

the road from where we are

Be not afraid of going slowly; be afraid only of standing still.

~Chinese Proverb

It is silent in my adult education classroom at 7:15 on a Tuesday evening. Almost silent, I should say. A slow tap . . . tap . . . tap echoes from one table to the next. Julia frowns at the screen, glancing to the keyboard and back again. Lincoln asks for one more proof-read before he hits print. Chris is searching for a used truck, reading ads online, his stack of letters next to him, finished 20 minutes ago.

As I scan this busy group of young adults—drop-outs ranging in age from 15–20 years old, my eyes come to rest on Rob; he is leaning back in his chair, arms crossing his chest, then springing forward with both hands poised over the keyboard like mini-parachutes, covered in the grime of auto repair. Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap. This is the first night since September that he hasn't fidgeted the entire evening. Rob is reading below grade level. How far? I hate to guess. One night he read aloud to me from *The Freedom Writers Diary* as we sat on the floor knee to knee in the hall outside my room, and each sentence felt like an accomplishment. He told me then that he could read only three pages an hour on his lunch break at the shop, but loved the stories so much that he wouldn't quit. He wants to finish, he told me. He hasn't finished a book since elementary school.

He's equally weak in writing. He labors over each word. I'm charged with improving his skills in our adult diploma night school, and we're making progress, but the road from where we are to

where Rob needs to be to advance in the workplace or community college is much longer than 14 Tuesday nights. Will I ever find a teaching job with enough time?

Tonight, however, Rob is motivated. We gather in a circle to discuss the task—to convince our state government to make adult diploma programs a priority in the next budget—and Rob gives us his characteristic energy. “Listen, we’ve gotta do this,” he insists, placing both palms on the table before him. He glares at Lincoln, “You gotta kick it up,” and points at Josh, “and *you’ve* gotta kick it up.” Then he pauses, grinning, “And someone’s gotta help *me* kick it up!” And off he goes . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap, a letter slowly taking form on the computer screen before him.

I remember his late arrival to the polling station the week before, quick with an apology because he couldn't find his driver's license. I imagined him then pawing through mounds of laundry in his room looking for it. Rob always looks frumpled—half put together in a wonderfully endearing way. I had piled Josh, Nikki, and Julia into my Mini Cooper for the ride over—and I do mean piled. Four adults, and with it too cold to even open the sunroof, we learned a whole new meaning for “compact” car. But here's what was cool about this field trip: we gathered around a ballot before they went in to the voting booth. “Vote for not more than two’ means what exactly if there is only one name listed on the ballot?” This form and this language are not familiar to these teenagers. The length of the ballot alone—50 warrant articles between the town and school—made this a dense piece of reading. So we worked at decoding it and learning how to read it before they voted. I won't

forget Nikki's trembling hands when she asked me about Warrant Article #9 for Starting Point, our local domestic violence shelter.

"I can vote to give money to this?"

"Yes, you can," I replied, echoing the language Barack Obama had spoken in our school during a visit one night.

She gave Julia a high five, and they laughed, "Yes you can, girl."

Only Rob will still be in school next fall when our letters might help us get additional funding. The others will graduate this May. None of them will directly benefit from their requests, and they're well aware of it. This school is special, though, and they want it to be there for others. They believe it matters, so they poured their hearts into their appeals.

My name is Julia. I am nineteen years old, and I dropped out of school to help support my family. I live in a modest house in the middle of nowhere. When I dropped out at sixteen there were three adults in my home working: my mom, my dad, and my grandmother. They were trying to make ends meet but failing. I knew that keeping my little brother fed was more important than a diploma. So I dropped out, got a full time job and tried to keep us out of poverty. A diploma never looked so far from my grasp as it did then. After I had been a part of the work force for almost a year, I realized that without a diploma I could only hold off poverty for so long.

Over the summer I got a life-changing phone call, one of my former teachers was offering me a second chance. That chance's name was Eagle Academy, an adult education program. I was one of the first to sign up for Eagle Academy and the moment my pen bit the paper to sign my name, my diploma came back into view.

Before Eagle Academy I just wanted to have money for my family. I had no future goal beyond that. I didn't care if I was unhappy doing jobs I hated as long as I had money. Now with a diploma a month a way, I have a new goal. I want a career I love, not a job I hate. So on May 29th when I get my diploma I am going to go on to school for cosmetology. Thank you for funding adult education last year. Please keep funding it for next year. Adult education is worth the money. You're giving kids/young adults like me a second chance at a better future. Thank you.

The point, of course, is not that all students should write letters to politicians or that we should organize complicated, expensive field trips to polling stations, but rather that all of our students deserve reading and writing experiences that mean something *to them*. That will drive them to focus on producing the best work they can. As Tom Newkirk reminded us at a recent Learning through Teaching consultants' meeting at the University of New Hampshire, we are accountable as teachers for engaging students in reading and writing—not for particular genres or novels, but for each student's authentic engagement with literacy. If it isn't happening, if "they won't revise" or "these kids won't read," then we need to look at our assignments and our texts and ask hard questions about them.

We are teachers of adolescents, not curriculum. It's hard every single day, but it's the chance to spark a Nikki or a Rob and live my life as a great poem, as Walt Whitman said, that gets me up before the alarm, ready to go, even on a dreary Monday in March.