

# No Thought Is Alone



*A Teachers Plea for You to Add  
Yourself into the Course of Change*

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*For those of you who may assume what is real . . .*

I remember what it was like to be a student. To sit in a classroom, and to feel so all alone. Lost and scared, it seemed like there was very little I could do in school or to do those things well. Here I lost my way through books and teachers, through educated individuals who never really explained why I was there in the first place. Here I watched as we became tarnished by fear, discredited through our shyness, and dislodged from our own unique sense of self. Soon the faces around me became blank, attitudes were easily assembled and fell into places that never really existed before. Like those children before us, a clear line was drawn between student and teacher, between what was lost and found upon the playgrounds and classrooms of our lives. It was formed and fortified by a system that systematized learning. From this I gained very little of what to learn, or how to learn it. It was just another border that denied both sides clarity and purpose and the ability to see each others own unique intelligence. This was how I was taught, where distance created dismissal between those souls that needed each other most.

So I thought about this, thought about you and others like you who are weary of being in college. I thought about those who have felt disconnected, depressed, or rejected by all this schooling and who are wondering if higher education is really worth it. It really is.

It is because there is a knowledge in you that has never existed before and that will never exist again. The fact is that many of

us have never had the chance to see this. We were taught around ourselves, rather than through our own intelligence. For us, this type of education only confirmed that education was not for us. That it was for the smart kids, the ones who knew the right answers to never ending questions, the ones who were always called upon in class. It took far less effort for teachers to teach those individuals, while the rest of us learned how to compare ourselves to them.

Yes, they were those students who appeared more focused and highly motivated. Those who seemed to know exactly where they were going, and what they were doing with their lives. But I am not writing this for them. They have other paths to follow. I am writing this for you. For those of us who felt out of place in these institutions, lost before the illusion of information and authority. For those of us who felt like we were constantly in someone else's home. I have seen this happen far too often in my university, seen it disable students heading towards their final years of formal training. They carry the symptoms of loss, loss of momentum, loss of meaning, and personally locate the origins of fear instead. They become the byproduct of exclusive education that selectively separates those easiest to teach. There are many kinds of fear out there, fear of failure, fear of future, and most damaging, the fear of self. I know this as I know myself, of students unprepared, cautious, and worried, wrongfully judged as slow or disinterested. They do not appear as the obvious academic upper class, or the so called scholarly elite, but they have their own potential none the less. They contain a volume of intelligence and intensity that is seldom understood or respected, nor sought for clarity. It is because of this fact alone that education has often overlooked

its greatest educators, the students they've been entrusted to teach. Those they cannot afford to ignore.

You may think that this does not happen in schools any longer. That education has learned from its mistakes and has somehow gained a higher awareness of its responsibility to serve a more diverse student body. To some extent it has, but schools do not always learn from the past or from what they teach, nor do they in turn focus on who they are teaching. They too arise from the institutions they serve and often pass on to their students the accepted institutionalized principles they learned. From this students inherit their teachers inability's to communicate issues that were never discussed with them and often follow the well worn path of academic repetition. This scared me when I was young, to learn a voice that was not my own from teachers who knew nothing of me and where I came from, and it scares me now.

Why? Because I was afraid of school, of what was promised, yet never delivered to me and my barrio. I feared for those like me, those who would be lost later on in life, handed over to other institutions that incarcerated and medicated those they could not control. Those who could not sustain the brute force of their influence. Too often they were those who fell through the cracks, the accepted casualties of an institutionalized culture. I was one of those who were wounded, incapable of seeing past those limitations set by others. I really believe you should know this fact right now. Because you are about to read something by a damaged individual, whose experiences were necessary to write these words I leave for you.

Books are seldom written for you. Rather, they are usually written about you. Used as studies and graphs for social or cultural research, or minor characters in Hollywood screen plays. You are more than this my friend, yet very few of us know it at times. It is too easier to blindly carry the weight of social stigmas than it is to know where they are created and why they are produced. So please be patient and aware of these pages, do not put your trust in them easily or think that you have found something that you should follow. That responsibility is really up to you. No book opens itself without the effort of the one who is reading it. The only thing that matters is what rests in your eyes and the mind that sees through them. Here is where my hope is placed.

- Y O U -

Despite what you think you are or what others may have told you you were, you are but a fraction of what you may still become. The difference is in knowing this, knowing who you are, and how you think. For you see, no thought is alone, not one felt that does not carry you into its own history, nor in the experiences that created it. What you are rests in what you think and how you think will determine where you will go, and how you will live. Knowing this, your thoughts, the thoughts of others and your relationship to thinking is what is most important between you and I right now. Why? Because you are the sum total of so many important things whose potential could change your world. But be careful! Do not assume that these pages have answers. It would be wrong to look to any book to do the work that is meant for you, and it would be

useless to start one more in your life without knowing your purpose or meaning for it.

What is important about these pages, is where you will find yourself in them, and what you will ultimately need to do to add to them. It will determine how the future will unfold for you and what part of it you will own and live in. This takes work. This is your job, and your job is to find out how you learn. Not in how you were taught, but in how you perceive learning. This is crucial and is based on an equation that few of us were ever taught in school. An equation based on identification and need, whose sum total depends on you and your ability to add yourself into the process of thinking, challenge, and change. Your world depends on this and it will only exist when you are ready to exist in it. It is a profound mystery, simple, yet complex and so universal that it becomes the very axis of reason and purpose in our lives. Identifying this, where it exists at times, where you belong in relationship to it, will be the only thing that will keep you committed to finding out more about learning. A learning that may help you distinguish your thoughts, and introduce you to yourself. That is why I have written this for you. Because I believe in you as a singular and unique human being, a true event that will never ever happen again in the history of the world. You are a profound possibility, and I am a person who believes in the mysteries of possibilities and the power of change.

So, before you assume your self worth in another classroom by a single grade, or lose sight of your hopes and begin to isolate your dreams, know that you are not alone in these pages. But you will be alone at school, away from what and who you

knew and who you thought you were. This is inevitable. Real learning is a solitary act, in it we find ourselves, or exchange this for something far less than what we can be. For real learning to occur you will need to persevere and endure the cold facts of investigation. You will have to believe in you more than anyone else has ever done in your life, because now you will face the full impact of self doubt, those immense moments when you will feel overburdened and ill prepared. For some of us, feeling these things has always been a part of our educational experience, something that made us feel uncomfortable and seldom secure. A residual affect of fear and comparison that was often felt in silence. This was never discussed in a classroom, or identified in school until it was too late, and we found ourselves sitting in a counselors office, or on academic probation.

For many of us, this was a byproduct of processed education, impersonal instruction, something that weighs down the mind to accept limits and expectations. Unfortunately educational systems have accepted this form of instruction, as it is always easier to teach you what to learn, rather than how you learn. Unfortunately it turns us into processed learners, passive observers, easily controlled and influenced. A massive audience swayed by nominal information and seldom inspired by individualized need or understanding. Here the crucial act of discovery becomes lost, self understanding is replaced by conformity before processed instruction. Here a captured audience is only that and they seldom know the difference. Because of this they would rarely venture past the designated boundaries of validated information for fear of being wrong or of becoming self conscious and singled out. Because of this,

they would blindly and automatically misplace themselves when entering a classroom. They would find the short cut, the creative excuse, the minimal amount of work required to get the grade, the least obvious path to original and personal understanding.

Don't do this! Schools have always produced a fear of failure, as well as a fear of success and fearful learning serves no one. You know this, you have felt it before. You know what it is like to study really hard, memorize facts and information, get a passing grade, and remember absolutely nothing of the information that was covered. Have you ever thought about why this happens? What it means? Why is it still so hard to learn what you tried to remember after all these years you've spent in school? Be honest with yourself. Figure it out. Why is this?

Because you've been asked to understand learning before you understood thinking. You processed information with the only tools schools has ever provided you. Tools that seldom fit the hands they were given. They were mass produced, and unsuited to the individual, nor built for their strengths. Therefore only a few of you knew how to use them, while others misplaced them or adapted them for use with other things. Real learning exists in figuring out how to make your own tools, but that is complicated and time consuming for a teacher to cover. It is seldom a course of study or a major interest in curriculum development. Unfortunately, very few of us ever considered doing this for ourselves.

That is why learning is so easily misplaced, why so many choose not to follow it further, or feel like it was not really meant for them in the first place. This is not your fault. School has left you disinterested and impatient, skeptical of what it may provide, and for that reason alone you have had a hard time existing within its structure. This is not suppose to occur but it does. Regretfully, every institution leaves enough room for this to happen, because it is part of a system that believes in the parameters it creates. It waits for those individuals who make it through their tests, those who haven proven themselves by finite standards and requirements, and honors those few for their efforts. And here is where the tragedy begins, for how can public education be inclusive if it's basic practices are built on exclusivity? Who will be taught and who will be excluded? It is unfair to create a learning system that systematizes learning for a distinct few? How can you feed those few, when so many are hungry?

You will have to realize your part in this my friend. Where this type of education has affected you. Which means that you will have to figure out why you should continue to be in school. Hopefully it is not because someone else is saying you should, or that you are too afraid to be doing something else. If that is the case then you are at risk of losing your power of choice in the world. Don't misplace your life or replace it by someone else's lack of direction, or fear. If you do you will never own what you may discover in your life. It will be easier for you to fashion your existence to suit those around you. To make choices that are limiting and safe. Do this, and you will only find things in your life that you will like but seldom love. Do not accept this. Go further than the classroom, past the

teachers and the walls that make any school. Investigate why all this happens around you and what might you do to change it. It is all quite serious.

The way we are taught is the way we learn and learning out of a fear of failure does not address fear, but only cements us into fearful learning. Fearful learning means that many of you will be quick to adopt a course of study, a major that is easy or safe. Something that others will approve of, or which includes people you are comfortable or familiar with, and therefore a lifestyle that is easy to live. Hey! There is nothing wrong with this. Let's not start out by thinking I know what is best for you. I don't know you, nor do I know your needs. So don't start making any assumptions in what I am trying to say here. I am just stating that being comfortable carries its own price. It often requires a tremendous amount of energy to maintain and inevitably shies away from anything that challenges it. Your learning should teach you about this and should exist as a place of questioning and refinement. It should not be done under finite conditions. Learning is infinite, and it should be approached that way, regardless of teacher or institution. If not you will begin to erode. You will allow easy excuses to form in you. Soon it will be ok to miss a class, to be late for an assignment or to let your grades slip just a little. Your response and need for learning will become slower and that last minute effort to finish your homework will be more and more familiar. Worse yet, it will not phase you to fail at something you once thought was incredibly important. And before you know it the future does not seem as bright.

You see, from this a learning fear occurs. It creates a certain distance between you and the teacher, between you and information, between you and yourself. It allows for excuses, for a failure of comprehension, and ultimately produces a lack of caring. It isolates, insulates, promotes indecision, procrastination, and decisively influences the life around you. Sooner or later it will alienate you, make you feel left out of the process all together and disable your ability to sustain your hopes and dreams. This should not happen.

To me, learning is a sacred act. Real learning initiates you into choice, and the possibilities of change that emerges with it. You are the only one that can make this happen and ultimately the only one who can find out what it means. So why not study it? It is right there, right next to everything else you own. It is next to the dreams and tragedies that enter anyone's life. It is all here and ready to teach you if you choose to learn and persist. Do not take your intelligence for granted, do not replace it with others facts and figures. Know your thoughts and meanings. For instance, try measuring the mass experience school has etched into you, and see how it has affected your world. Weigh it, understand its circumference, and see how it has influenced your ability to make decisions and how it has molded itself into your private world, your private voice. The voice you'll want to use in response to the worlds questions, the same one you were taught through love and impatience. We share this as human beings, we become the children of so many teachers, taught by teachers, who were taught by teachers. Often, we learned from those we have never met, knew of others thoughts before our own and inherited a lineage of response and reaction to life. You have

studied this through enlightenment as well as transgression and found your way through others moods, and limitations. A long line of experiences that has created what you now have to work with.

To find out more about this, I am going to ask you to think about some very important questions. Please, consider them carefully and try to see how they are connected to you and your life. There are very few individuals who ever let this happen by the way.

First of all; *Where has education placed you in your life? How did it function in your neighborhood? Did it really matter? What did it mean to those around you? Think about it please. How important was it when you were growing up? What did it mean to you when your cousin dropped out of school, or your friend got thrown into jail? Where did drugs fit into your community, along with the drive-bys, or pregnancies? How many died by pride, defending a gang, or street that was never truly theirs?* I am not kidding, this is really important to think about. How you were introduced to your life has a lot to do with how you will respond to it after all these years.

For many of us, our first introduction to school was really traumatic. We didn't want to go to school, we didn't want to leave what was safe and familiar. School made rules, drew specific lines around us that could not be crossed. In essence, it ultimately controlled time in a very systematic way. There was lunch time, test time, time out, and time in detention. From this our lives were etched, introduced and forced into academic time. They were regulated by specific hours in a

day, certain days of the week and that was hard to understand, hard to explain to parents who either supported, or overlooked our changes.

They wanted to believe that school was as it was promised. That it would treat their children fairly with kindness and respect. They assumed that we would be handled with care by well educated professional adults. Qualified teachers who would be sensitive to our individual needs, and who would look out for our well being. Unfortunately, a parents hope is not always realized in schools. How many of them really knew what their child was learning? How many had the time to see into what they saw? Many parents never knew their child's world nor their intelligence. They knew who you were at the dinner table, maybe criticized you in front of the TV, but the only time they sensed your education was when that report card came home. Remember? Some of us dreaded that moment. Grades were letters and letters carried weight that could easily crush a sensitive mind into apathy, something that hardens with age. Many of us were punished for that D, forced to be better rather than shown how to be. And from this something began to happen. A grade fear emerged into being and what transpired was insufferable, a perceived self worth in the form of a single letter, seldom accurate or ultimately true. It was just about then that having to go to school was different than wanting to be in school. When it was much easier to find your seat in the back of the classroom, never to raise your hand, never to directly look at the teacher.

Why does this happen? Why do we let it? How will we survive in a well educated society that does not educate its

society well? Miserably, but try not to be discouraged. Do not let this stop you. First realize that you have been institutionalized most of your life, so have your teachers. What does this mean? Find Out! Find out what happens to an institutionalized mind that is taught to be self conscious, rather than self aware. Study the influences of a system that makes one just as worried to succeed, as well as fail. Learn this for yourself, and you will start to position your thinking in such a way that may be of some real use to you. If you do then the world might shift just enough to give you reason to go further into your own learning. Not just to the end of a required book or an academic year, but beyond it till you find out what you need to know.

Be aware. Be sensitive to the things that aren't easy to understand. Things that directly affect your learning, like isolation, and loneliness. Things which have always been a part of school but never really covered in class. They are hard lessons and are the first real unwritten exam in any institution. A decisive test that systematically separates those who will stay in school from those who will leave. It has a lot to do with how you came to know personal freedom in your life, and how you earned it, and what it means to you.

Do you know what I am talking about? Do you know what personal freedom means? How you came upon it, earned it, negotiated your life around it. It has a lot to do with how you responded to learning. Some of us did it by isolating ourselves, by being quiet. A response that would defend, and proclaim our distance from the world. Soon, teachers would be less interested in asking you questions, expectations would

decrease, and you would be free. It was that simple. Others fought for it, rebelled in any way possible to gain something they felt was missing. They struggled for identity and wrestled for power and attention, negotiating who they were for what they might become. The resulting effect often appeared in or on our bodies. Somewhere between what we look like, and what we are. For some of us it meant wearing certain colors that others would fight or even kill for. Hair styles would change, clothes would echo attitudes and beliefs and tattoos would read like books. We would talk, or act like those who knew us or like those we wanted to be. It was often the minimal cost of belonging to others rather than ourselves. Now our bodies would look like theirs, lungs and livers would be affected by what they too ingested. Even memory would be lost to what we thought others could provide. Teachers became threatened by this. They didn't seem to understand that we were only using what school had so blindly taught us, a need to follow, a call to order, a chance to include and exclude what was not common to all. And like school, the individual was lost to the group, where security could be found in numbers, where you could fit in, rather than stand out.

You were not made for this. You were made distinct and original. It is your choice to believe in this or not, which is the rite of personal freedom. It all depends on what you believe freedom is, and how you will acquire it will determine how you will use it. You see, we all face this differently. We are all affected by where it comes from. From those who dominated us with demands, we responded. From those who were lenient and passive with us, we responded. Whatever your relationship is to freedom, it is based on how you learned it. If

you constantly fought for it, freedom becomes a fight. If it was handed to you easily, then you constantly look for the giving hand. But if it was found through self discovery, self awareness, then you seek it through your self. Maybe. This is not always true. Do not anticipate an easy answer from all this. It all comes down to realizing where it comes from in you and all of us are different.

All I can say is that your personal freedom will be tested to the extent of your understanding of it, and your understanding is far more capable of understanding more. That is why loneliness and isolation are important things to question right now. Isolation, that will test your commitment to what you believe, and how long you will believe in it. Loneliness creates yearning, which will produce a need for you to seek out familiarity. These things make you susceptible to distractions, and often places you back amongst old habits, certain people, or things that you were trying so desperately to change and replace in your life. Believe it or not, I find that this is the biggest reason why many of us have dropped out of school and left the possibilities of higher education to someone else.

This alone, is what worries me most. I need you in school. I need the potential of an pliable mind that knows its capacity for how it learns. A brave and active mind that is willing to see clearly and knows how their thinking works. Why? For as many students as you will see around you, those who will pass you in the halls and sit next to you in the library, there is not one of them that is like you. It is that simple. For that reason alone, and no other, is why you should be in school. Others may take your place in the future, they may read your used

books, or sit in the chair you are sitting on now, but they could never be you, they could never experience what is ultimately here for you alone. This is important for you to understand. Learning is not meant to be easy, it is not suppose to be. It has nothing to do with comfort. It has everything to do with you having a personal understanding of yourself and your place in the world. If not, the original mission of teaching is subverted. It will weaken the student by degrees, sacrificing their sense of personal purpose and sentencing them to a comfort orientated society. One that knows very little of how it survives itself or those within it. When this is done a community arises that is often incapable of communicating with itself. Too often schools contribute to what they were entrusted to change and any clear hope of real diversity is abandoned.

Do not be discouraged as I was. Do not believe that this is already set in place. Know that for change to occur you will have to create a place in yourself that can outlast the influences of your education thus far. You will have to believe in something you cannot see, something that you are capable of approaching now. You are worth it. But be careful! If you only focus on the results of going to school, rather than the process of understanding your self in it, you will only gain a small portion of what it has to offer. You will lose your focus. You will only take classes that go with your major, you will limit your exposure to other things that could expand your learning. Any university is suppose to inspire universal thought. That is there job! That is what you are here for. If not, you will find it much harder to sustain the originality of your being, and you will begin to lose sight of it. It won't be gone mind you, you will just not see it as often, nor the opportunities

to use it. This restricts personal freedom, freedom of learning, freedom of will, freedom to initiate what you are here to do. That is what being here is all about, what a school really needs for it's students. Without you, your mind, your sensitivity, these buildings around you are empty shells. Just seats without brains, teachers without students, all useless.

So, be aware. Know that most colleges and universities will assume that you are ready for this. It will take for granted that you have been properly indoctrinated by this time, and that you are ready to take on the academic responsibility of walking through their halls. A responsibility that includes self determination, how to use it and what it means. They will leave this up to you to prove to them your purpose, or to face your fate. Sound severe? Well it is! Being in school, staying in school, is the real test! Everything else, like getting to class on time, doing your homework, staying focused is just what surrounds it. So be here, be aware of your possibilities. Think like you mean it. Because the process you are in has the ability to definitely weed you out. Do not be afraid of this. It confronts everyone, and it will all depend on how much you believe in your self, how you let others affect your perceptions and responses, and how you will endure the responsibility of believing. You are worth much more than what you, or others may think you are.

#### - WHAT COULD STOP YOU -

Everything! Anything! Any word, any gesture, or action that you let affect you. It doesn't take that much, it doesn't have to. Usually it starts slowly, builds momentum, and eventually

becomes something that hits you by surprise. The problem is that you just don't see it coming. Before you know it, you are less interested and more susceptible to failure. From here suspicion arises. You begin to fear the thought that you can't make it, that you are being singled out by a teacher, or a member of the community. Maybe you think it is the color of your skin, or the way you talk. Even if this is true, anything can start this into motion. A callous word said by someone, felt and placed somewhere close to your pride, and something changes the direction of your thinking. A teachers impatient glance now becomes the basis of your cynical response, and something begins to hurt, something definitely moves its position inside you, making you less concerned, less sensitive and more skeptical. Soon this movement begins to restrict and ultimately distances you from those around you. It creates a separate reality, a system with its own language and barriers of understanding, very similar to the society you are living in now. Yet, any system that excludes cannot include new knowledge, or diverse interaction. And like any barrier, it denies both sides.

I will be honest with you. This barrier has stopped me many times and in many ways. In my life, I inherited a self conscious affliction from a dominated culture in need of self understanding and self reflection. I could not learn what was not taught through its lack of communication and understanding of itself, and the world around it. My education could never truly erase my feelings of exclusion in this society. It only made me realize that these feelings existed, and what might be done to change my perception of them. Learning was hard for me, made difficult by others, made necessary by a

belief in knowing the intelligence of ones self. So I worked hard to understand these things. I studied the anatomy of loss, and the symptoms of a critical society. I researched fear in the hearts around me that made me self conscious, and who in turn taught me their own limitations. I studied the eyes of authority that so easily froze me to my fears. That positioned me in a never ending motion of self doubt, a torrid movement that once started becomes perpetual and unchanged. It was in those eyes that I discovered other's limitations about my self, my culture, and the vast amount of scars left upon others. Here I was divided by an inaccurate perception of individuals, who were not so different than I. Those who failed not by the color of their skin or their intelligence, but by the lack of hope that entered their lives. These scars ran deep into my life, and still do.

That is why I am writing this to you. I believe in your eyes, and that your learning can move you towards an awareness of actualizing perception and change. Why? Because there is so much work to be done, so much to do to counter act the memories we carry from those we have learned to mistrust. How we see those individuals is usually how we live with them, and in turn, how memory is created and passed on. It is this memory which must be addressed and learned from if learning fear is to be changed. You can do this, but it will take time. There are still so many questions to be asked, and so many more to be answered. All I can say is prepare for this, and try not to take it for granted. At times you will get tired of it and you will feel uninspired. Remember, inspiration has a price, but you can pay for it. It comes at the cost of your excuses, that alone covers your participation. It is not easy,

and I am not saying that you should do it. All I am stating is the fact that I too have faced this challenge, failed at it, and tried again.

What could stop you is the same thing that has stopped so many of us before. Like believing that higher education is not for certain people, but it is, and it depends solely on you to make it so. More specifically, it depends on how you were inspired to love or hate learning. You must be honest with yourself about this. Is there still enough useable space left in you to believe in learning? I know that some of you are very tired from all those years of feeling bored and uninspired in school, but that could be over now. If you let it.

You have a choice. To be here in this moment, or not. Not being here is easy, staying here is difficult. For all that schools do, they often repress what they have tried most to inspire. They forget about teaching you how to survive their influences, how to integrate their meanings into a world that is both caustic, and indifferent. From this we fail to learn self sustainability, and quietly survive the cold bare facts of information. We are formed by this, as is our world, and the things in it.

Your involvement with school will depend greatly on how you were initiated into its structure. A structure that is both complex, and terminal. It thrives on participation and numbers. It perpetually divvies out it's own needs, and desires. For this is where doctors and lawyers are made, as well as laborers and inmates. Think about it. Where does that place you? What separates you from anyone else? What distinguishes one

student from another? Is it really based on the school you attended, your grade point average? Was it because you were popular, or unliked by teachers? Maybe you thought you were predestined to a certain life or job because of race, class, or privilege. Does where we come from ultimately decide who we will become, or what we will be?

This, my friend, is an illusion, and any illusion lasts only as long as those who believe in it. The purpose of education needs to be challenged all the time, because many are left believing they have no choice in it. Freedom of learning is freedom of choice, and education is not for everyone if it denies anyone that right. Education needs to be inclusive, rather than exclusive. It needs to remember, and understand it's own original purpose. Not to segregate, and alienate, but to integrate all our lives in order to comprehend and bring new knowledge into the world.

I believe in this, as I was once believed in by others. I was given the opportunity to learn these words by those unique teachers who were patient and deliberate enough to afford me a choice in owning my world. They left room, where room was needed, and encouraged belief in something many of us forget and leave behind, our sense and need of discovery. Discovery defines us all by experience, it calls each of us by our original name, and is usually the first causality of discouragement. How you approach it depends on your belief in it. Discovery loves the discoverer

You know this. You remember what it is like. You remember the first time you found something extraordinary and showed it

to someone less interested. A tired parent said, "*That's nice dear.*" and turned the other way. A classmate said, "*So, who cares!*", and then quickly compared it to something of theirs they claimed was much better. A teacher may have only criticized what it meant, critiqued its technique, and then simply explained its *private meaning* away. At that moment, your discovery felt far less genuine, less unique. Eventually these singular moments of discovery were less shared, they were kept private, or never really sought for again.

Don't let this happen. Do not allow your personal interests to dry up and drift past your grasp. Discovery is a gift you must give yourself. It is the one true hope in life that will deny you your inspiration, if you are not mindful of what it needs, and how it exists. And what does it need? You. That is all it requires. When you do this, you will own what you find, and no wayward response, or selfish criticism, will ever be a part of it. Let nothing stop you. Learning is a rite of discovery.

#### - W H A T N E E D S T O B E D O N E -

You are in school because of a series of events, so precise and decisive, so imperceptible and translucent. For some of us, these instances occurred before you were born, or when you were being adored through a nursery window. For some, it was when you took that first step, or when you were seen asleep on the couch, and growing so fast, after a parents exhausting day at work. It may have happened in other ways. It may have been triggered in the mind of a teacher who saw something of you in their own struggles.

We are all formed to the degree of how we are seen. It is this formation that sets us into motion. Love and understanding, equally forges the same mold as does anger and frustration. We become these things out of others hopes and fears, and the perceptions that created them. For some of you, your education came out of this, out of silent *novenas*, out of dreams, and a desire for you to achieve a better life. This all happened without you even knowing it. Your life was projected into the stars, into a future far from hardship and worry. Here, an initial investment in hope took shape, and hope said you would succeed, you would become a doctor or lawyer. You would live in a big house and have plenty of money, and school would give you this. It would give you more than what was experienced by others in your family.

This originates and evolves from many directions. It may have come from an inheritance of self consciousness, by a grandparent who never felt their own self worth. It could have happened the minute your parents crossed the border, leaving a war or poverty behind long before you were born. For many it was formed from the scars of slavery, from those forced to suffer at the hands of others with very little compassion or respect for human life. The residual affect of history passes on in us like a defected gene, or as a sense of accepted identity. A consciousness that forms specifically for some, fits differently in others, and carries the weight of memory.

It is often memory that teaches us what reality cannot. We intimately hold on to this, carry it in various ways, and feel it at different times in our lives. Our history follows us, reminds us, limits and detracts our intentions at times. For some, this never

changes. It has as much potential to inspire one, as it does to cripple another. That is why education has always been looked to to provide an alternative to failure. It has been thought of as the deciding factor that distinguishes us from those around us, from our past and the history of thought. Yet, no amount of education frees a confined mind, unless that mind is aware of its self, its life, its choices and those confinements that affect it.

This is what I am asking you to consider what you are thinking right now. Because when you combine this with the natural complexities of memory and projection, both your own and that of others, you come very close to the same challenges of your ancestors. Those who wanted so much more for you in your life. You are their ambassadors. Their challenges will be your challenges, and you will know them through your struggles. It is just that way. But it will be different, if you let it. How? You have the benefit of a different opportunity in time and space. You have a genius that is capable of giving you that better life they dreamed about. Because of this, and the suffering of those before us, you are afforded a better position to make good on the hopes and prayers of those who have loved you. How could you deny them that?

It all has to do with a unique spirit. The one that has formed itself around you and yours, around teachers and schools, priests and churches, and around cops and prisoners alike. But more so, it has a lot to do with where this spirit is attached to you. Those things that make us think what it is and what could be. It has an innate power that can just as easily stop you, as well as inspire you to go further. You should think about this.

Spirit forms vision, and vision puts one into motion. It can become easily clouded and disfigured, it can equally blind, as well as permit sight. I saw this in my early years in Junior High. Saw how the spirit of the school created a certain identity in some. It was forced upon the weak, adopted by the strong, and laid waist to those who would soon drop out altogether. School made demands. It elevated some and sacrificed others. It caused many of us to go to our respective corners and come out fighting. It forced us to pay tribute to that which separated us the most. Ignorance. The only true, and ultimate weapon of mass destruction

I saw this happen all the time. I saw it in the *cholas* with those long sharp needles in their hair. They would use them for jumping others, inflicting pain and fear. I saw it in the scared *tijuanetos* that the *chicano* kids would mock and isolate. Neither of them would ever know much of the other. Yet, where I saw it the worse was in the life of a young boy. He had almost blinded me with a pencil in Elementary School. He was the first of many, who would draw blood from my face on playgrounds and parking lots. School could not control him. Instead it taught him, what it taught best. How to leave it. He would always be that example used by the teacher of what a “stupid mexican” was really like. He was the punished soul for acting out, the one left out in the rain and forgotten during class. Later, he would be that one guy I would always see emerge from a crowd, bloody and ripped, his arm severely bent by a teacher on just another trip to the principle’s office. His ending was always the same.

One day I remember seeing him without his hair. He was walking alone, slumped over, as if he had a bag of rocks on his back. Something wasn’t right, something had changed in him. He had his head shaved, which meant one of two things. One you were trying out for the football team, or you just got out of juvenile hall. He had been missing for a long time. Many said he had run away, or was living with *hobos* down in the San Gabriel River. Instead, he was held in the only other school that could hold him, behind fences that were never left open. I had heard that it was pretty rough on him in there. Rumors of beatings and rape were being passed around. It was hard time for a hard life, made harder still by school. From then on, he never put his fists up to fight, never spoke back in class, or threatened a teacher again. He just stood there like a dark animal waiting for directions. His spirit was gone. A lifeless frame had emerged in its place. I felt bad for him.

Once I was coming out of a bathroom stall and was shocked to see him standing right in front of me. He was by himself, leaning up against the sink with his back to the mirror. I nervously said, “Orale” as his head rose to meet me. His tortured eyes looked at me briefly, and then he walked away. Did he remember me? Of our first meeting so long ago? Or was I just another reminder of all those he would have suffered for hurting? I couldn't say, but I felt really nauseous when he left. His eyes looked so old and tired, as if he were miles away. Eventually the guy I once knew disappeared altogether, he still came to school, but he just wasn’t there. It was like this for a long time and years later, I heard he was in jail for something or other. This made me very sad, because I knew that once jail got inside of you it would never let you out.

Your mind would never be yours again. It would always think like a prisoner, it would always feel locked down and relieved of its spirit.

I am writing you this, because our spirit plays a key role in learning, and it is best that you understand yours at this pivotal moment in your life. The potential of an educated life can be lost simply by degrees, based on how you see yourself and your relationship to the institutions around you. It is that easy. You may not be able to control what is in the eyes of others, nor change it, but you can study how you and others see and where that seeing comes from. This is where real learning begins. A learning tool that must fit your grip so as to be useable and sustainable under any circumstances. You are in an excellent position to learn what this means right now, and you will find it wherever you make space for it in your life.

Now, the question is, how will you make it? Do not take this for granted! It requires something that many of us have never been any good at when it came to learning,. Being patient. Real seeing requires this, it demands the viewer to own their lives and to understand the nature of sight, in order to allow meaning to unfold. So when things become difficult, when others choose to overlook you or mistrust your presence, you will endure this by being patient in your seeing. Patience affords us time for this and relies in how much you believe is essential in your life. If you are patient you will understand the importance of waiting, which will prove how much you believe in what you are waiting for. Patience does not demand product but process. It will teach you that knowing where your target is, is more important than hitting its center. Being patient will

help you sustain your beliefs, which in turn, will help you focus your seeing. It can afford you opportunities that others will miss, and will allow you to learn from everyone and everything. The question is, what are you willing to wait for?

Do not limit yourself to what others have or to what is sold by the media. Do not limit your thinking to others established perceptions or limitations. Learn from them. The first time your patience overlooks the uniqueness in any person or situation, it will signal the time you will overlook the possibilities of learning about yourself. Knowing this, your seeing will be capable of encircling that which is around you. It will provide you a choice to interact, and to be rather than to be like anyone else. It will give you a choice to be lonely, or alone, and to know the difference. It will allow you to excel at your own unique velocity of thought. That is why you must believe in what you are doing in school. You must invest in the possibilities that honest investigation helps one to uncover. Believing this is a difficult thing. It stems from a past that many of us could not control. We grew up believing in other peoples beliefs, in a rite of passage, and a code of institutional ethics. It is a hard fact, tied to our perceptions of academic acceptance, that our beliefs are often accepted and denied by others.

Believing in something for ourselves is the first real test of knowing who you are. No one can really tell you how to do this, and you cannot follow anyone else to find out what it means. The only life worth living is the one you discover, and what you will discover is still yet to be understood. But remember, that believing in anything means that there is a good

chance that you will be misunderstood. Prepare for this. Real beliefs are challenged every day, and will mean nothing if you do not leave enough room for the beliefs of others to exist with yours. Therefore, know that you will be surrounded by the casualties of belief. By people who have been misused and marginalized, and who hold the world responsible for their anger and suffering. They will have become discouraged and pained by loss. They will sense their wounds and endure them, until they linger past the numbness of acceptance. Suspended by memory, they soon will drop to the very real surface of self doubt, of believing there is nothing more that they can do. But there is. There has to be. You must know more than what other people think is possible. You must go beyond your worries. People always think they lose their beliefs. But this is just not true. It is an illusion. You never lose them, you just basically misplace them amongst everything else you own. The trick is to find out what you own.

We are fragile, and can only last as long as our beliefs allow. Disbelief challenges the dream, but not the dreamer. It dims what light we may own, locks what doors might still be opened, and makes us as hard as the world around us. Is it right to accept this? No, not really. But, it is present for a very real reason, caused by an oversight of assumption and loss, a missed opportunity in education, that could have really helped so many of us later on in life. What was it? Well, I believe it was because of some things that were very basic and essential for our survival. We lacked the essential studies in patience, self discovery, and seeing. They were those things you would never find in a course syllabus, never heard discussed, or questioned as relevant subject matter in a class. They were

those missed opportunities for teachers to learn from those being taught. They were lost moments of personal understanding that were left for someone else to complete.

Many educators believe that schools are not responsible for teaching this side of you. But, where does a student go to learn their individuality when everyone has been taught the same way? In our society individualism is sacrificed everyday, sold as a product and leased to those who would know very little of how it is was created. They would never truly own what they would consume. Imagine what happens to a society that accepts packaged individualism? Now, imagine what must happen to a mind to let that happen.

Processed education may have us work adequately on a program or a machine. It may afford us the security of a good job and allow upward mobility. But without self awareness, students will not be able to see past the menial, nor integrate their potential for knowledge. Knowledge is a goal, taken for granted. In our lives, it is what divides us the most. It decisively splits us into those who can, and those who never knew they could. But, knowledge should not be seen that way. It is never a destination, not something to be satisfied with alone. It is something meant to prepare you for what lies beyond it. And what is that? Wisdom. Yes, wisdom! Wisdom allows space and leaves room for you to grow into the possibility of purpose, and compassion. Mind you, it will not guarantee you a better life, but it will provide you with a remarkable vantage point for the one you own.

For this to happen you must start now, before you are distracted or are lost in the crowd. Do your best to see how you see, and those you will effect will benefit from your sight. Look beyond the surface of things and you may find a sustainable belief in what you really own. Others have done it, and others have failed, but don't assume this as your final conclusion. Rather, assume a positioning of hope. When this is imagined you may cross borders similar to those drawn in earth and mind.

To do this your mind must evolve and be capable of dramatic thought, pliable to change and resolved in facing the responsibility of a learning debt. *What does this mean? Not another debt!* It means that your education will feel useless unless it is shared. It won't have real purpose until it is added to, and then passed on. It should not be treated as a commodity, to be bargained and sold. If this is the case, then your education has taught you nothing. It will have only added to the system that powers it. Don't get me wrong, I am not saying you should go without, live a monastic life, or join a philanthropic organization. Maybe that comes later. All I am saying is that there are great things to be done in this life, things that can change with very little effort, if you choose to do so.

For instance, from all those words you have ever learned from books, teachers and in your private moments, find the kindest ones you know and use them. It is that easy. Things change, when you do, and knowledge is easily transferable through kindness. A gentle word, or glance, could affectively inspire others. But remember, it may be misinterpreted for being weak or suspicious amongst those hardened by experience. Don't let

that deter you. Eventually these gestures land where they are, and for that reason alone, they should not be discounted, nor made exclusive. You have something more to do with this life than just living it. Your learning has the ability of placing you in a position of awareness. It has the potential to breathe new life into us all. In affect, this will off set what you owe by contributing your spirit to the world, by adding your own unique light to the many lights that surrounds you. For that reason alone, even without you knowing it, the learning debt is slowly paid back, taking absolutely nothing away from what you own.

#### - I D E N T I T Y -

For that sad boy I grew up with whose spirit was crushed into submission, many would say it was a good thing. That he had to be controlled first before he could be taught. That his identity needed to be reformed in order to fit the shape of the world around him. This may be true for some. But no one ever thought about teaching him of his world and how to survive it. About how he thought from within and why he did what he did. We were never taught about identity, nor how it survives the actions and reactions to the world around it. Rather, school left us adrift upon a sea of learning, whose depths were never fully explored. Where its tides secretly pulled you across great distances over a short period of time, and whose surface would critically deform your reflection. To some, identity could not be taught, it could not be a major. Therefore, it, like so many other things, were left up to you to shape. Left in the hands but not in the heart of those who would piece it together.

You see, our identity is formed in so many ways. It is fitted into the actions of our thoughts by how we were taught and how it was expressed by others. It's form is outlined by the contours of memory. Like old photographs, they give clues to what we looked like, what we owned and how we were touched. They make reference to things felt and captured. In them we see you pointing where that front tooth once stood, tears running down your cheek from a puppies quick bite or in front of that old church in a new dress. Images of loved ones half asleep and drunk on the old couch, the doves on your Grandmother's roof, the person you forgot, or who forgot you. To us, those images meant something, to others, nothing at all. We'd misplace them like other things from time to time, find them again, and cut out those who had fallen from grace. Some of these images would be worn by affection, stained by abuse or elevated in prayer on the alters of those who loved us. We too were like these images in so many ways. But what matters most is where we have placed them not in space, but in the heart and mind. They record our living, our seeing and our place in time. They are the first treasures rescued in a fire, and the last to be discarded after death. Our thoughts rest here, they toss and turn in the night of memory.

Our identity is often measured by this. We are made of so many minute details. Things that are familiar, that stretch far back and lead down so many paths. Some point to the left of truth while others pull just to the right of fiction. We travel this, experiencing ourselves in what we know, what we've felt, and in how we were touched. From this journey our identity is assumed, it is arranged and formed to fit the shape of our thinking. Like a custom made coat, it outlines our form,

assumes our shape in the world, and creates an identity that is seldom challenged, or tested. Before long we believe in its shape, rather than its content. We begin to limit our experiences to those things that only support it's structure. Identity then becomes a reflection of need, of belonging, something to maintain and harbor, rather than to experience, something made difficult by the society that surrounds us. The society that assumes roles of identity by casually taking for granted the identity of others. A society made visually illiterate by processed consumption, tainted by both prejudice and a lack of understanding. Its identity follows the same paths as yours, sees in the same way, hears and reacts to the same things, but in different ways. It too suffers the symptoms of a processed identity from things learned and copied. From this, things change slowly, mistakes are repeated, and the individual person, distinct and unique is overlooked. What it does not know, it will not understand, and is often limited to teaching those around them only that.

Understanding this takes effort. Not the kind of effort that makes you right, and others wrong, or justifies your beliefs, but the kind of understanding that sees fairly. That is why we understand so little about our own identity, because we limit our learning to how we've been taught. Teaching, often teaches limits. Many of you know this already, you have only gone as far as what was expected of you, never seeking past the information provided. It easily suits some of us to limit our exposure to learning up until the time it is no longer required for grades or social interaction. That is why it is taken for granted. You think you can learn it at any time, and that if you study long enough you will understand it. This is not always

true. It is not in what we learn, but in how and when we learn it that matters. This is where learning institutions have failed. They forget to understand that the individual exists. Those who learn at different times, and in different ways and who need other forms of teaching and learning to exist. The system was not built for this and therefore, neither are we. We stumble through facts and figures, and our learning experience becomes our learning identity, a processed reality seldom challenged or changed. Where a teachers voice slowly turns into our own.

Some would say that this is how it should be, how it has always been. But what becomes of you? What happens to the identity of your unique being? Think about it. What will you need to survive higher education if you are limited by the identity it has already taught you? How will you fit into a club whose members never thought you would enter? What does this mean? It means that you will have to take charge of your learning identity, and to seriously initiate it into the rites of your learning identity. The one you create! To go past what is, into what could be. A learning identity is exactly that, to learn identity. No one can give you this, but you can find out about it. You can make it your own.

Let me try to explain this by making a simple analogy. It is sort of like the first time you were given an ipod. Remember? You may have read the instructions to operate it, learned how to control the volume and scroll, but you would have been naive to expect those instructions to tell you what to download. Sure, at first you might have loaded what was popular at the time, or what others might have told you was really cool, but

until you found what order of songs made sense to you, this technology was just a receiver. A broad net catching everything made available to it. But each player reflects its owners identity. It has the power to contribute to the mood of the moment, the need for news or propaganda, the need to occupy time and space, or just to get up and dance. Knowing how to control this is what really matters, it elevates its use and becomes something more than a receiver. Now it can transmit desire and add to your thinking. It allows you to identify your purpose and to use it in what you alone may find. In this way identity serves the owner, not the other way around.

Society does not always see this, because its identity is so transient. Its collective beliefs stem from a history of manufactured identities according to certain trends, specific needs and styles. This is very similar to the personal history we know of ourselves, and sometimes forget. For instance, remember your elementary school? There was a playground there, a place where you skinned your knee, ran with others, and traded lunches. It was a time to be out of the classroom and to do what you did best as a child, play. Yet for many of us, a different education took place there too. The playground often taught severe lessons. It both isolated and insulated us from each other. There amongst soft spring days, and cold morning light, we were taught by others what we were and, more effectively, what we were not. Divisions were invisibly set according to aptitude, strength and weakness. Standards of beauty and sameness were silently arranged. We rarely faced our true selves in this process, but rather, came to know the face that others made and identified for us. Some of you bought into the convenience of an easily prescribed identity.

So the goony smart kid was stigmatized with being odd and treated as such, limited to what smart kids could identify and interact with. This form of identity was easily transferable, which meant that the troublemakers fate would be as damning as the one who was admired for their beauty. Each was sectioned off, held in check to find like individuals in hopes of friendship, understanding and acceptance. For us, we learned that one does not feel so out of place, nor feel their differences so severely, when surrounded by those similar to themselves. Therefore, it was easier to stay in your group, to believe like other do and therefore maintain what was necessary to sustain ones acquired identity. We saw the world from these eyes, whether they were our eyes or not.

So here is where the problem begins, and how many of us suffered from the sight of others. Here too were how your teachers eyes were formed as well. Eyes that would judge, grade, and assume by association. Many would see the finite, the impression made on or in the skin of others. They would scan the faces of the disinterested and the admired. Everything they ever learned to assume about the physically disabled, the slow learner, would be arranged and taught by long remembered associations. Miscalculations came standard with this, and the future was based on the past for so many brilliant minds. Unfortunately the severity of this association was taught to the cop as well as the addict, to the future parent and teacher as well. Now, so many others would easily assume who they were by a physical or mental association with others. This made it easy for someone to believe that all “\_\_\_\_\_”, were the same. That they all failed, and could care less, like the rest of “them”. And if something were

to happen to confirm this, they would instantly associate by default, assume and thus consumed a limit of understanding. Tender shoulders and minds would bare the weight of others experiences long before them, and a stigma would be firmly attached to the soul of the wearer.

I think about this a lot, about the voices of authority that would often question why these individuals would *never change*, or *better themselves*. Why the so-called, “THEY” would make it so difficult to teach and control. But I say it is in how we were taught and what we learned from others that keeps us confined or grants us independence. You would think, that in a world that’s suffered a holocaust, permitted slavery, and allows others to go hungry, that we would be the wiser. Not so. We will not rise unless all of us are brought up together. We cannot call ourselves civilized, if we are uncivil to each other.

So, where does that leave us? What happens now? What will become of those who cannot withstand the judgments of others. Well, it is already happening! It’s taking place right now in the ex-con who can only think like a prisoner. It is continuing in the failed student who knowingly assumes their failure. Believe me, it is going on all around you. In the faces of the young who live through violence, in the addictions of the rich and poor that drain life from living. From this, the world permits its failure, and bargains its ignorance through the lives of others. It conveniently sends them off to fight their wars, and adopts a collective arrogance of responsibility, blinding itself to what it creates. Here, we slam into each other from great distances. We hurl our pain into the world without question or understanding, and think we are rid of it. But it never leaves. It re-forms itself

in the lives of others, it layers its suffering one upon the other, and erupts again, somewhere else.

We hear of this all the time. How a student lays dead his classmates in a rage of bullets, how they fall silently from bridges, are lost in the crossfire of a drive-by, or thrown at an enemy in a distant war. You may think that this doesn't really matter, because it is not happening where you live. But it is. Because your world is much bigger than you think. It is intimately connected to everything that touches us all. A world of individuals that still cannot figure out why tragedies occur. They sit perplexed in front of TV's, dumbfounded by a society that produces teenage killers, child prostitutes, and a vast numbers of homeless Vets. Those fragile souls who break lives with lives, that were once broken themselves. What does a society do with these human beings who have fallen through their cracks, those unique individuals they did not wish to teach? Where do they go to survive? What options do they get to choose from? Isn't it a bigger crime to create the criminal? Isn't it a greater offense to offend those who were once sent to schools for guidance? Just think about it, please.

What would your ancestors say? What would they feel about all of this? Who would they be more disappointed in, those who hurt us, or those of us who have hurt ourselves? Imagine their pain if they saw how their children were taught? How they learned to assume limitations and the assumptions of others without understanding why, unable to survive a life less respected. What would they say, if they saw how full our prisons were with those they loved, how our morgues now stored their children, and how drugs and violence would

forever replace the hope and possibilities they had once dreamt for them? Imagine their sadness, their eyes . . . now what will you do about this?

If this matters to you at all, then you should take all this into consideration without anger, or further assumptions. PLEASE be aware of this, be aware that your learning is a personal and solitary act. One to be chosen and celebrated, one to be discovered and refined by it's owner. Only you can do this. Don't leave it to someone else. Real learning is a massive act of will, and it should not be limited to the facts of process and product alone. Why? Because your identity is formed by meaning, by what you have felt, and how you see. It should add strength to will. Yet how often was this covered in class? How many times were you allowed to understand your meanings for yourself, or even permitted to address them? Why is that? Why is it that things like passion and meaning never stressed in learning? Think about it . . .

It is very rare that our whole person is taught to in a school. It is much easier to teach that part that does not emotionally respond, the one that does not mix meaning with information. For many, it takes too much time, it makes schools liable. That is why it does not always suit the teacher that prepares for what they will teach, rather than who they will teach. The very nature of higher education is based on this, it creates an elitism that is often confused about the well educated individual. Unfortunately, it tends to see them as a commodity in the business of filling seats, meeting projected registration quotas, and as the source for budget deficit pay backs. But where does this put you? What will become of you and your society if you

cannot fit your own meaning into it. How will your identity survive? Where will it go and how will it communicate with others? There are prisons full of these casualties, and not just the ones built from stone and steel. Rather, there were many of us who were sequestered to live out life sentences within ourselves. Stranded to meanings that were never given a proper name, or a place to exist.

So, the question is, what will you do with this? You cannot afford someone else's identity right now. You haven't the time, or the money to invest in what is not true for you. You are beginning at the end, the final years of institutional study. Which means that you are having to focus on challenges that should have been made available to you much earlier in your life. Then you could have challenged the reality of suspicion and identity, you could have forged a stronger union with yourself and meaning. Don't waist this knowledge now. Without you and your thinking, the world becomes an empty sieve. Much will pass through it, but it will still hold something of what might still become. This is important! Without you, no new discoveries will be made, no new truths will be uncovered. Don't get me wrong, others will find their own, write about them and make lots of money, leaving you to consume their identities in place of your own. But they won't be yours. What use is that? Consumption displaces meaning and creates a fragile ownership, which provides a shallow experience of understanding anything. You are more than an acquired identity, a duplication of purpose, more than a product to be marketed. You have what you need to understand this. An original identity worth recovering.

- *A Quick Note* -

Please forgive me, but I thought it might be of some use to you to know that it was at this moment in writing this that my education got in the way of creating these words. With all these thoughts about identity and schools, I began to remember familiar voices. Those that criticized me, my writing, and the meaning structures that surrounded my life. It began to weigh down my thoughts, creating in me a feeling of fear and insecurity. I wanted to run, to hide, to delete these pages, find the easy way out and not think anymore of these old scars; the ones I knew people would find so easily readable and judge from these pages. I felt quite alone and really sad. I thought, what will these words ever do? It won't change schools, it won't undo what has been done to all those minds it has affected. Why keep going?

It was then that my wife Kambria, in her deep and loving affection, said that maybe what I would write might eventually help someone else who'd help others change what I could not do directly. I thought about this for a long time. Thought about those who taught me, whom I've never met. Those who assured me that meaning really mattered. Maybe, in some way, I too am part of a lineage of meaning, whose sum totaled effort melts into the words of those they will never meet, and into the change they will never see. Yes, this made sense to me, and may be of some use to you later on in your life, when the meaning of what you are doing is unclear, makes you vulnerable to the world, and forces you to stop caring. Some of us stop and continue, while others stop and become unclear of how to start again. Remember, you can start at any time, at any

age, under any circumstances. Just don't allow your thoughts and their meanings to be lost to the lineage of meaning and what it might mean to others.

## - C H A N G E -

This is an amazing word. It represents so many things. It is feared and prayed for, sought and destroyed. It can move in an instant or take forever to happen. It threatens the familiar and causes a repositioning of thought. We fight what it creates, question its validity and then at times, realize that it may have been for the best. This is where wisdom is born. Where one might see beyond what was once thought solid and unchangeable. Where experience allows one to pivot over limitations. If you want to understand the nature of your identity, to take it somewhere further than where it exists, you will want to learn how change affects you, what makes it move, what scares it away, and how it responds when tested. Change, in itself, is what affects us most in our lives. How you deal with it and what it means to you is incredibly important to understand if you are to use it in any meaningful way.

I believe it has a lot to do with how we were introduced to change in our lives. How we were formed by the currents that shaped our meanings. Some of us had problems with this, it flooded us with fear and apprehension. It washed over us with a sudden impact and rearranged the things around us. It was not your fault, but it sure felt like it at times. Very rarely are we allowed to ease into the waters of change or understand their movements. That is why so many of us often capsize into the currents of life, into an ever changing sea. Here we'd dip

beneath the sudden wave of divorce, a loved ones death, the tsunami of dreams. Emotions would scatter and drift past lives that would surface and sink, through storms and sudden shifts of meanings. All of a sudden things seemed less capable of keeping us afloat, and change became something to fear and hide from rather than to embrace.

For others, this same current flooded into our schools, where change was enforced, but never explained. In those waters we were thrown in as a group, and made to suffer the cold surface of information while wading through rivers of facts. The shock would numb us causing many to drift far from the rest. Here, we were never allowed time to ease into these new waters, never invited into the shallow end of learning in preparation for the deeper waters of knowledge. No life vests were handed out for the dynamics of change. We held on to what we knew, and floated over the depths of information where bad swimmers were seldom able to go. When this happens a students confidence is confiscated at the shore. They easily abandon what has kept them afloat for fear of drowning, and reach out to the only other options available. Many of you did what you could to sustain yourselves in these swells. You tried hard to tread faster, to "fit in", to swim like everyone else. For this, you were seldom accepted for what you brought to these waters, or of the personal and cultural powers that once kept you safe and dry.

For some reason, it seemed to me that teachers never understood this. They could never take the time to understand the guests that entered their classrooms. Why was it that we had to be like them, in order to be liked by them? Some could

do it, and some of us just floated out of reach. And soon the differences became apparent amongst us. We became divided by the prevailing tide of grades, and the attention that ultimately teachers would float before us. Eventually, those of us who weren't as capable of floating ourselves around these things, found less and less to learn. We were set adrift, castaways, sacrificed faces without names. But that was not all. There were those who eventually came close to meeting the teachers demands. Those who finally mimicked the strokes they were taught, and forced to use in order to survive. Soon, something happened to them too. They would be drawn away on very different currents that effectively separated those who could swim, and those who could not. It was the first of many oceans that education would fill in around us, that eventually divided us into distant seas, upon distinct islands of information. I have floated these waters myself and have felt their undertow. I have witnessed the many lives that could not endure their stagnate pools, or rushing torrents. You may think this is an exaggerated metaphor for learning and change, but it isn't. I have seen students freeze and boil in these waters, never wishing to swim again.

Please think about this for yourself. Think if this has affected you in any way. You have just read how it affected me and those I care about. These waters can be so debilitating to many of you who swim against their currents. But I say, swim! Please swim. Do not be overcome by the vastness of the sea around you, nor its depths. Do not allow the waves of change to lessen your strokes. The trick is to find your own pace and to sustain it past where others have drown. I believe you can do this.

This means you will have to do a lot of training. You will have to figure out the distances between shores. Change will not drown you if you know how to navigate its movements. Even though you may have seen the aftermath of floods, where family and friends have washed up all around you. You still have the chance to swim. Not everyone will see that this is possible. Many will think that it is better to sink, better to get out before it gets too rough. Yet, how will you explain to them the necessity of swimming in swells that others have learned to fear? How will your family trust the waters that swallowed your cousins, that left your sister adrift and alone? The waters of change show no sympathy for those who enter them. Its nature is specific and it changes for everyone individually. You can never control its movements, but you can understand its patterns, chart its currents and navigate these seas.

This is why so many of us live far from shore. Away from the sound of waves that crash and echo and remind us of our struggles. These currents of change are not easy to get through and that is why so many have chosen not to enter and therefore never reach those islands of higher education. Even if you can swim, many do not, in fear of leaving the firm familiar soil of family and friends. Those unique individuals that often kept you deeply rooted to the core of your universe. Even though you may think you will have to leave them behind, they will always be there inside of you.

Change provides choice, and choice is the beginning of freedom. This is something you can only teach yourself. You have the potential to really understand this right now, but it will not happen easily unless you allow yourself the complexities of

change. Change has the capacity to inspire hope or to affirm fear. It will always be drawn to you even if you are not ready for it, it will be ready for you. If not, then very few things will change in that world of yours. This could devastate your life, it could make you bitter, and keep you far from shore. Just remember that your survival floats on so many possibilities, interconnected to a mass array of responses and emotions that wells up in and around you.

That is why it is so important to consider what relationship you have to change. Be sensitive to it, and learn how it affects you. Think of how it has treated you in relation to things that are unfamiliar, to faces that reflect your memories and limitations. To voices that seem foreign or familiar and incite comparisons to those who have praised or hurt you. Facing change, and doing it well, is all that really matters. It positions you on the verge of knowing more about yourself and how you think and react. It pulls us into the deeper end of knowledge, where we swim by choice, or are thrown back on old familiar shores. If you deny your chance of this now, you will most likely follow those who have learned to fear these waters. You will swim like everyone else, “fit in” to that which seems less challenging, and hope for the best. Others will learn from your example, like your little brothers and sisters, and will simply follow what you do. This has affected you your entire life, and many institutions have allowed these waters to wash students off their shores, having allowed something they cannot ultimately prevent.

It continues to this day. Every year institutions of higher education draw the tested swimmers onto their established

islands. They unwittingly form a processed system of elitism, that provides the accepted intellectual environment for those who have survived this process. Yet, this often overlooks the necessary fundamentals inherent in teaching those less familiar. Those whose mannerisms, and aptitude are more challenging for some to really understand. Because of this, it rarely knows the individual, or how to teach them. It rarely takes into account the learning styles present in a single human being, the delicate, and unique elegance of those in need of understanding. To know them, to compassionately learn their personal intricacies is to grasp the real fundamental clues in how to teach them.

The reality is that there are so many amazing individuals who enter their shores. They mirror their culture, language and experience. They bring with them lessons from the past, from other places far away. They are the life ambassadors of those felt and unseen, children of hope, our children. If allowed each of them becomes a unique swimmer, each different and distinct. Their strokes reveal their experiences in society and culture, their kicks show how they were affected by so called “learning disorders”, which in affect are just other orders of learning. And still, many are worn down more profoundly in ways that are deeply private and are very difficult to comprehend. Schools rarely consider the true nature of diversity in their students, nor how to nurture and sustain these unique beings found scattered upon their shores.

You need to know this because there are exceptions to these islands and those who teach upon them. You will have to find where they exist, and how to get to them. Why? Because your

learning will affect others. It has already begun its own lineage of change, and you will want to know something about those tides that have held you back. Why? So that others will know how to make their way through them. Mind you, these currents will not disappear, they change all the time. But others will know about their strength and how to swim through them based on what you have studied. When you are really interested in knowing this, when you become aware of these possibilities, things will happen, and something magical will occur.

Trust me. This feeling is what keeps us going and what keeps us challenged. It is what allows a certain kind of hope in our lives. Not doing this only restricts your movements, it provides you the excuses you have already used time and time again. The same ones that stopped others from doing what they never had the chance to do. Do not be afraid of this. I too am on this shore waiting for you, surrounded by waters full of swimmers. I believe that there is very little that will change this current, that abandons so many, if we do not welcome everyone that comes from these waters. The only thing that keeps me going is to believe that things will change through you. Not upon the islands that float among you, but in those individuals like you who may bring a new understanding to their banks. This is hard, but harder yet for a mind unprepared for what it will face.

That is why you need to know your thinking right now. You need to prepare for the bigger world that surrounds this one. If it matters to you it will matter to others, and you will have fewer regrets about your days in school. For them you will have something more to do with the way things occur in your

life. You will see beyond the oceans of change, which will permit you entrance to an even greater place of learning called *the unknown*. It is a place few know anything about after so many harsh lessons. If you know the way you think, you will know the way to act. You will not need excuses, as they always require a tremendous amount of energy to maintain and justify simple limitations. Here, nothing but your honesty will do. Really! You do this well, and eventually mysteries will open up to you in your life because you will know how to approach them. They will be a welcomed part of a life that will accept nothing less. A life that asks questions, eventually gets answers, and can more directly affect change in the world. So, I say, challenge the surface of these things, let nothing stop you. Be aware of your own unique abilities, and how to sustain them wherever you may be. You need this, it needs you.

#### - L I M I T A T I O N S -

Now remember, all I can do is to share my thoughts with you. They are meant to challenge your perspective, not to enlist you in anything that you will not test for yourself. All these words about oceans and tides, islands and swimmers, may seem sort of boring to you and I apologize for that. But right now they are the best words I have to describe what I have witnessed time and time again. In affect they are my limitations, and I would not want you in turn to be limited by them. Go further than I, and never define your existence until it has been fully challenged and studied in every possible way.

What I am asking you to think about is not easy, its not meant to be. They are things that begin and end in so many of us.

Believe me, there are tons of professional offices filled with people seeking help in dealing with things like identity and change. I have been in some of them myself, and know their benefits and limitations. That is why it is important to know that you will come across many of these issues that may not seem clear at first. Things that may appear limiting to you, vast oceans that seem uncharitable. Try not to be afraid of this, even though it may seem very scary at times. Limitations are only those things which are accepted by limits. Much of this has yet to be tested, and for that reason alone, you have a lot to do.

I first came to know about my limitations when I was in grade school. It came in the form of a small piece of paper. It was my first real understanding of what I meant to my teachers. It frightened me more than anything else, and always made me dread the long walk home. It was the “report card”. How such an innocent piece of paper could cause so much trouble was beyond me. Here was the evidence of loss, of what teachers could not teach. I felt sick and panicked to see what all those little C’s and D’s meant on the back of the card. The code described clearly that I was average to below average. I didn’t understand what this meant? Was I better than the worst, or not worth helping at all? These little cards never explained what was average, but it would sure put a point on it, drawing blood from a vulnerable child’s heart. Would I live just an average life, be surrounded by average people, own average things? Well, it made me think, but it enforced in me something that schools often teach without knowing. It made me “self conscious” and fearful of the results of learning. It made me question my intelligence and it abandoned me to the

realms of comparison. Teachers aren’t always aware of how their actions affect what happens outside of their classrooms. From this damage I learned a sense of place, of where I did, and did not belong. It taught me limits, which in turn, scared me into silence, a loss of voice, long lived and often misunderstood by teachers as ignorance, shyness, or a lack of interest. Once you assume that these limits exist they do, and I existed in them and they in me.

Learning ones place is different than finding ones place. Schools forget this. They tend to teach the group rather than the individual. From this we often learn where we think we belong by where we have been placed in the mind of a teacher. But more so, by what we think we can and cannot have, and with whom we might be able to share that with. Trust me, this is not what all teachers do on purpose. They too were affected by others. There were rules to be followed that none of us knew about. Information and conduct that had to be enforced to assure a so called, “proper and manageable learning environment”. But any rule that separates a student from their own unique intelligence could never be healthy. One grade does not fit all nor can it explain the details of ones soul. The very nature of grading is limited to defining individuals on a purely comparative relationship. It only reports the progress of teaching and often hides the scars of learning. What saved me were those few individuals who would inspire my understanding to imagine myself as something more. To see myself through a different lens, beyond the one I thought was made for me by a single grade. It was only then that I could imagine being something more than what I was told.

Imagining defies limitations and is but one source of freedom that allows us to breathe in ourselves more deeply. Grades are never an accurate description of the individual student. But for many of us who were scorned or praised by a single letter, it was equivalent to self worth. I am sure you have felt this. Maybe you have seen its affects on the those around you. A better grade does not entitle you to a better life, and a D does not mean that you are mentally inferior. Try to understand this. Anytime you think you are limited by anything, you have already added to that limitation and supported its existence.

What you believe and how you believe will determine this. What effectively challenges us through limitations is believing you have the ability to change and create something different. Imagine any scenario, and it will occur based on how much you believe in it. This is what creates limitations, and filters out any hope of believing otherwise. Our thoughts, our identities are very susceptible to this. We are the fragile pieces of a societal form of acceptance and inclusion. In it we come to believe that we are our grades, our possessions, our history. We believe in the authority that tells us to believe in authority. All along this path, the mystery of belief is silenced. Its limitations, once observed, are never truly questioned. The only thing that will change this is a mind capable of knowing its own thoughts and how they can be used. In reality, believing is rarely erased, often it is just misplaced and never really reclaimed. Believing affirms your necessity to believe, and therefore pursue learning beyond, so called, limitations. Understand that there is no strict penalties for not doing this, as you will only find other choices that will lead you to other questions for other ways of seeing. You'll have to figure this

out for yourself. I just pray that you will have the sensitivity to choose what is right for you.

So, it is my hope that you will not limit your education to the walls, and personnel that equate it. Don't just accept the same outcome for the same effort you've put into every classroom. The resulting affect is terrifying. It limits you, and creates misunderstandings again and again. I have seen this happen much too often. I have seen what it does to those it would not reach out to. It creates ghosts. Yes, *ghosts!* Beings, who drift in and out of classrooms, down halls, through courses, and experiences with very little interest. They accept silence, often avoiding direct eye contact. They quietly allow others to speak in their place instead of making their presence known. These ghosts permit very little interaction with anyone or anything that could make them visible to others. It is often a solitary experience, one that few teachers ever understand or take the effort to study, but it could change.

It starts when you believe that you are more than a ghost. This means that the teacher will know your name. They will be aware of your absence. They will honor and confirm what you have to say. This is good! What does it guarantee you? Not a damn thing! But by believing less in the limitations you perceive, you will leave enough space for more experiences to happen around you. If you believe there are things to learn, things to know, you will find that the resulting effects are quite extraordinary. Why? Because you will see how to apply these things to what you feel most strongly about. Believing in what you believe makes this possible and leaves nothing to be

misjudged as useless. It will teach you how you learn, which is what you are really in school for.

This was hard for me when I was very young. I could not understand my teachers. They did not speak the same language I did. They did not look like me. They didn't know what I was trying to figure out. So, I too became a ghost. I glided on the fringe of being known, not because I didn't want to learn, but because I did not know how to learn. Being a ghost made me uneasy with time, unsure of what I would own and remember after a test. It taught me ghost knowledge, ghost language. It made me aware of how easy it was to disappear in a classroom. How a teacher could be easily controlled to look the other way when I seemed disinterested or seen as a threat. Ghost language was no language, it was formed by silence out of silence for silence and that was something I got use to. It became damming and addictive, a limitation I could not easily control. It created an unsure voice for me, one that follows me to this day.

Do not judge ghosts too quickly. Do not think that a ghost does not care about the things I am writing about. They do. They just care about them in ghost ways. Try not to mistake this as something wrong. Ghosts are unique, they have been known to change the world and to make great things occur. Many of them are responsible for the music you hear, the poetry you've read, and the movies you'll see. Don't forget that a ghost wrote these pages, because he believes in something more for you.

Believing is a unique act formed out of choice, one that speaks out of your original voice. Do not let who you are be confused by how you've been treated, or what you've been taught. You are quite able to learn through any individual, through any *barrio*, or *reservation* that has contributed to your form. You are part of a larger belief that must be tested honestly, if it is to be of any real use to you in defining so called, limitations. Remember, not all ghost are meant to be invisible.

Please let me clarify something for you before I go any further. I write this not to be a writer, or an educator. I basically have a difficult time being either. I write this because I am tired of seeing so many students lose sight of themselves. I am saddened by the fact that so many students will not make it through these last few years of school, the ones that really matter. That you will leave higher education to someone else, all for the sake of being uninspired or unprepared. Do not let your excuses allow you this choice. It is not worth it. I need to know that you are out there at least trying to find out what is available for you to learn and understand. I am sure that many prayers are being said for you right now, by those who want the same. But I will admit to you, I am greedy. I want a classroom filled with students capable of original thought. I want to believe that this matters to you, and that you will sacrifice yourself to do anything to see that this will happen.

To claim one's life is a difficult process, to own it, harder still. To find this requires a free association with yourself to be who, and what you are under any circumstances. Regardless of where you are, or who you may be speaking to, you have the right to be confident and to respect your self worth. So, know

your own thoughts and the limits of limitations. Also, be aware that there are many books out there that will tell you exactly how to do this, if you let them. This is not one of those books. I will not propagate a sure path to anything for you. I don't believe in this. I am just asking you to consider what I've learned, from teachers like you, and to reflect on these things by choice, rather than by fear. Please, do not reject your understandings by simply replacing them with someone else's. It just doesn't work. Investigate everything, learn from experience, risk the insensitivity of others for the sake of feeling and validating yourself. Thinking you must acquire acceptance from anyone will never end, but to accept yourself is a valiant example of knowing who you are. Simply try thinking about things differently, and if you find it doesn't work, try again. Never turn away from what you need to see. You'll get something out of it eventually.

#### - WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW - ABOUT YOUR TEACHERS

Before I start this, I would like you to think of something that I believe is essential for your learning. Something that I hope will help you as you come into contact with the many teachers in your life. The ones you will pay for and the others you will not. I want you to know that it is possible to learn a great deal from any of them. Even the ones that have overlooked you, put you down, or who made no effort to see you for yourself. Regardless if they inspired you or not, these individuals have something to offer a mind capable of dynamic thought, a mind just like yours.

You should know this. You should never limit your learning, nor the quality of your education to teachers alone. Knowledge cannot be left to teachers alone, but to the perfect mind of a student who must find it for themselves. The reality is that you are not here for them, but rather they are here for you. It is suppose to be that way. It is something that has become unclear for many generations of students who have felt dishonored, silenced, and alone throughout their education. It has made many of us believe that higher education was not for us. But I found something that helped me through it all. I found that some of the most important lessons I ever learned was in front of those teachers who showed very little love, or compassion for what they did. Those who could care less about who they taught or the effects that their teaching would have on their students future. From them I learned what I did not want to become, and the necessity of becoming whom I thought I could be. I am hoping that your experiences will teach you about this too, for all of your experiences are meant to change, and then to change again. Be patient! Learn through this process so that you may make yourself aware of those things you will need to do what the teacher cannot. If you are lucky, you will find those rare individuals who are here for the same reasons you are; to learn, to question, and to change.

Now, who are your teachers? This leaves a lot to be considered, and has as many varied answers as there are students. Some of these individuals never wanted to teach, others saw it as a part time thing until something else came along. Yet, there were those who had no choice at all, those who stood in the shadow of a parents directive and were unable to step around it. Then there were others who felt a deep

responsibility and love for what it meant. They sacrificed a great deal to do this. They believed in what they loved about school, and knew that the only way to pay back their *learning debt* was to give some of what they had received. So, I'll ask you, which ones make a better teacher? Which ones will do more for a student? The answer is not that simple, and you should not be looking for simple answers. A teacher cannot be truly defined by what they teach, but rather by who they teach. Those individuals whose job it is to listen, learn and question. They are critical to what real teaching is all about. Student knowledge is the beginning of the worlds wisdom. If you are not ready to do your part in this relationship, it will not happen, and you will never feel free to add yourself to any classroom. You are so essential for this to have the potential of existing at all.

Now, know that you will have to find out about this if you want it to happen. It will teach you how you approach teachers, what you expect from them, and what you put in their way. Some of you demand a great deal, while others nothing at all. It all rests in what you ask for, how you ask, and whom you ask that makes the difference. Believe me, it is far more easier to blame a teacher for what you did or did not learn in a class, than it is knowing how you contributed to process of learning. It is far more important to find out if you are letting learning happen, or not. I've seen this occur many times. A student lacks interest, any real passion for what is being covered in a course, and they think they don't have what it takes to make it. They blame the system, or think they're stupid, when it may just be that they were not prepared or ready to learn from that particular teacher at that particular time. Enlightenment works

like this in the same way. Sometimes the student is ready for it even before they know it. They are sensitive and aware to things that might have been overlooked before, but now there is purpose behind their search and a teacher often gets the credit. This isn't always true either. That is why I can never claim responsibility for being a so called, "good teacher". I see myself more as a placebo, waiting for what the students to allow what might happen between us. It is the student who makes good teaching great, and when they do it raises us all up together. Real learning was made for this, and teaching was just a natural expression of its own unique essence. It is not a simple act because it is not done alone. It needs you to be a part of it, to lift your end up of this experience.

What I would like you to consider, if it is to be done with any real purpose, is that you should allow your learning to consider a wider range of teachers. Not just the ones who stand before you and correct your papers, but those you see everyday, the ones next to you on the bus, the ones you overlook and label too old, or too young to matter. Everyone has the potential to teach you something, but only if you are interested in learning, and if you permit that learning to be inclusive. If it is, you will see the face of your teacher in the alcoholic, the waiter, and the so called, "disabled person". More importantly, you will see them everyday in the faces of those students that sit next to you. Every classroom contains so many unique teachers. We overlook this when authority is present, but if we are to truly understand your teachers we must include all of them, including yourself.

Placing yourself in this position will help you to understand what teachers see from afar. Think about it. Place yourself in their shoes. What would you eventually feel like if one of your students was coming late to class all the time? Another one expresses no interest in a subject you love, while others sit listlessly as you demonstrate an important learning concept. They never raise their hands, never use their creativity until it was needed for some lame excuse. How would you respond after a days worth of this? A years worth, or ten? What would change in you? Again, that depends on the individual and their own unique spirit, but eventually it wears a teacher down. It makes one hard, selfish, and often moves their attention over to those few individuals who are easier to teach. And here starts the problem. Now the teacher works off their students energy instead of their own, and everyone becomes a guest to what is boring and insignificant. The class stagers through information, no one interacts with each other, no one talks. It gets monotonous and the clock on the wall gains more attention than it should. Soon there are less students in the class, less of what makes learning fun or interesting. Without knowing it a great light begins to dim, a shadow appears over ones attention, and potential leaves the classroom.

What do we know about your teachers now? What will they be able to do to survive their students, and their own sense of purpose? What would you do? Hopefully you will see that they are just as human as you are. Capable of being discouraged by lack of interest, and at risk of losing their own unique focus over time. This is debilitating, and quite often cannot be helped. Especially when this scenario has been played out again and again within the system that created it.

After awhile this deadens the senses, it makes one less interested and more critical than before. At this point the teacher may think that you are just not worth it, that you'll never get it or that you are not interested like all those like you. But is it right to lose those that are lead? Anyone could make this mistake when they too are disinterested. A tired mind can make miscalculations. It can easily misrepresent those around them. Maybe the bored student is not listless, but hard of hearing and to shy to speak of it. The one that arrives consistently late works two jobs just to stay in school and feed their child. Or maybe the student who is not so eager to learn what the teacher thinks is important has never loved to learn. What do you do with that? How do you get around the impressions we all make on one another? You see learning is hard, but teaching is harder.

Every teacher faces a particular challenge that happens with each individual student. They must teach through every teacher that student has ever had. Through every influence that ever stung or nurtured them and then in turn, be subjected to that same standard by the student themselves. Not only that but they must also instruct through every memory of race and gender, through every form of fear and prejudice. Imagine that? Imagine being a student who is prejudice against Black people and then having to be taught by a Black professor. How would they be able to learn from a Gay person if their minds are incapable of seeing a teacher, rather than a perceived social stereotype?

I will tell you now, there is more to knowledge, and where you can find it than we allow. There is Gay knowledge, street

knowledge, knowledge retained by those who pick your fruit, and sew your clothes. Knowledge capable of adding light to the world. There is knowledge in how one makes a tortilla or lifts a child, but we are blind to this because our minds follow the exclusivity of the institutions we attend. We are trained to be refined by our studies, made exclusive for what they represent and deem intellectually significant. We live in a society that prizes only that which is given prizes and tend to reserve our interaction with others from an institutionally safe and acceptable distance. That is why it is easier to label experiences and individuals with academic efficiency. To distance oneself in a critical analysis's of facts, rather than experience. For many, differences are threatening. They draw a thick line amongst us that makes it easier to dismiss the unfamiliar, easier to ease our social conscious of equality to fit our needs and lifestyles.

I fear this. Fear what it does to our perceptions of each other. How it creates great distances between us and makes it easier to take for granted the individual and their contributions. When this happens we create a society that knows very little about itself, about how it sees, consumes, and creates. It unconsciously relinquishes meaning for what is easier to categorize and attaches generic labels to those descriptions; Oh look, here comes the *Pakistani waitress*, our *Guatemalan gardner*, the *Asian tourist*. It reluctantly surrenders its attention once more to *Black Heritage Month*, *Cinco de Mayo*, *Chinese New Year* or a *Gay Pride Parade*. It often uses it hunger to come to grips with an easier form of diversity; What would you like to eat tonight? *Italian? Chinese? Indian?* Many people equate their cultural awareness according to a

meal, or when they go on vacation. It is always much easier to put on the *Hawaiian Shirt* for the Luau, watch the floor show, and wait to be served. Always more convenient to celebrate festivals that have no personal meaning other than entertainment, and try to practice a language their mouths are insensitive to form. It is when others are seen as spectacle, that it makes it easier to haggle with the locals for the lowest possible price, watch the *Pow Wow* and eat their *fry bread* from a safe distance, and never to know the difference. To never know what it is like to be someone else's amusement. We have been brought up in a society that easily consumes others identity, and uses it without thought or meaning.

This reminds me of a time much earlier in my life, when I would be seen for what I looked like rather than who I was. I was having an exhibition of my photographs at a very well known gallery, in one of the most beautiful and affluent communities I had ever seen. I felt truly fortunate to be there. I really couldn't believe it was happening to me. So on the night of the opening, I thought I would get there early, just to see my images up close. I was amazed! Here was my work on the same walls where some of the greatest photographers that ever lived had shown theirs. I felt like crying.

It was just then that I heard a voice from behind me say, "We are so happy that you are here. We were hoping you would show up on time." I turned to see a very beautiful woman standing alone in a door way, and I said, "Gee, thanks! I thought I would come early just to see the work." She looked a little perplexed and then commented, "That's nice. Now we want you to know a few basic things. All right?". I was

smiling from ear to ear when she said, “We want to make sure that you keep everybody's drinks full, and that you quickly remove any plates lying about. Ok? There are trays in the back for serving, and you’ll be compensated after you clean up at the end of the night. Is that clear? Do you understand what I am saying?”. I was dumbfounded and merely replied, “Sure”, as she hurried off.

Now here is a point in the story when I usually stop and ask my students what they think. Was it her fault that she saw me as a waiter, rather than the nights featured artist? A lot of my students usually say, “Hell yes!”. They would say how racist it was of her to assume who I was by the color of my skin. They asked; *Did you tell her off? Did you make her apologize?* No, I never did. Why? Because I believe it wasn’t her fault. She only saw what her seeing had taught her up until that point. I looked like the man who cut her lawn, picked her fruit, and stood on the corner waiting for a job. I had the face and the color of the reported gang member, the illegal immigrant, those seen in newspapers and televisions. She only assumed what we all do when we are quick to judge the surface of anyone, rather than getting to know the rich substance of others.

She only taught me what others would in my life, and still do. Whether it be a *White Supremacist* tacking his beliefs on my office door, or anonymous phone calls warning me that, “my kind” was not wanted around here. All of them contributed to my education, and now yours. That is why I am sharing this with you now. You see, we live in a society that consumes by sight, rather than through understandable association and respect. We are prone to dismiss meaning, and tend to reserve

anything cultural to fashion, food, or entertainment. Here it is easier to eat from hands that often cannot feed themselves, easier to live in the safe parameters that separate our lives and define our perceptions by momentary acquaintances. I cannot hate this, as hate is what created it in the first place. I can only pass these thoughts on with hope that you will have something to do to change this for others.

So I ask you, what do you learn from this if everyone is suppose to be your teacher? Well, that is up to you. If you are to evolve into something more, it will mean that you will have to think. To think about how you think, how you touch the world and how it touches you. It would mean that you will have to consider your relationship to change, which is never easy. It will mean that you’ll have to go beyond what your eyes consume. You will have to learn what you put out before you and how you create those connections which are vital for your development. I beg of you, learn from this while there is still time. Let it be your teacher while you still have the capacity to make a difference. Why? Because your mind never sleeps. It thinks itself into motion every day and names each experience according to its thoughts. It impresses itself into everything and every one, and often takes for granted what it has been sold from a society that blindly consumes whatever is in its path.

Think about it. How will you respond to all this when it happens to you? Will you allow your teachers to assume your identity before you know your own? Remember, they come from the same system that has taught you. A society that fears what it sees before it knows what it is looking at. This means

that you stand a good chance of being misrepresented. That a teacher might assume what the media has taught them about the so called “*gang banger*”, how they act and what they’re really like. Does this mean if you look like them, you are them? What is it that would stop anyone from thinking that this is true? See, you are susceptible to this all the time. Every one of us are made vulnerable by the eyes that see us. We could be just as easily mistaken for the *Evangelist* or the *Terrorist*, based on how we appear to others.

This my reader, is the politics of sight that will always surround you. It will affect you the same as it has affected others, unless you learn to deal with it differently. That is why your education has a lot to do with the education of the teacher. Learn this. It will determine if they will defend your right to learn freely or assume what they think they know about you and allow their assumptions to affect your relationship with them. Many students have suffered this directly from those who disregarded this simple fact. Those who assumed the form of their students, rather than understanding their substance. They often never know who they are or what it would take to teach them. Education has so efficiently weeded out so many distinct and important individuals by this oversight. Those we should have learned from and lost only because they were different. Those who needed help in their learning, who required a little more patience and encouragement so that they could have understood their choices more clearly. The disenchanteds seldom make it as far as others.

So what happens to these students? How will the teacher teach them? How will they approach a student from the “*Rez*”, when they have never even been on one before or even knew that they still existed. What will their learning allow them, when it comes to teaching the *Lesbian*, the *Sikh*, the one in the wheelchair, or the student who is just very tired. Won’t their perceptions influence the learning of others? Undoubtedly it will only be based on the experiences they have had so far in their lives. Without experience they can only reference their knowledge or make assumptions of portrayal. That is why you must succeed right now, before any ones assumption are unfairly justified and easily confirmed through suspicion. Why? Because you represent eyes capable of dramatic change. Eyes that can understand if they are less concerned with being understood. Do not expect your teachers to know how to do this or wait for them to teach you the way you need to be taught. Rather, help them through your observations. Teach them by making them aware of those words formed in your own private language. Help them to study what a student can be who is rich in memories and beliefs. Do not discount what you know. Don’t just meet their level of expectation, excel beyond it.

When you do, you will teach others who you are by what you are, not by what you appear to be. Ghosts have a hard time doing this. Which means you will have to be patient and alert. You will have to suffer those who will only assume your form. It is these assumptions that make us strangers to each other, it is in these moments that communication lacks depth and then becomes difficult to understand. Try not to let this get in the way. Especially with those teachers who will try to bridge this

gap by making contact with you in the only way they know how, by asking impersonal questions. Be ready for this. Do not let it annoy you, or rush you into silence. There are those out there who have never suffered the public questions of private meanings. Those who never felt how disconcerting it can be when one is asked to speak from an unfamiliar place in front of unfamiliar eyes. They are unaware of how their authority was used by others in the past, how it scared and humiliated a tender heart. Especially for those students who always had to explain to someone for being where they were, feeling what they felt or for doing nothing at all. In a world where power is a privilege, those without power have very little privileges at all.

That is why we found it so hard to be accepted for who we were rather than what we looked like. This is hard to explain to someone who has never felt adversity from something as thin as a layer of skin or an unfamiliar accent. But it is there and you will have to deal with it at some point in your life. I am sorry. It will especially seem demeaning when you will meet those who'll change their voice to sound like they came from the *Hood* and call you *Sista*, or *Homie*. They may even know the right sequenced handshake, or try to speak to you in a foreign language, that has nothing to do with your cultural awareness. They might ask you how your family celebrates *Kwanzaa*, if you could show the class how you perform the *Hula*, or ask you to point out on the map, where your country is, when you were born in *So. Cal*. All I can say is, try not to be mad, do not think of them as dishonoring you or your culture even if you feel they are. Be patient with your response, for the simple reason that it will help everyone else.

It is all in how you respond that matters, that which affirms or substantiates the beliefs of others. Remember, they just speak a variation of the same language you do, but in different ways, through different experiences. They are not use to you or you to them. Do not let this be what stops you from trying to communicate or understand anyone around you.

Academia is its own culture and for everyone of us that comes to it from our own neighborhoods, it is a foreign land. A land with definite customs and expectations. A topography of society that you must make ready to learn and chart. Do not worry about getting lost on your way but be prepared, you are in a different neighborhood now. One that you will have to be aware of and maneuver through like you did back home. Some individuals will not be use to your presence, your voice, or gestures, nor have they been trained to understand the way you communicate. Be brave. If your response ceases to support their expectations then maybe things will change. Maybe your brave acts will clear the way for others to understand you and those like you. Maybe your patience will serve the future of those they will yet to meet. Through your efforts, maybe someone will be hired to teach others who will know something about their struggles, who will understand their lifestyle and what it means. We need this. It is long overdue.

But better yet, why don't you teach? Be the one who instructs from what they know and from who they really are. A singular voice, unashamed and undefined by self conscious restrictions. Bring us your knowledge, let no one stand in your way! Never allow any individual to be influential enough to change the direction of your spirit. That is your job. And your job is to

set your life into motion, a motion that others may read and learn from. From what a teacher knows, a student should define for themselves.

### - WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW - ABOUT STUDENTS

Students look a lot like you, they make mistakes and feel themselves in similar ways. Many of them are homeless, even though they have homes. Many seem poor, when they have lots of money. Drugs and alcohol claim some of their lives, as does memory and heartache. They sit and wait and sometimes wait too long. They risk time and loose momentum for lack of purpose and direction. They look for the big picture and settle for the little ones instead. Some of them know that this is happening and look the other way, while others get angry about it and do nothing at all. There are those who know exactly what they want and those who don't. Those with worn out dreams that were lost and never found. Some who've never faced adversity and those who were birthed by it. Then there are those individuals who hide behind the barriers of apathy, test the sincerity of others and never learn it for themselves.

Where did they come from? How do we get this way? Is it a hard question to answer? No, not really. These are the children of another family, raised by strangers, housed but not homed in our institutions. Every year, they are placed on the doorsteps of schools in hopes that they will be adopted into a better life. Institutions became the other family, teachers the other parents, entrusted with real and delicate lives. For this they would add to the creation of real or imagined realities that

would float or sink, soar or stumble, lead or follow. These adopted parents would reflect their own world instead of helping the child to understand their own. And what of the student? Like any child they would seek to please the parent, adjusting their lives to survive their moods, accepting, so as to be accepted for what was told and believed by the family around them.

A student rises out of so many different families in their lifetime and blood lines have very little to do with it. Often they are formed by convenience, a certain necessity or out of a desire for social acceptance. The need to belong is primal, it is what all systems are built upon. But you are more than this and your learning will have a lot to do with what you bring from the only family that really matters, the one inside of you. The one you claim as your own true turf. Don't just bring what you've been sold in school only to share what you've been taught. If you do you will risk very little to gain what real learning is all about. This is important, and it may or may not affect you. But remember, I am not writing about the top 10% of your class. Those who have always been "good examples" to the rest of us. The ones who knew exactly what they were doing, and had the support and connections to make it happen. No not those, although they too exist amongst these individuals. I am writing about those who were sacrificed in their learning. Those accepted numbers of marginally classified human beings who didn't have the same luster as others, but reflected a unique brilliance all their own. Not everyone's surface shines the same as others, some only need a different light to reveal their own unique qualities. Too many are lost in the misinterpretation of brilliance, they become easily

overlooked and falsely labeled. A light less defined, defines less. Add to this a certain style of speech, or dress to the student and it only reinforces a certain prejudice or a lack of interest in “those” individuals.

These labels are hard to get off once they are secured. They adhere with a strength that few can loosen. And because of this, some will believe what they think is written clearly upon them. They will see them as those lazy *Losers*, *O.G.’s*, or *Thugs*. But even a *Stoner* learned their identity from somewhere. Even they had to make a choice, when other choices were not available, and believe me, the easier choices always come first. But, some had no choice at all. They believed what they were taught, that they were dumb, menacing, or just plain weird. From this their spirits would become weighted down and crushed. Their future became fogged and less of an issue. For many of them they would think more of their death than their life. They believed all along that they would wind up doing something they hated, something that would grip them and never let them go. They knew they couldn't hack it and that others were smarter than themselves. Their spirits would become opaque by those around them and their vision would change. It would never feel the same, never comfortable in the presence of those they needed to understand. They would develop an aversion to authorities and the institutions that created them. All these things would become fearful occurrences, lived again and again in the lives of others far after they were initially experienced.

I felt this, heard it too, because I was the *dirty mexican*, that *stinking wet back*. The one who didn't talk right, the one with his ancestors body weight and color. The D student, the ghost, the slow learner. Early on my teachers let me know very clearly what they thought of me. They said I couldn't write very well, I was too emotional and that I moved around too much when I talked. That I looked like a clown and that my mannerisms were immature and distracting. (*By the way, I still move a whole lot when I talk.*) I learned about how I was seen and judged and in turn, my teachers learned very little about me. They took things for granted, things easily misinterpreted upon the surface of any soul. Their education failed my own as they were unable to see that my distinct mannerisms were a byproduct of their teaching. From a child who was taught to be scared and silent in their presence.

Just because someone is silent it doesn't mean they don't have anything to say. If I was in it for their identity, I would have learned very little about my own. I would have repressed my expressive nature to adapt to a society that feels more secure in editing its emotions, rather than living with them. I just couldn't do it and neither should you. Of all the things I was bad at in school, this was the only thing I never felt ashamed of failing.

Even now, some of my colleagues criticize my grammar and teaching presence. It doesn't surprise me. How I ever became a university professor is beyond me, but it proves that someone can slip through the system, with very little comprehension or confidence and still have something to offer. A student should know this. No, you must know it, because it is your job to

dispel or confirm the assumptions that will surround you. Believe me, my story and others like it have never been exclusive to any one group or culture. We have all suffered each other endlessly. Yet, I have hope because I have seen brave individuals pull themselves up through this, through tremendous challenges and limitations to risk every assumption of projected suspicion and thought. To go beyond the *Emotional Footprint* laid upon their backs by teachers and institutions that did not care to calculate their impact on those they knew least. Their impression on these gentle souls would manipulate a lifetime of self-conscious struggles. Struggles that would alter identity, dispose of self-worth, and incite a lineage of denial in those they would love.

We are all at risk. At risk of having too much or too little, in believing or not believing at all. But more so at risk are those individuals who do not carry an easily identifiable identity. The ones that are connected to wealth and status, power and privilege. Being rich does not restrict you from making poor mistakes. Even prodigies have been known to commit suicide. Having does not guarantee ownership or appreciation. Just as going to church does not free you from sin. If anything, it may make you more susceptible to the guilt of its presence.

Just remember, knowing where you come from does not necessarily mean that you will know where you are going. If a student knows exactly what they want to do they may not leave enough room to consider other things as well. They may become easily devastated if those goals are not achieved quickly, or if they do not turn out the way they were planned. Many people leave very little room for other things to happen

in their lives. They usually step over possibilities, fear change, doubt creativity and head off anything that might threaten the structure of their reality. Here is where many students become lost in the process of real learning. They blindly trade in one institutional persona for another without any real concern for who or what they will become because of it. This makes it easier to fit into something that is all ready made for you rather than to make something for yourself.

But, think about it. Imagine doing something completely different? Imagine making something that bares your own resemblance, your own creative thought and input. Something the world has never seen before, that came from you and no one else. So many great discoveries have been lost to the world for the simple fact that we never learned to trust that side of us that lets things happen. Great books haven't been written, vital inspirations left unshaped, due to the repressed minds of those who believed what others have said about them. Imagine that? Their words could have inspired countless imaginations, and encouraged others to do amazing things in their lives. Monumental discoveries could have been shared with so many if it were not for the lack of respect that some were shown in school. Badly needed medicines would have soothed a world in need of healing, if one was possibly honored for what they were rather than what they appeared to be.

This happens around us all the time in different ways. I believe learning entitles us to discover what we can become in the midst of risking our perceived limitations and assumptions. Not knowing how to risk these things has kept us separated

long enough. It has been responsible for countless moments spent in justifying ones excuses not to change. Yet, what does one really risk for finding out what might be possible? Believe me, the reality around you can handle a lot more than you think if you are ready to do this. If you're not then it is just not time for it, that's all. Don't put more pressure on yourself to do what someone else says you should be doing. I believe that all things come in time and that time unfolds like you do. If you want it, you will have to be patient about this, for you'll be involved with a very specific process and it is an incredible place to be if you are aware of it while it's happening. Don't think you only get one shot at this. You get as many turns as you will allow yourself, but if you take it for granted, those turns will be less available to you when you really need them. It is just that simple.

So, please know that a student is a sacred being, one capable of extraordinary things. Know that they are susceptible to fear and sensitive to loss, capable of exquisite thought and action. They are like you, complicated and delicate and often unsure of their direction. Don't just tolerate others, learn to understand their mannerisms and dialogue, learn their expressive nature and meanings. These are your greatest teachers. If not, you will only learn from a very select number of individuals. You will be unprepared to welcome them, or others like them into your future. You will only see their form but not their substance. Everything is ready for you to do this now. The only question is, do you believe that this is something worth doing?

## - N O T B E L I E V I N G -

When all is said and done, not believing will have a lot to do with what happens next in your life. Ultimately, not believing is the easiest excuse to do nothing at all. It has always limited imaginations, torn down beliefs, and has been responsible for death and indifference. If you don't believe, you won't have to be patient for what could happen, you won't have to care. You can exist without the challenge or the change it could provide you. Not believing is exactly that and there are very few things that can change it once it's been established in your presence. This is why very little gets accomplished in life, why so many things are finished before they ever start. It explains why you never lost the weight you promised yourself you would, why you couldn't give up the smoking that killed your grandfather. It would never allow you to see the pictures of yourself on that far away beach you promised you would one day visit. Not believing never introduces you to the language of possibilities, of wonder or amazement. It permits regret and allows space for failure. It justifies every misstep as a common occurrence, something you'll think happens to everyone all the time. Here is where excuses come in handy, and lead us to believe; *If only I were smarter! If only I came from a better school, and had better teachers. If only my skin were lighter, and I had a trust fund like the others. If only I had studied for that last test. If only my parents would have supported me in what I really wanted to do. If only I didn't get so depressed all the time, or if others would have understood me for who I really am.* These words sneak in us all the time, they wear down the best parts of our being and may have never found you if you had believed in something that was meaningful to you. Maybe then the

resulting effects would not have been so dramatic and disappointing.

All of us form ourselves to our own experiences, to our own beliefs and nature. Not believing in who you are makes you easily susceptible in believing someone, or something else. This is why school can become so dangerous. Some of you may go there looking for a *Guru*, the *Wise Master*, the *One Teacher* on the pedestal that will show you “the way” and make you change what you thought you could not do on your own. You will invariably quote them, follow their footsteps, and live in their shadows. But this is not fair to you, nor them. A “good” teacher cannot change a student, they cannot make them into who they should become. Rather, a teacher can only add or subtract from that student's perceptions. They can only encourage or deny. Why? Because they too are human and subject to existence. They disbelieve as often as you do. This is what makes not believing so contagious, an epidemic of immense proportions that is so easily transmitted between us. It devalues our efforts and supports our assumptions. It seeks the easiest path to any destination.

All this affects you as it affects me. It affects the way we look at time, the way we choose who we love and how we will love them. It permits a standard answer even before the question is asked. Why is this permitted? Why is it done? I think it is because it is much easier to draw a safe perimeter around ourselves. A standard shape that encompasses a territory of sustained beliefs, regardless if they are true or not. Here there are borders and pass words, a topography of restrictions built to keep out the obvious influences of belief. Not believing does a

lot to take care of itself. It limits things that could challenge its authority. It sets you apart, easily categorizes other individuals into groups of “them” and “us”. It makes it much easier to view life from afar, from the cheap seats, instead of the expensive ones up front where all the action is.

Hey! You may not agree with me on this. That's okay! I am not here to have you do that. If anything, I am leaving myself wide open for you to see the psychology of a middle aged *Chicano* professor who believes in evolution, rather than revolution. Anyone can read this and say that I am pretty “*F\_\_ed up*”, that I lack the sophistication of a real intellectual scholar or that I have serious problems with academia. This may be true and I have no problem with that. Believe me I would rather make myself vulnerable to you and your judgments so that you can figure that out for yourself. Vulnerability has always been a good teacher to me. My real problem is in not seeing you challenge what is necessary for you to grow and to search out your world for yourself. That is what scares me the most, it keeps me up at night, and wakes me up at 4 o'clock in the morning to write about this now.

All I am saying is that you should never get to the point where it is easier for you to restrict your learning and understanding. You should never stop believing that there is nothing left to learn, never discount the thoughts of others or overlook their role in your life. It is your actions that matter, your thoughts. This is what sets lives into motion or stops them all together. Do not let your lack of belief restrict you from believing anything. Test yourself, test your seeing, as you will need this on any campus you attend. But more importantly, test your

own borders of beliefs and see if they are in need of rearrangement. I am not saying that they should be torn down. It is not that simple. You will need to know where they exist in order that you might understand why they are there. All I can say is not believing may restrict you from some things, but it may permit you access to others that are just as important and challenging to understand. It would be significant to know the difference right now. This is where you come in, through your beliefs in your world, and its meanings.

For me, I have seen lives changed by what they believe in. I've seen souls healed and destroyed, witnessed students smothered by the limits they were sold. And through it all I would remind myself of the words a dear friend once shared with me when I was very young, "*To believe is to wait and to wait is to believe.*". I don't know if these words will ever have any significance for you, but they might come in handy later on when you feel that your beliefs have gotten you nowhere. Try not to worry about this. Things are happening right now, even without you knowing they are, and will have a great affect on you later. Really! Try not to worry about the future, or the things you will have. Trust me, the car you will drive to your job in the future is probably being driven by someone else. Right now the one tree your house will be built from is standing somewhere alone in the forest. Even the person you will marry may be already married to someone else. You just never know how the future will unfold, but it is being formed as you read this. All I am saying is get ready for what it may be interested in teaching you.

## - YOUR NATURE -

You are getting close to the end of what I have written for you, and I wish to thank you for being so patient in getting this far. Books are not always friends and words are not always owned or understood. Some of them enter into us over time, slowly initiating a form of identification, revelation, or purpose. They have been known to slice deeply into the arteries of thought to severe, or reattach the soul to itself. In one moment they can inspire, in the next, condemn. Your words arrange their own language, their own intellect and private voice, and it is here, if you listen carefully, where your nature speaks. Where your thoughts whisper to themselves to form your own thinking. You may not consider this such a big deal, but believe me, it is. I didn't think much of it either until I found something in my life that whispered about a very unique light. A light that would illuminate through me with words and objects, that defined meaning and emotion. It gave purpose to what I am doing right now. It reintroduced me to myself, to my nature, and never allowed me to forget what was most important in me. Photography did this for me, it saved my life, it became a friend, a wordless act capable of infinite words. It taught me and it tested me, and it is testing me still.

This is why I am asking you to consider your nature, the voice of personal meaning. The specific one you hear inside of you that is distinct and unlike no other. It has grown up with you since birth and has seen you fall into form. It was the one that quietly spoke to you through nuance and the spirit of wonder when you were a child. With it you tasted dirt for the first time, imagined things under your bed, and poked that dead

animal with a stick. Remember? Wishing was important, dreaming too, and you were at one with time, as it was with you. Yet, in time, without warning, the voice of your nature changed. You started paying less attention to it, it was something to be left at home, something not needed at school. Because of this, you would depend less upon it. It became muffled, less clear, and would become slowly covered by a thin layer of neglect. Dust filled its entrances and choked off the passage ways you crawled through and explored. Then before you knew it, you'd systematically rearranged yourself to live without it in a world that has very little use for nature. Soon that part of you became dull and inefficient. It no longer reflected your being or the sound of your amazement. It did not respond so easily to what was around it. It became less affected, less amused, and more in need.

This need would eventually occupy the space once reserved for wonder. It would set its priorities by what it could acquire, how quickly it could happen, and how it compared itself to what others owned. From this a new learning curve of importance was created. Here it would set an arc of comparison to generalize its priorities. On it it would misplace your first kiss with others, easily categorize success and failure. It would blandly standardize memory and emotion, purpose and excuses. Things fell off it, things were added and soon it would be the curve that was important, not the life that affected it.

I mention this now because I am concerned about your nature. About that voice in you that is uniquely important. Do you know what I am talking about? Can you still hear it? Do you

know what it sounds like? You see, your modified nature is susceptible to the influences around you. It adapts very easily when it has denied itself. Soon these influences demand things, demand validation and your original nature steps aside into its shadow. It does not go away, but in its place it forgets where you are. Soon you need what others have, soon there is no room for your original thought. This alternative nature stealthily emerges and you begin to live what is not yours.

I believe this happens all the time and it is why the world suffers the way it does. We forget what is important. We allude to what we were taught to rely upon and become addicted to what it provides, an intellect that severs the head from the body, the mind from the soul. I hope your learning would question this, not to deny or accept it, but to test its validity and to learn how you react to it. It is this reaction that will either work with or against your nature, where your originality will either surface and flourish, or adapt and disappear. I cannot say where you should take this. I can only point you to these multiple directions and ask you to consider what will happen to your voice if it is abandoned. The world cannot afford this, it cannot risk losing one more unit of nature that could add to its volume and to the nature of itself. If you respect this you will respect your relationship to learning and how your nature is affected by it. It will make you ask yourself; *What is my nature? What does it need in order for it to exist? How much of it is tied to those things that are in and around me?*

This requires a sincere effort, one without judgment or excuses. One that opens wide the opportunity to engage knowledge and

experience. Your nature depends on this. It is woven into so many things, and because of this, so are your responses. Learn from them, learn what happens to your nature when it is linked to the systems of beliefs found in culture and class? Learn what becomes of it when it is added to a school or religion? Can it withstand the nature of others? The standardized form of teaching and memorization? Does it know enough about itself to investigate the essence of what others may think of it? Have you learned enough about it's motion to know how your nature responds under pressure when it replies with a convenient lie, or a harsh response of cynicism?

If you know about this, if you study the tracks created by your journey thus far, you will see the impressions made by the weight of your experiences. These marks will take on the form of your commitment, they will show the width and depth of your strength, the direction of your purpose and the things that have challenged you and made you change your course. Like footprints in sand, you will see where you avoided some things, went through others, and lost track altogether. You may not see where you started, nor where you are going, but you will have known something about the depth of the impressions you've made. And for that reason alone this is worth learning.

Try not to let your nature feed off your fears, nor the limitations set for you. Not all flames burn, nor all distances as far as you think. Your nature is its own entity, its own world, with its own climates and seasons. You may see it as something solid and immovable, or too old to change, but this is just the surface of something that is far more deeper. Know that all things that appear concrete, are seldom solid. Try

adding this to what you know, and you will understand the nature of change. And that by its own nature, it is meant to change again. If you know change, you will know choice.

I mention this because I believe in the force of your nature, its unique and intrinsic value whose source is capable of bringing to the world something it so desperately needs. Yes, something quite exceptional. I have seen it appear, at times in the individuals around me. It usually arrives as an outward expression of their honesty with themselves. It comes with intimately knowing the way they sincerely see the world, the way they have challenged it through thought and understanding. From this a great and singular effort arises. Compassion. When you care not because you have to but because you need to. When you begin to appreciate the fact that there is very little that separates you from those around us. My friend, your nature is uniquely capable of this. It is formed to form other forms of meaning in you, if you learn it well and learn its language. If you do you will hear it ask you to consider what your life needs to understand it better. All this depends on the work you are willing to do and if you wish to place yourself amidst the nature of others. If you do then maybe you might be able to help explain the nature of fear and of hope, the options of thought and consideration. Maybe you will make it clear to us what was once hard to understand and provide the time it takes to share this with others. Why? Because compassion is an Art, a form of expression unlike no other.

You may think that this should be left to others. That there are enough books and teachers to do this already. That there are

others who are more qualified with degrees and clinical expertise. But please realize that there is not one of us who is more qualified than the next to care. And don't think that it just comes from sincere human beings with great sensitivity, or extraordinary abilities. No, not at all. I have seen it emerge in time with those you would never think capable. From individuals who were seen as mean, or vindictive. From students who would cut themselves with razor blades in order to seize their pain, and who would later find other ways of expressing it. No, if you care then maybe we might learn what makes it so hard to learn. Why we seem to lose our way towards the dreams we follow. Face it, you might not have the solutions to everything, but maybe you will have the inspiration to keep us moving toward them.

#### - THINK ABOUT THINKING -

There will be some point in time, when you will find yourself deep in thought. It will be unlike now. You will be older, time will have moved you somewhere further than here. You will have grown in knowledge and patience and you will be explaining something significant to someone else. They will be listening carefully to you and you will see something begin to light upon their face. This may not be life changing, but it could be life affirming. You will begin to feel it inside of you too and it will feel exhilarating, almost as if someone else were talking. Because of this, your heart will soar as you create words and images that give rise to the rich and fertile experiences that have informed your knowledge. You will know it and you will feel it and it will feel good. And after you've said what words you could, the ones you own and are

responsible for, you will hear something wonderful, in their reply saying, *"Thanks that really helped, I never thought about it that way before."* This will stop you for a moment and you will remember when you said the same thing to someone else. You will go to that time when you were given hope with just a few simple words. It will seem familiar to you as though you briefly went back to a place where you first felt safe and supported. You will be comforted by this innocent form of gratitude and it will be your reward. It will remind you of everything you ever fought for and survived in school. It will be a personal testimony to what you have stride so hard for and believed in. A strong indication that your spirit is very much alive. With this you will know that someone has felt your believing, the form of your thoughts, and you will feel better for it. Why? Because it worked, you shared what was most important in you. You made yourself open and available to a world that still knows very little of what it can expect from you.

Learn this now and you will know this later. Consider where knowledge is, not where it's suppose to be and search out those standards by which you will live. Live them fiercely and deeply. Realize this, so you will understand that you are more than your culture, your bank account, the color of your skin and the thoughts others think. This is your job, it is a lifetime position if you choose it. It comes with amazing long term benefits. Everyone is capable of this but not everyone remembers how to do it in the same way. Why? Because remembering is difficult and often very selfish. We forget many things in the course of our living. Like not letting other people live their lives, like stopping things from happening,

even before they begin. Little things that grow big and often take a lifetime to change.

You know about this already and what affect it has had on you and the people you care for. You have seen it when you return to the old neighborhood. You've seen it take its toll on the drawn out excuses of friends on drugs. You've seen their faces age rapidly, heard their contorted voices from some far off high. You've watched it in the young lives of pregnant teens already holding their first born in their arms. It is etched in the faces made prematurely hard by tragedy and reflected in eyes now saddened with loss. It is written between the lines of those letters from friends in prison, a reminder from those without choice, without "*La Vida Loca*", without hope. They too were institutionalized, but to what fate did they graduate into?

That is why you must safeguard the opportunities open to you now. You must prepare to meet the unimaginable, to sustain yourself in the unknown whose very presence turns away those without choice, to drugs, crime, or bitterness. Know that there are other ways to do things, so you will not wind up with excuses for an incarcerated life. You must occupy your place in this world. You must think about it, find it with the mind and body you came with. A pliable mind knows this. It knows what it must do with dreams. It knows it must make itself available to what can happen. It must be aware of how it reacts, and its capacity towards pain and intolerance. It should chart the results of doing and not doing, and understand their differences. You are capable of this without any excuse.

You are on the edge of a great mystery, the one in which you are the main character. It needs you as a vital part of its unfolding. But this will all be lost if you let it stop here. You must graduate into the next moment, into the next day, into every discovery that transcends the one before it. A curious mind knows this, an inquisitive mind subdues its fear as it seeks its answers. It is responsible for its own learning, which means you will not get up tomorrow morning and cut someone else's lawn. You will not bend your back to pick fruit you will never eat. There will be no need for you to scale a wall, cross a foreign border or dodge the authorities. You will have no court date or prison time to suffer. You are free. Free, if you think you are. Free, if you take on the responsibility of being free. But don't be naive, you still have greater borders to cross, more dangerous waters to wade through. Find out what they are.

There are clues everywhere if you are patient and know how to read them. They exist in the newspapers that speak of violence and bigotry. They can be found in the music of our neighbors that speak of anger and desire. They are in your TV's, where you have been taught since birth the intricacies of processed propaganda. Here are the definitive oracles of our times, the blind scribes of our tragedies. Just other kinds of teachers if you choose to use them, instead of being used by them. They will help you to question your thinking, to test the pulse of a world that suffers itself and learns very little from its mistakes. From them you will be able to see the triumphs and down falls of society, the outcomes of lives without choice. From those lost to objects and consumption and those who make a difference. From them you will have a choice whether you wish to fit yourself into this world or not. Whether you wish to

challenge the borders of objects and minds, or to run ahead of prejudice and indifference with wisdom, to bravely walk in the full light of ignorance with compassion, or to face the cold presence of suspicion with a warm assurance that you have invested in the living entity that is your life's spirit. It is then and only then that you will be more than the mirror of society. You will have learned what you look like on the other side of indifference.

Take this opportunity to graduate into life. Do it for yourself. Others will think what they want, regardless of what you do. It will not be easy. Some back home will accuse you of wasting your time in school, that you'll be back to the old neighborhood soon enough. That you are stupidly throwing money away. But how do you explain hope to those who saw it do nothing for them? Still, others will think you have lost your mind when all you did was find a part of it you were not sure really worked. Even if you don't finish your schooling you will not have failed, because you will know the difference between making excuses and living with them. There is a world of difference in this, and all I want you to know is that I believe you can do it. You were made for this.

So look around you and learn. There is more to you than anyone's definition. You are much more than "*White Trash*", more than a "*Drunken Indian*", or a so called, "*Dumb Nigger*". Believe me! I don't mean any disrespect to you using these words, but I know from experience how much it hurts when these things are said. I know how it crushes one's dignity when it comes from someone in your own culture too. You are a human being! So be aware of this, know where you stand and

how you stand. Because you will need this when you begin to notice the differences between you, the teacher, and your classmates. Between yourself and those other students who always have enough money for pizza and beer, and the concerts you wanted to see. Don't be frustrated when they tell you about their plans for Europe during Christmas Vacation, or how they will be hanging out in Guatemala over Spring Break. You have not come this far to be a victim of jealousy or comparison, nor to judge others for what they can do with what they have. So don't be pissed off when you see others outside your culture going on *Vision Quests*, making *Dream Catchers*, cruising in prefabbed *Lowriders*, or ripping in *Rice Rockets*. They may imitate what you think belongs to you, but they will never be you. They may copy the style of your clothing, duplicate your walk and talk, but they will never know where it truly comes from. They may even know how to prepare the food that means the most to you, but they will never know the meaning of it, or what it was like to come home on a cold rainy day and smell the warm aromas of your mother's kitchen. They will never know the sound of her hands slapping *masa* into shape, nor how it made you feel. This is something that is yours. But be careful, you own none of this. You have no copyright on mannerisms or social identities. You live in a society that amuses itself with exotic trends until it replaces it with something else. Ultimately it is you who must bring meaning to memory, to honor what you love and love what you honor. For you, this will never go out of style.

Just remember, it is not up to you to change what others think or find lacking in their own lives. We all borrow from each other and life is only leased to us for a very short amount of

time. The only things you will ever truly own are your thoughts, your memories and the things you learned from them. If ever you think you are being singled out because of your race, think again. People generally treat each other pretty bad regardless of where you come from or what you look like. So when you think you are being overly watched in a store or suspiciously asked where you're from, don't let your self consciousness react with annoyance or assume it is because you are different. Be who you are so others will know who they've met. Let yourself, be yourself, so that when you achieve great things there will be no misunderstanding that you made it happen. If you look into the systems of beliefs that surround you and the influences they wheel, you will know that through them we are all subject to suspicion, regardless of class, race, or gender.

A human being is a vessel that must contain itself. Be sensitive, be aware. Become familiar to the different customs and dialects that will affect you, learn something about each of them and don't settle for easy assumptions. Do not wait for a reason to learn. Let no instructors teaching style get in the way of your learning. Strive to maintain your reflective nature and the possibilities inherent in hope. Learning is about freedom, and if you don't own yours you will not know what it can do. Do not use it to assume self worth, rather use it to access self knowledge and you will know the difference. For this, you must make room in who you are, and learn how to ask questions from the source of the world around you. If you become frustrated, you will create frustration and the mysteries you approach will sense this. They will deny you entry and

you will never know what they will have had to offer. You see, we do not live life, life lives us, we live our perceptions.

#### - A FEW LAST WORDS -

So after all that I've written, after all you have read, what happens next? What happens to you, and the life you want? All I can say is think about it. You know what you are, what you are lacking, and what you need to be. You know your deficiencies and what it took to get you this far in school. What it will take to go further will be harder still. So be brave, seek out those who know something about struggle and endurance. Find those who know something about the language of sadness and hope, and know that each of us speaks it in different ways. From these individuals you will know more about the weight of individualism. But remember, real individualism shows no noticeable differences, no obvious external traits. In a world that is all about visual comparisons, you will have to be satisfied with what you are from within. It is the only true way of getting to know its value and then in turn, appreciating the same things in others.

So I beg you of you, try not to fade into your fears. Do not disappear in the presence of others. Know the volume of your own voice. Learn what you are before you believe what you are not. Find your place, the one you own. Occupy it with all that you are worth, and know that if you really want a truly memorable educational experience, it does not come with the price of tuition. Rather it is due in part to what you bring with you. All that you bring without shame or insecurity. For you

are part of a great possibility of substance and meaning and I believe in this, like I believe in you.

No dream has substance if you do not dream it true. Think about it. But be aware of what you know. Fight your addictions to your own prejudice and apathy, and to that procrastination that subverts your efforts. Know what you are in the presence of drugs and alcohol, food and sex. Find out why you are so susceptible to the influences of fear and rejection. You need to know this because the world needs to know you. It needs to understand your knowledge. It needs to affirm what it can learn from the homeless, the immigrant, and the parolee. It needs to listen to the words the addict speaks, the thoughts of the faithful, as well as the faithless. There is knowledge in all of them and not one whose story could not teach nor add something to this world. Never discount this! Seek out what you can learn from the *Transgendered*, the *Hindu*, and those you may think are too old to matter. Even the dead have much to offer to you in life, if you are aware. Listen carefully to all of them, to the vocabulary of the abused and the hated and know that knowledge cannot be wisdom until it is felt in you first. If you care, this will mean something to you. If not you will find something else, but will that be all right for you?

I am done now, and I am sorry if I have bored you in any way. My desire has been to share something with you that has evolved through my own experiences so that you might learn where someone like me comes from. I too am a product of so many teachers and the society that creates them. But I believe if we make ourselves available to each other, if we open our

lives to understand our distinguishing individualities, then maybe the problems I've described here will be outdated and unnecessary to write about in the future. Who's to know about that? I just know that I would have felt really bad if I hadn't made this effort before I left this world.

So, I trust you will know what to do with these pages. They contain my hope for what you will allow yourself to study in your world. I pray you will not misunderstand these words nor mistaken them for your own. The hands holding this book are far more capable of doing much more than what I have created. In all honesty, these words wrote themselves. I just listened and took notes. They in no way make me into anything more than what I was before writing them. For I am a student just like you, following thoughts and wondering about the nature of things. These words are meant only to dislodge whatever is important within you so that your thoughts may be placed into motion and flow. They have been produced through sorrow and elation, through what I was and what I am attempting to be. I am honored to claim their origins of inspiration from those teachers who have taught me more than I could have ever taught them in return, my students. So complete these words for me, continue where I leave off and know that they are only thoughts in need of change. Every book should do this for you, as books are seldom finished by their writers. Rather, they are meant to be completed by those who will do something with what they've read. I wish this for you, and what you love.

If, for any reason, you wish to contact me, to disagree with what I have written, to share your concerns, or to just connect

with someone else who struggles with things like you, you can find me at [dga2@humboldt.edu](mailto:dga2@humboldt.edu).

*So please, go further. Maybe your pain will be your cure, your knowledge, our salvation.*