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Excerpted from the forthcoming book: *Beginner's Mind*

## Chapter 1: Right Notes

Long before we hear it, we feel it. The treble hum of one boy, then another, intoning the notes of an *a capella* that is winding its way down the long sheeny hall toward us. The confident girls brush the cantors away. They sing their own rondo: a circle of chatter about girlfriends stealing girlfriends, about sleepovers, about the sensual unknown of *after-school*. In a performance that is part Carol Channing / part Hepburn, the lead boy presses his lips together and mimics the long, muffled moan of the distant chant. Primping unruly and invisible curls, he weaves his way among us, until at last he leads his congregation in singing some of the *Ordinary* – the *Sanctus* and the *Agnes Dei*.

Of course, he is mocking her. And yet, his insolence requires such study of her pulse, her every note, it's difficult to see him as condemned. He takes us to her like a divining rod. With each approach, softer and softer, we hear the *Sanctus* -- or is it the *Agnes Dei*? -- until, with resounding confidence, the *Sanctus* reigns. By the time we reach the doorway to her classroom, we know how her piece goes. At the threshold to Room 20, in a pitch that Johnson Public Elementary School would rightly characterize as *religious*, we are humming the right notes.

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It is our first week of school in the 4th grade. She is the only teacher who does not escort us from the playground to the classroom. *You know your way back*, she will say with a thermal hug, and we know what she means, but not really. There are terms here, but they are so encoded, apparently too precious to iterate. It is as if the most perfunctory elements of our lives – leaving and returning – will now require from us a new vigilance, a wakefulness. Parents and federal laws aside, coming back will require – oddly enough -- an exercise of our will.

It is an exercise that we let ourselves fail. With each return, we glance through the glass-paneled doors of the *other* classrooms. We envy the other 4th- grade class whose teacher has so creatively drawn up her rules of conduct in the form of the *Bill of Rights* -- a giant, brown, paper scroll, unrolled for all to read. For a look of authenticity, she has even burned the scroll's edges and painted in shimmering gold glitter the numbered Amendments -- laws like the comfortable half-truths of school that we can hardly remember now. With each return, there is always this sideways glance, the nostalgia for dioramas: for the promising cool of oily-blue rivers in shoeboxes, for the tedium of Colonial-day chores made bearable under sticker-star skies and amidst towers of Nabisco Shredded Wheat, for the parade of miniature clay resisters buckled over by the weight of their clay berets before they can reach the Bastille.

We long for the cycles of seedlings in Dixie cups, for the classroom door covered in Christmas paper as if to reveal a perfect package – a Toyland of busy, smiling learners. We envy their self-containment, their ease with platitudes.

By contrast, our classroom door is always open, an endless welcome – or, as we come to imagine it, an endless acquittal for our quiet betrayals. But it is never an easy acquittal. From the farthest end of the hallway, we can read her puzzling greeting. Gothic letters trimmed in gold-leaf, letters sized to the width of our classroom door, and each one filled in with stories and faces and figures from an Old World. And the message on the classroom door, so alarming:

**GO AWAY!**

## Maps inside

We literally do not know if we are coming or going, except that there are indeed maps inside -- navigational charts primarily, but also the quaint Countries and Industries maps with sheep eternally grazing in ranges eternally lush and green.

On every desk, a compass, and between the rows of desks: atlases, feathered hats, and rolls of paper spilling from boxes. On the walls above the blackboard: the faces of adventurers -- noble exiles, she calls them. **Columbus, Copernicus, Moses, Galileo, Gauguin, Odysseus.** And beneath Odysseus's cold, black eyes and his pouting homesick mouth is the directive:

## Be inspired

But, our stomachs are still registering Odysseus's homesickness, and we find ourselves standing still as if to discern which is moving: us? Or like a ship leaving port -- this room? We stare back at Odysseus in an effort to keep him at his lonely post, ourselves on land. We steady ourselves. The groundskeeper putters below and a scent of sulfur stirs the maps on the wall. We are going away. Or else we are coming home.

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There is an enormous dictionary in our classroom -- so massive that, on every turn of the page, it threatens to crush to a glittering dust the folding card table that supports it. Our teacher has crossed out the word *Dictionary* and written instead, in beautiful Palmer script, the word *Sanctuary*: Webster's *Sanctuary*. On the floor is a throw carpet charting Marco Polo's long dream -- a broken line around the tip of Africa. In the same corner, in crushed-velvet reds and marine blues are overstuffed pillow chairs.

In spite of the invitation that we sense from all the props, we visit the Sanctuary less often than we should -- and not one of us ever looks up the word *inspire*. But, if *inspiration* means *to breathe life into*, then it is literally her breathing that draws us back each day. Swept up in the progress of her own drone hum, she absently smiles at us as we drift in, then mimes her directions to us: her arms breast-stroking through an invisible ocean: *Make room for song*. Palms down, then open and rising: *Raise up your voices*.

We know these gestures as phrases because they are tacked to the bulletin board for **DAILY ANNOUNCEMENTS**. Where other teachers have posted the daily news, our teacher has hung a giant poster-board musical staff on which she strings daily reflections like musical notes. Instead of today's date and weather and a calendar of school events hanging on our bulletin board, we find large thoughts strung across her musical staff like lyrics to songs that we do not know yet: **No man is an island** or **I think, therefore I am!** or **To thine ownself, be true!** ... and that means you and you and you.

On occasion, as it happens during one Lenten-gray February in A major, whole months could pass in a single, unwavering scale. For a whole month, we would look toward the DAILY ANNOUNCEMENTS board and see the same message in the same climbing scale:

\_\_\_\_\_ the right notes \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ it helps each of us sing \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ at the same time \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ If we sing the same notes \_\_\_\_\_

It takes us several weeks to recognize that there will be no such thing as Daily Announcements, and that this will be information that we will have to gather elsewhere. During recess, or amidst the thrill of fire drills, we skulk about like spies among our peers. We become experts at piecing together the most ordinary bits of information -- *Third bell means 4th-grade recess, right? The 4th-graders are*

*going to the Christmas play today, right?* Report cards come out this week, right? Day by day, the very details that we have been taught to regard as the most critical parts of our lives since we entered the school system will eventually come to be regarded by us as the most dispensable and inconsequential details of our lives. After a while, we will lose interest altogether in these details. We will stop asking the easy questions. And yet, this will not be an easy transformation. As with all of the metamorphoses that we would experience in Miss D's class, we do not give up our learned habits, our learned values, without resistance.

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*Resistance*, for John G. Ashe, would mean requiring a working clock in our classroom. Since our first day in the 4th grade, John G. Ashe has politely informed Miss D that the clock in our classroom has stopped. Each morning, as we line up for outdoor recess, John G. Ashe pauses in front of Miss D and points to the clock above our classroom door and then demurely informs her, *Excuse me, Miss D, but our clock is broken.*

For the first few days, Miss D glances up where John G. Ashe is pointing and then hugs him and thanks him for his "eagle eye". Recess after recess, it becomes clear to us that John G. Ashe is going to continue telling Miss D that our clock is not working; and recess after recess it becomes clear that Miss D has no intention of fixing it. After a while, John G. Ashe simply points his long, slender finger, or tips his head toward the silent and inert clock; and each time he does this, Miss D offers the same appreciative hug to him.

Several recesses later, several bright mornings and grey afternoons later, several weeks of wet leaves and several footpaths through a snowy playground later, Miss D would finally lean toward John G. Ashe and toward our single-file line to announce,

*Let's not worry about that beast of a clock, children. I prefer the ticking of your hearts, don't you?*

We are so surprised by the idea that Miss D has been apparently keeping time by the beating of our hearts -- and we are perhaps so oddly flattered by the idea as well -- that not one of us questions her. Glen Rooney, the smartest boy in our class, even announces that he thinks we should get through our math lessons much faster this way since his heart has a pretty rapid beat. But for John G. Ashe and for a majority of us who have come up through our first three grades as stellar students, this is witchcraft, or voodoo, or unusual time keeping at best.

We are not like other 4th-graders, and we know this. While our peers flourish in the transparency of a day's scheduled tasks, we grow in the cool shade of musical signature patterns: big ideas tacked onto an oversized musical staff that tell us -- not how to exit for fire drills, not when to eat our lunches, not when to end our school day -- but *how to live*. While others fall into a kind of communal march through the stages of a school day -- lessons, recess, and final lessons -- we move from Math to Reading to Recess to Art by observing entirely different laws of time. We tell time according to the rhythms of our own beating hearts. We tell time according to the slightly impatient tapping of Miss D's hand on her lap as we linger too long over a word problem. We tell time by the symphonies of light that penetrate our row of windows and that play across our floor and walls: the sacral gold hues of late morning like saints casting off their halos; the florescent and ambivalent gray of midday; and always the same metallic sliver of skylight that stretches itself across our desks to announce the day's final dismissal.

We feel the shift away from a material world toward an interior world, away from the secular in favor of the spiritual, away from the literal in favor of metaphor. And, as if already aware of the casualties that can accompany shifts like this -- and as seasoned offspring of the public education system -- we long for our old routines. We yearn for an hour hand that moves, and we grieve the loss of a kind of happy captivity when our days, our goals, our gods were all concepts drawn up for us by our teacher, or by the Principal, or by our parents -- by anyone but us.