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*It's the final morning of my summer teaching assignment, at an all-day-five-day-a-week enrichment program, where I literally punched a clock and worked 7:45 to 3:30, M through F. This column is a day late. I'm exhausted. Two stacks of papers continue to grow on my office desk and the table inside the front door of my house. I haven't talked to friends since June.*

Today, we're cleaning the classrooms we borrowed for six weeks (from a very generous Bethesda Academy). The kids are writing letters to our executive director, detailing the things they would retain or drop from our program if they were in charge. We'll swim after we finish a group art project. Then, we'll have lunch and buzz through two one-hour class periods this afternoon. Afterwards, goodbye.

My students are middle schoolers, from a variety of SCCPSS institutions; some truly wanted to be here this summer (though few would admit it), while others would have been happy to stay home. Most, if not all, of those homes aren't in my neighborhood. If not for the gift of this opportunity that presented itself to me – to teach English, but that's such a limited and simplistic characterization of this experience – I would have never met these young people. Which would have been a tremendous shame.

This has been one of the most challenging undertakings in my 56 years. It has preempted everything else to which I have grown accustomed. It has drained me of energy and winnowed my world. Yet I leave it energized and able to see well beyond the boundaries of my comfort zone.

You're supposed to treat each student the same as you do every other. I tried. But they are individuals, and each one needs a different set of things from me. You are drawn to some immediately, and others frustrate you from minute one. But an amazing thing happens – and it's a quick process – you develop a profound sense of caring for every, single kid.

I look around the room as they cut and paste through their last assignment. I make eye contact with some. The most-trying case flashes me a wry smile, careful that none of her followers notice the exchange.

There's plenty of high-minded theory around education and social-impact programs. Smart, well-resourced people populate their safely isolated echo-chambers and repeat words like "scalability" and "measurement." They debate, pontificate, inculcate, and jostle for funding. And then there's the ACTUAL work. Which isn't work, in the laborious sense. It's human connection, and it defies the politicized pomposity that surrounds it. There's talking, and there's walking. I've done both. Trust me, the former is much easier, while the latter is the exercise of the special few.

I am happy today. Happy that I did this. And sad. Sad that it's over. That I won't see these kids again for a while. Some, perhaps, never again. I won't know if our work together has lasting impact. I won't share their successes and disappointments. But I'll think of them often. With gratitude. And hope. And affection. And maybe, occasionally, they will think of me.

*Scott A. Laurer*



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