children still spend their days trying to please their teachers.

The desire to come through for parents is an even greater pressure. Many children are so desperate to please their parents they will even pick their colleges and majors to keep their folks happy. These same kids grow into frustrated adults who hate their jobs and can’t understand why they are so displeased with their lives.

Well, at least they were trying to please someone.

But I think we can do even better.

Level IV. I Follow the Rules

Level IV thinking is very popular these days. With so many young people behaving badly, most teachers are trained to lay down the law on the first day of class. After all, it is essential that kids know the rules. The better teachers take the time to explain the “why” of certain rules, and many creative teachers get their students involved in the creation of class standards. The theory is that kids who are involved in generating classroom rules will be more invested in following them. There is truth in this.

I’ve seen many classrooms where such rules are posted on the
wall. There are charts hastily scribbled by a teacher with too much work to do and other charts that would impress the board of a Fortune 500 company. I’ve seen rules that make sense (no fighting) and rules that make no sense at all (no laughing). Well, to each his own. The fact that different classes have different standards can actually be good—it teaches students to adjust to new situations in new environments.

I have no problem with rules. Obviously, children need to learn about boundaries and behavioral expectations. I am certainly not an anarchist. And when I come back from my day at the staff development meeting, am I glad that Robert behaved himself with the substitute? I am thrilled. This already puts Robert on the right path to success and far in front of his more mediocre peers. It tells me that Robert knows the rules (not all children do), accepts them (even fewer do), and is willing to carry them out. If Robert and his class are Level IV thinkers, they’re doing much better than most. One could argue that these good ends justify the means. But if we want our children to receive a meaningful education, do we really want Robert to do things because Rule 27 says he should?

I met a teacher who had an interesting way of teaching his kids to say “Thank you.” One of his rules was that if the teacher gave you something—a calculator or a baseball or a candy bar—you had three seconds to acknowledge his kindness by saying “Thank you.” If you didn’t do this, the gift was immediately taken back.

And it worked. The kids said it constantly. The only problem was that they had no real appreciation for the gifts they received. They were merely following a rule. Also, the “lesson” did not carry over into other areas of the kids’ lives. One night I took these same children to see a play, and they were no more or less gracious than other children in the theater. They did not thank the ushers who handed them programs or helped them find their seats, and they did not thank the people who served them drinks at intermission. Their
class rule was just that—a way of behaving in one class with one teacher.

It's also worth considering how many outstanding people would need to be erased from the history books if they had never looked beyond Level IV thinking. I teach my students that while rules are necessary, many of our greatest heroes became heroes by not following the rules. We have a national holiday for Martin Luther King Jr., and this heroic American would have accomplished nothing had he been only a Level IV thinker. Gandhi didn't follow the rules, and neither did Rosa Parks. Courageous labor leaders broke rules to help their workers. Thank goodness that people like Thoreau, Malcolm X, and Cesar Chavez had the temerity to think beyond Level IV. Extraordinary people throughout history have done this, and if we want our children to reach such heights, they need to know the rules but see past a chart on the wall. There will be times when the chart is not there. More important, there will be times when the chart is wrong.

Level IV is a good place to be, but we must try to do even better.

Level V. I Am Considerate of Other People

Level V is rarefied air for both children and adults. If we can help kids achieve a state of empathy for the people around them, we've accomplished a lot.

Just imagine a world of Level V thinkers. We'd never again have to listen to the idiot on the bus barking into his cell phone. No one would cut us off when we're driving or in line for a movie. Noisy neighbors would never disturb our sleep in a hotel at 2:00 a.m. What a wonderful world it would be, indeed.

After many years of trying to get this idea across to my students, I finally found success by introducing them to Atticus Finch and To
*Kill a Mockingbird.* At one point in the novel, Atticus gives his daughter, Scout, a piece of advice that perfectly illustrates Level V thinking: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb inside his skin and walk around in it.” Many of my students took this advice to heart and before long the idea began to snowball. Soon almost all of my kids were becoming extremely considerate of others. With Atticus Finch leading the way, I learned that the old cliché is true. Kindness really is contagious.

During these years, I received extraordinary thank-you notes from my substitute teachers. They were amazed that my students were able to modulate their voices throughout the day. When one sub asked the class why they spoke in whispers, the kids told him they did not want to disturb the students in the next room. When the teacher remarked that he was hot, several youngsters offered him cold bottled water they knew was stored in our small refrigerator.

Hotel employees also remarked that my students were the kindest and best behaved they had ever seen. Announcements were made by grateful pilots on airplanes that the Hobart Shakespeareans were on board, and planeloads of people applauded their quiet demeanor and extraordinary manners. I was very happy and proud to be their teacher.

But . . . you guessed it: I still think we can do better. While few things make me happier than encountering a young person who has reached Level V, I want my students to reach even higher. For a teacher, there is no more difficult assignment. But the fact that it is difficult does not mean we should not try. It can happen, and when it does, the gratification I feel makes up for every heartache, headache, and small paycheck I have ever received because of the crazy world of education.

I know we can do better because I’ve seen it happen.
Level VI. I Have a Personal Code of Behavior and I Follow It (the Atticus Finch Level)

Level VI behavior is the most difficult to attain and just as difficult to teach. This is because a personal code of behavior resides within the soul of an individual. It also includes a healthy dose of humility. This combination makes it almost impossible to model; by definition, Level VI behavior cannot be taught by saying, "Look at what I'm doing. This is how you should behave." In a way, it is like a catch-22.

I teach my students about Level VI in several ways. Since I cannot discuss my own personal codes, I try to help the kids identify them in others. There are any number of outstanding books and films in which the Level VI individual exists. It's fun for parents and teachers to find this type of thinker—they're all over the place once you begin looking. Let me tell you about a few of my favorites.

Each year my fifth-graders read the outstanding novel A Separate Peace by John Knowles. The book's hero, Phineas, is an extraordinary athlete and a Level VI thinker. One day he's at the swimming pool and notices that the school record for a swimming event is not held by a member of his class. Although he has never trained as a swimmer, he tells his friend Gene that he thinks he can break the record. He limbers up briefly, mounts the starting block, and asks his friend to time him with a stopwatch. A minute later, Gene is shocked to see that Phineas has broken the record. But Gene is disappointed because no one else saw it to make the record "official." He plans to call the local paper and have Phineas redo his feat the following day in the presence of an official timekeeper and reporters. Phineas declines, and he also instructs Gene not to tell anyone about his ac-
accomplishment. He wanted to break the record and did. Gene is dumbfounded, but my students are not. They have a language to describe and understand Phineas's character.

Or take the case of Bernard, the boy who lives next to Willy Loman and his family in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. Bernard is constantly pestering Willy's children about school and studying and is seen as a nerd. Later in the play, as Willy desperately tries to understand his failures and those of his own children, Bernard shows up but is in a hurry. He is a lawyer and has a case. As he rushes off, Bernard's father mentions that the case will be tried in front of the United States Supreme Court. When Willy marvels that Bernard didn't mention this astonishing fact, Bernard's father tells Willy, "He doesn't have to. He's doing it."

Through these examples I try my best to battle ESPN and MTV, where posturing, trash talk, and "I'm king of the world" is the norm. I try to quietly show children a different way.

I also use films that feature Level VI thinkers. One such character is Will Kane, the sheriff in High Noon, played brilliantly by Gary Cooper. Gunmen come to kill him, and everyone in town wants Kane to flee, for different reasons. Some want the gunmen to control the town so business will be better. The deputy wants Kane to leave because he wants his job. Kane's wife, a Quaker, wants him to run from the fight for religious reasons. But Kane has to stay. It's who he is. And even when he's been deserted by all, when his life is on the line, he remains true to his code. That's a tall order to ask of our children, but I ask it of them anyway.

For my money, the best example of a Level VI thinker on film is Morgan Freeman's character of Red in The Shawshank Redemption. I am well aware that most elementary-school children are not ready to watch this mature film, but Room 56 is a special place and we watch it after school each year. Red is in prison, serving a life sentence for murder. Every ten years or so he comes up for parole. He
faces the parole board a number of times during the film, and each
time he tells the board he is a changed man. His appeal is always re-
jected. But in one glorious scene, after spending most of his life in
prison, Red finds his voice. He tells the parole board he doesn’t even
know what rehabilitated means, at least in their terms. When he is
asked if he feels regret for what he has done, he says he does. But he
says this not because it’s what they want to hear or because he is in
prison, but because he sincerely feels regret. He has grown into a man
who knows himself and has reached Level VI. He does not base his
actions on fear, or a desire to please someone, or even on rules. He
has his own rules. And he is released from prison.

If you are skeptical about trying to get kids to this level of think-
ing, I don’t blame you. Any teacher who is sincere and ambitious
about what he does opens himself up to colossal failures and heart-
breaking disappointments. A while back, two former students re-
turned to my school. Only a few years earlier, they had been smiling
in my classroom. They had participated in extracurricular activities
and performed Shakespeare. I took them on trips to Washington,
D.C., Mount Rushmore, the Grand Tetons, and Yellowstone Na-
tional Park; I have a photo album full of pictures of these boys smil-
ing, laughing, and having a wonderful time. I still have the thank-you
notes they wrote me when they graduated from the class. Both prom-
ised to continue to be nice and to work hard. Yet they came to our
school one afternoon armed with smoke bombs. They ran through
the halls and threw the smoke bombs into classrooms, destroying
property. They also detonated them on teachers’ cars. Mine was the
first one they chose. For weeks I didn’t sleep well, trying to under-
stand how they had become so lost in such a short time.

But that’s what I do. It’s what all good teachers and parents do.
We ask a lot of our kids and do the best we can. We need to raise the
bar for children precisely because so many kids are behaving so badly.
We cannot allow incorrigible behavior to make us lower our stan-
dards. I refuse to go back to telling a child to do something because I said so. I will not trick myself into believing that if a student looks up to me I’ve accomplished something. I can’t do that.

A few years ago, I missed a day of school in order to speak to a group of teachers in another state. As is my custom, I told my class in advance and did not discuss consequences if they behaved poorly for the substitute. I did not promise any rewards if they behaved well. I told them I’d miss them and would see them the day after my talk.

When I returned, I found a note from the substitute to the effect that my students were wonderful. I gave it a quick glance and began setting up for our day. About an hour later, during math, the kids were working quietly on some word problems involving fractions. There was a knock at the door of my classroom, and a short woman came in, holding hands with her six-year-old son. She spoke Spanish and asked if she could talk to me. Something had happened to her little boy, a first-grader, the day before. Walking home from school, he had been beaten up and robbed of his backpack. While this was happening, other students, as is so often the case, only watched or continued on their way home. But a little girl who was walking by had picked him off the sidewalk, taken him to a fountain, cleaned him up, and walked him home to make sure he arrived safely. The boy’s mother was going around that morning trying to find the girl who had helped her son. She wanted to thank her.

I asked my class if anyone knew about this. Nobody knew anything. Having been absent the day before, I was clueless. I told the mom about some other classes to check and tried to comfort her little boy by telling him to remember that while there were mean kids in the world there was also a nice one who had helped him. They left and continued their search.

As I shut the door I noticed that most of the kids were talking to one another, speculating on which school bully had perpetrated the
crime—some bullies seemed more likely than others. Out of the thirty-two kids in my class, thirty-one were involved in the discussion. Brenda kept working on her math, head bent closely over her paper. I noticed this because Brenda hated math. (She was a marvelous reader, and she used to joke with me that try as I might, I would never convince her of the beauty of arithmetic.)

I stared at her as she hunched over her math problems in the back corner of the room. And for one oh-so-brief moment she looked up, unaware that I was watching her. She looked up because she had a secret and wanted to know if anyone knew it. I didn’t until our eyes met for a split second. Her eyes narrowed and she gave me a serious shake of her head that told me to mind my own business. “Don’t ask me anything and don’t give voice to your thoughts,” her face told me before she put her head down and went back to work.

It was Brenda. She had helped the little boy, but her plan for anonymity had been foiled by the mother and my brief glance. I asked the other kids to get back to work and resumed my business. The rest of the day was a blur. Brenda had reached Level VI and no one would ever know. She and I have remained very close over the years, but we have never discussed that day.

I don’t think we can do better than this.