

# The Cult of Success



BY DIANA SENECHAL

**I**n November 2002, Grigory Perelman astounded the mathematical world by posting an outline of his proof of the Poincaré conjecture on the Internet. The following April, he presented his proof at the Massachusetts Institute of Tech-

*Diana Senechal is the 2011 recipient of the Hiatt Prize in the Humanities. She taught English and theater for four years in the New York City public schools and is currently a curriculum adviser at Columbia Secondary School for Math, Science, and Engineering in New York City. Her translations of the Lithuanian poetry of Tomas Venclova have been published in two books, *Winter Dialogue* and *The Junction*, as well as numerous literary journals. Her education writing has appeared in *Education Week*, *the American Educational History Journal*, *The Core Knowledge Blog*, *Joanne Jacobs*, *GothamSchools*, and *the Washington Post's The Answer Sheet*. This article is excerpted from her new book, *Republic of Noise: The Loss of Solitude in Schools and Culture*, published by Rowman & Littlefield Education.*

nology and, two weeks later, at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. His audiences of students and mathematicians sat in suspense. They recognized that if the proof had no errors or gaps, it could help determine the shape of the universe. "The atmosphere was tense," writes Donal O'Shea. "Everyone knew how delicate and subtle the speaker's arguments were, and how easy it was to go astray. Everyone wanted them to hold." The Stony Brook audience also included a few reporters who, unlike the mathematicians, were mainly interested in the question of the million-dollar Millennium Prize to be awarded by the Clay Mathematics Institute. What was Perelman's attitude toward the prize? Would he accept it?<sup>1</sup>

In March 2010, some newspapers reported, under sensationalist headlines, that Perelman had turned down the million-dollar prize: "World's Cleverest Man Turns Down \$1 Million Prize After Solving One of Mathematics' Greatest Puzzles"; "Strange Russian Genius Declines Million-Dollar Prize from U.S.A."; "Grigory Perel-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ENRIQUE MOREIRO

man, Reclusive Russian Math Genius, Refuses \$1 Million Prize”; and more. Readers argued about whether he was a fool or a sage. Some called him selfish (he could have accepted the money for his mother’s sake, after all); others called him noble. A reader, “Ana,” from El Salvador quoted from the film version of *Doctor Zhivago*: “the kind of man that the world pretends to look up to and in fact despises.” Few had anything to say about Perelman’s discovery. Whether they praised him for his higher values or derided him for his lack of common sense, their focus was on the prize, not what it stood for, and on his mental state, not his intellectual work.

The point is not that Perelman is just an ordinary man (he isn’t) or that his decisions make complete sense to outsiders (they needn’t). The point is that journalists and the public felt compelled to explain his actions. What would be wrong with simply leaving Perelman alone? Why so much chatter about his motives and mentality? What bothers people, it seems, is not Perelman, but rather his violation of the social codes of success.

Success has meant wealth, virtue, excellence, wisdom, personal contentment, or any combination of these, but its definition has flattened over time, particularly in the past few decades. A combination of economic anxiety, aggressive advertising, ubiquitous ratings, and verbal vagueness has led to an emphasis on the external aspects of success—money, status, and appearance. Ranking is especially important. A “successful school” (in education discussion and reporting) is one that has raised test scores; a “successful teacher” or “successful reform” has done likewise. A “successful student” has earned high grades, landed a job with a high salary, or both. In research studies, newspaper articles, and general education discussions, there is far more talk of achievement than of the actual stuff that gets achieved. What strikes the listener is how blithely the term “success” is used, as though there were nothing wrong with it and nothing missing. In a *New York Times* article titled “Is Going to an Elite College Worth the Cost?” Jacques Steinberg asks, “Do their graduates make more money? Get into better professional programs? Make better connections? And are they more satisfied with their lives, or at least with their work?” He ignores the possibility that education might have benefits other than prestige, connections, earnings, or even personal satisfaction. William Deresiewicz, who sat on the Yale College admissions committee, described the recently admitted students as “great kids who had been trained to be world-class hoop jumpers.”<sup>2</sup> Our society has come to worship the god of blatant accomplishments and overt results.

Or is it a god of fantasy? The philosopher Luc Ferry argues that the contemporary world “incites us to daydreams at every turn” (by “daydreams,” *rêves éveillés*, Ferry means imitative fantasies). He writes, “Its impressive train of stars and spangles, its culture of servility in face of the powerful, and its immoderate love of money tend to present daydreams as a *model* for life.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, our view of success includes an element of make-believe—the conjured notion that we can succeed *as others do* and that we deserve it. It also involves devotion to metrics: the modern “science” of measuring everything we do, in order to increase our chances and our profits. School districts measure teachers and schools according to the students’ test score gains, regardless of what they mean. Amazon recommends books to purchasers on the basis of detected purchase patterns. Social networking sites announce how many friends or fans each person has and how many people liked the person’s post or comment; such ratings are supposed to guide the Internet user through the morass. Employers administer multiple-choice personality tests to determine whether potential employees have

the desired personal qualities. These measurements, disparate as they seem, all serve to rate performance, predict success, and prevent failure. Of course, these are decent aims, or can be, but the formulas rely on a false understanding of them. We don’t always want books that others like us have liked. The curmudgeonly employee may

**Success has meant wealth, virtue, excellence, wisdom, personal contentment, or any combination of these, but its definition has flattened over time, particularly in the past few decades.**



prove brilliant and industrious. The person with few online “friends” may be beloved and admired elsewhere.

Perhaps we are losing the words that separate themselves from success’s screech and glare. Television has slowly tipped our consciousness and sensibilities toward the visual display. For decades, anyone with a public profile has had to pay some attention to looks—or be rebellious in not doing so. The author interviewed on the talk show has to dress well, wear makeup, speak clearly, make good eye contact, and appear relaxed; the presidential candidate has to look both dynamic and confident. Slowly wrought arguments must contend with the jingles of commercials. Today this pressure extends to all. The Internet and accompanying technology—handheld digital video cameras, the World Wide

Web—make it even easier to craft a public persona, and with that ease comes obligation. College and job applicants bolster their applications with videos, photos, and animated slideshows. Colleges use videos to advertise themselves; in 2010, Yale University’s admissions office released a musical video, “That’s Why I Chose Yale,” which gives the impression that Yale students are outgoing, hard working, beautiful, and fun loving.<sup>4</sup> Presenting yourself online has become an essential skill, not just for celebrities and institutions, but for job seekers, students, artists, freelancers, business owners, and scholars. Everyone can have a public self for the world to see. Even comments on blogs often come with an “avatar” (a cartoon figure or photo). It is common today to speak in terms of one’s “personal brand”—the particular way that one presents and markets oneself. Schools and universities, even school systems, have taken up self-advertising with fervor.

Colleges and universities, seeking to improve their image, recruit aggressively so that they can both attract a more diverse student body (or, rather, a less eccentric one) and turn more students down. According to the *New York Times*, the University of Chicago has sought to break away from the stereotype of “a place for nerds and social misfits who shun sunlight and conversation.” Whereas in the past, the university drew students who were attracted to its particular intellectual climate, in 2010 it received 19,347 applications, an increase of 43 percent over the 2009 total. It abandoned its unusual essay questions and joined the Common Application, which supposedly brings in more applicants. It hired the direct marketing firm Royall & Company to assist with its recruitment campaign. It put out a brochure showing University of Chicago students in a variety of group activities. When conducting outreach, admissions officers emphasized the university’s preprofessional and career preparation opportunities.<sup>5</sup> As the University of Chicago joins a larger trend, it loses its identity as a university that stands outside of trends.

The trend toward advertising has affected K–12 education as well. There are essentially two kinds: advertising for political self-promotion, and advertising for survival (with overlap between the two). Beginning in the fall of 2008, the Fund for Public Schools purchased subway advertisements proclaiming the successes of the New York City Department of Education. One advertisement read, “Because finishing is the start of a better future, New York City public high schools have increased graduation rates by more than 20% since 2002.” Aaron Pallas, a professor of sociology and education at Columbia University’s Teachers College, noted that such advertisement was not common practice in cities and that the timing was strategic, given the upcoming vote on mayoral control and the mayoral election. It seemed likely, in other words, that these ads were intended to promote Mayor Michael Bloomberg himself. In any case, when the very Department of Education advertises itself, it sets the tone for schools, teachers, and students. It becomes difficult to escape the spin. Public schools find that they must advertise themselves in order to compete with charter

schools for students and stay afloat; principals have to spend time devising brochures, pitches, and recruitment plans.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, presenting oneself well in public is neither novel nor offensive; it is a necessity. The danger is that one can start to live in and for one’s public image; one can forget the value of the things one does not show. In his 1947 essay “The Catastrophe of Success,” written in response to the wildly enthusiastic reception of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams comments<sup>7</sup> on the nature of the public image:

You know, then, that the public Somebody you are when you “have a name” is a fiction created with mirrors and that the only somebody worth being is the solitary and

unseen you that existed from your first breath and which is the sum of your actions and so is constantly in a state of becoming under your own volition—and knowing these things, you can even survive the catastrophe of Success!

If one takes Williams’s words to heart—if one grants that “the only somebody worth being is the solitary and unseen you”—then one is left wondering what

remains of that “somebody” today. To the degree that even our private lives have become public (through Facebook, ubiquitous video cameras, and so forth), we have little that is unseen by others and little room to tend to it. There is little room for the thoughts that course this way and that through our minds, the persistent questions, the recurring troubles and delights, the most difficult decisions, the phrases that change in meaning over time, the people who die, the stubborn fact that things often do not go the way we want.

If success consists of image and material acquisition, how does one attain it? It seems to require a combination of self-esteem and metrics: believing in oneself, on the one hand, and, on the other, measuring one’s achievements and doing what it takes to raise the numbers. The culture of self-esteem dates back to early 20th-century “New Thought,” a cultivated mental state that was supposed to lead to success. Practitioners referred to it as a science of the mind. In 1911, Frank Channing Haddock recommended<sup>8</sup> reciting a daily affirmation that begins:

I, IN MY DYNAMIC POWER, AS A THINKER, COMMAND THAT PHASE OF MYSELF WHICH RESTS ON AND NEAREST THE INFINITE, AS THE LOTUS RESTS ON THE SURFACE OF THE NILE, TO DRAW FORTH FROM THE DEPTH AND VASTNESS OF LIFE, NEW POWER, NEW THOUGHT, NEW PLANS AND METHODS FOR MY BUSINESS AND MY SUCCESS.

The historian Richard Weiss notes a “tone of plaintiveness” in the mind-power writings of the time; despite their insistence on the power of the mind, they “lack the ring of full conviction, somewhat in the manner of an individual trying to believe in spite of

**In research studies, newspaper articles, and general education discussions, there is far more talk of achievement than of the actual stuff that gets achieved.**

himself.” Such insistence characterizes later success writings as well—for instance, Norman Vincent Peale’s formula “(1) PRAYERIZE, (2) PICTURIZE, (3) ACTUALIZE.”<sup>9</sup> The very suffix *-IZE* leaves one suspicious, as it seems forced, unwieldy, and funnier than it was meant to be.

Besides the affective route to success, there are formulas, which often carry a tinge of magic. Economists have long worked on calculating the profitability of individuals and organizations, in business, medicine, transportation, and other fields. In education, this has taken the form of value-added assessment: algorithms that calculate teachers’ effectiveness, or added “value,” on the basis of their students’ test scores. Originally developed by the statistician William Sanders at the University of Tennessee, value-added assessments number among the key reforms promoted by think tanks and the federal government. While many scholars caution against the use of value-added assessment in high-stakes decisions, others insist that they should be used precisely in that manner. The economist Eric Hanushek states that if we could just replace the bottom 5 to 10 percent of teachers with average teachers, our schools’ performance could rise to a level near the top internationally. The *Los Angeles Times* caused a furor in August 2010 when it published the names and ratings of some 6,000 public school teachers; Secretary of Education Arne Duncan approved the action and urged other districts to follow suit.<sup>10</sup>

While it makes sense to look at students’ performance on tests when evaluating teachers, there is something strange about the idea that the sheer act of ranking and replacing teachers will cause *student* performance to soar. It is as though students had no say in their own performance—as though their very mental workings could be controlled by an outside force. There is something equally strange about placing so much trust in the test scores themselves, without regard for the nature of the subject, the material tested, the quality of the tests, the relation of the tests to the curriculum, the other things taught, and much more.

Attempts to reduce failure through formulas abound. Teach for America has been seeking to identify effective teachers before they even begin teaching, by finding correlations between personality traits and increased test scores. Their findings have been inconsistent and inconclusive; their most robust conclusion is that teachers who in college pursued measurable goals such as GPA and “leadership achievement” were likelier to bring about test score increases. Similarly, districts across the country administer the Haberman Educational Foundation’s Star Teacher Pre-Screener, a multiple-choice test intended to predict whether prospective teachers have the necessary qualities for raising student achievement.<sup>11</sup> Such formulas seem scientific but actually rest on faith that if we could only tweak things right, achievement would rise to desired levels. The problem—and not a trivial one—is that even if one could identify a “type” of teacher likely to bring up test scores, that type would not necessarily be the best kind of

teacher in all ways. Students need different kinds of role models—not only go-getters, but people who take deep interest in something, whether or not it carries status, high pay, or visible marks of achievement. By treating test scores as the main measure of a teacher’s worth, these initiatives could keep many fine teachers out of the field and narrow the very idea of education.

In a similar manner, psychologists have been trying to identify personality and behavior traits associated with student success. According to Paul R. Sackett, a professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, the greatest predictors of student success, as far as student behaviors go, are conscientiousness (e.g., work ethic, dependability, and perseverance), agreeableness (teamwork, emotional stability), various kinds of extroversion, and openness to new experiences. Roger P. Weissberg, an education and psychology professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is developing “common-core standards

for social-emotional learning,” while others are working on programs for the teaching and assessment of emotional skills.<sup>12</sup> As with the Teach for America formula and the Star Teacher Pre-Screener, this research seems biased in favor of a particular kind of success and the kinds of personalities likely to attain it. Many thoughtful and capable students dislike working on teams, enjoy

thinking on their own, and are not necessarily agreeable. If “common-core standards for social-emotional learning” do indeed catch on, they may cast eccentric, dreamy, and reclusive individuals as deficient.

School programs are filled with success stories and success talk, yet their conception of success is often limited. In Chicago, the organization Strategic Learning Initiatives brought its “turn-around” program to 10 struggling schools; much of the reform was aimed at preparing students specifically for the kind of questions they would encounter on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test. Every day, the students received “success time” devoted to the practice of skills. They learned to identify “clue words” in test questions so that they would know which skill to apply. Success came up as a theme as well; when the students learned about Wilbur and Orville Wright in history class, the teacher asked the students to identify the character traits that made the brothers successful. But are character traits the deciding factor here? In *How We Reason*, Princeton psychology professor Philip N. Johnson-Laird demonstrates that it was in fact their exceptional reasoning, not their perseverance or other qualities, that set the Wright brothers apart from their rivals.<sup>13</sup> That is, they made sense of a succession of failures; they not only persisted through failure, but learned how to interpret it correctly. To understand how they made their discovery, one must look closely at their work all along the way. This is much more interesting and complex than platitudes about their character traits; sadly, the standardized tests are more likely to have a question about character traits than a question about the Wright brothers’ actual work.

**There is something strange about placing so much trust in test scores, without regard for the nature of the subject, the material tested, the quality of the tests, their relation to the curriculum, and much more.**



**T**he quest for a success formula sometimes takes surprising turns. Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* posits that success is a matter both of intensive practice (amounting to some 10,000 hours, regardless of the field) and circumstance; it actually matters, in many cases, where one was born and in what year. Ability is not enough; even hard work is not enough, he demonstrates. One must also be in the right place at the right time, and one must seize this advantage. His argument is appealing and hard to dismiss. Yet he misses one of his own crucial points. When describing the success of attorney Joe Flom, he notes, "Think of how similar this is to the stories of Bill Joy and Bill Gates. Both of them toiled away in a relatively obscure field without any great hopes for worldly success. But then—boom!—the personal computer revolution happened, and they had their ten thousand hours in. They were ready."<sup>14</sup> Gladwell observes that Joy and Gates were not thinking of worldly success, but he fails to acknowledge the importance of this. Their immersion in the work itself, without thoughts of great success, may have had a great deal to do with their accomplishments. Moreover, such immersion is often inherently rewarding; a person need not end up like Gates to deem the hours of work worthwhile. Gladwell's limited definition of success weakens his otherwise intriguing observations.

In this quest for a formula for success, we lose the gradation between the unseen and the seen, between the visible and the invisible. The armies of the visible and the invisible rage at each other, and the invisible loses. When we argue that some of the most important things in life cannot be seen or measured, we set ourselves up for defeat, because the invisible is just that: invisible. A stronger argument is that we need a mixture of the visible and the invisible, the measurable and the unmeasurable—and that the former sometimes gives us a glimpse of the latter. It is through contemplating imperfect geometric figures that we can imagine Plato's ideal forms; it is through making sense of a sonnet that we glean something beyond its overt logic and rhyme. Some believe

## The mixture of the measurable and unmeasurable was at one point a central aspect of liberal education. Learning went far beyond the literal and immediately applicable.

with fervor that the most important things are the tangible, measurable ones; others believe with equal fervor in the unseen. But the mixture is essential to the understanding of both the seen and the unseen.

This grasp of the mixture of the visible and the invisible, the measurable and the unmeasurable, was at one point a central aspect of liberal education, part of every field of study and part of the spirit of study. In mathematics, one wrestled with abstract concepts that did not translate immediately into practical examples; in literature, one tried to grasp what made a passage particularly beautiful. Such efforts varied, of course, from school to school, teacher to teacher, and student to student, but learning went far beyond the literal and immediately applicable. Teachers and professors delighted in the students who pursued subjects out of

interest, not just for a grade. A lecturer could make artful use of a digression, and at least some students would listen for the connections and the meaning. Today, the teacher who digresses is frowned upon; everything in a lesson is supposed to move toward a specific measurable goal. Teachers are supposed to announce the objective at the start of the lesson, remind students of the objective throughout the lesson,

and demonstrate attainment of the objective at the end.

Such a utilitarian view of education has a long history, but in recent years it has overtaken education discourse. It can be attributed to the loss of a literary culture, the introduction of business language and models into education, and the resultant streamlining of language. Schools and industries have become less concerned with the possible meanings of words, their allusions and nuances, than with buzzwords that proclaim to funders and inspectors that the approved things are being done—goal setting, "targeted" professional development, identification of "best practices," and so forth. Thus, we lose the means to question and criticize the narrow conceptions of success that have so much power in our lives.

**J**ust as we dream of attaining success, we dream of obliterating failure. In *Facing Up to the American Dream* (1995), Jennifer Hochschild writes, "Because success is so central to Americans' self-image, and because they expect as well as hope to achieve, Americans are not gracious about failure. Others' failure reminds them that the dream may be just that—a dream, to be distinguished from waking reality."<sup>15</sup> Many believe that, in order to attain success, they must somehow distance themselves from failure. Some believe that if they forbid failure or erase it from the books, it will disappear. With enough slogans, chants, and pep talks, perhaps, just perhaps, they can drive it away.

Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, wrote in an op-ed in 2010: "Visitors to my public charter

school often ask how the students feel about the signs on the walls that say: 'Failure is not an option.' They are surprised to hear that the signs are really for the staff." But if failure were not an option, why would one bother saying so? What's hiding here is the acknowledgment that failure is an ever-present option, one that Canada and his staff fight every day. The Harlem Children's Zone aims at breaking the cycle of poverty for Harlem children through a combination of education and social services. Using a "conveyor belt" model, which takes children from infancy up to college, it strives to provide seamless supports so that no child falls through the cracks. Yet failure happens even in the Harlem Children's Zone. In March 2007, Canada announced that he was phasing out the Promise Academy middle school, which he originally had intended to expand into a high school. All the graduating eighth-graders would have to find a high school elsewhere, and there would be no incoming sixth grade. Why? The preliminary test scores weren't high enough, and Canada felt he had to change course.<sup>16</sup> It was a wrenching decision for him, and the question remains: If failure is not an option, what does one do with it when it appears?

In many situations, the stakes demand that one try to prevent failure at all costs. This is the case in surgeries and wars, in high-poverty schools at testing time and earthquake rescue missions. Even in safer places such as concert halls, there is tension and expectation when the moment comes. Laxity in those cases will not do. But even there, failure happens, and one must have a way of reckoning with it. One must have a language for it, a kind of dignity around it. If all one hears about is success, then those who fail are left stumbling and bewildered, and the audience, equally confused, points fingers and makes noises of blame.

If we try to exclude failure, we deny much of existence: we disregard wars, famines, and other disasters; we wish away low test scores, college rejections, romantic rejections, divorce, pov-

## The Practice of Solitude

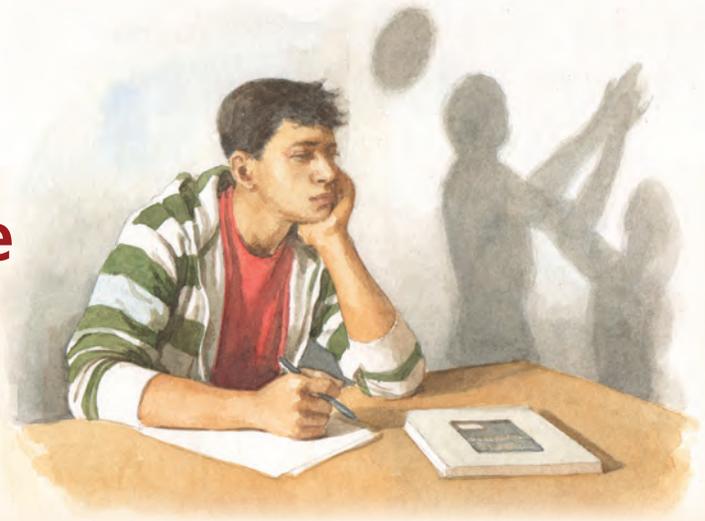
There is only one practice of solitude: to make a choice and carry it out well. The particulars assemble around this simple principle. One may later regret the choice; one may end up reversing or abandoning it. The choice may consist of doing nothing or refraining from a decision until the time is right. But no matter what it entails, one must entrust oneself to it in order to see it clearly. In our hectic lives, we have difficulty making choices; we have even more trouble living them out, as the alternatives flash and jingle around us. Solitude allows for a gathering of the intentions.

The practice of solitude requires education and experience. None of the choices of solitude can be made without insight, if they are to be made well. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is filled with philosophical, religious, and historical references. These are not ornaments; they give dimension and urgency to his argument. They help explain why, in his view, nonviolent protest is the one viable response to the injustice of segregation. This simplicity of view is anything but simplistic; it draws on study and experience, wisdom and anger. One senses the years of thought in it.

On the whole, with variation and exceptions, everyday American culture tends to favor busyness, not action or contemplation. "Work hard. Be nice," goes the motto of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools; this is not

bad advice, but its value depends on the substance of the work. Similarly, many businesses embrace the slogan "work hard, play hard." Hard work is necessary for many endeavors, but we have turned it into an end. Students in school are supposed to be working constantly—that is, visibly doing something, whenever anyone enters or peers in the room. American adults work longer hours and with shorter vacations than many Europeans in similar positions. Our escapes, such as TV or the Internet, may be symptoms of working too much; the tired mind seizes them to relieve the burdens for a little while. This is the inverse of busywork and just as numbing; it prevents contemplation and quiet thought. Susan Jacoby notes that the video and audio media "demand that everyone take his or her place as a member of the audience"; and "the more time people spend before the computer screen or any screen, the less time and desire they have for two human activities critical to a fruitful and demanding intellectual life: reading and conversation."<sup>17</sup> The loss of *desire* for reading and conversation is especially dangerous, for without desire, we do nothing to combat our excesses.

How can schools help students learn



to make choices—between contemplation and action, silence and speech, and more? Giving students many choices is not the answer; students may end up bewildered, as they do not understand the choices yet. Students need first to learn about the nature of these choices—by studying history and literature, discussing ethical questions, working out mathematics problems, learning languages, practicing instruments, and reading about the lives of others. In high school, students may start to take electives, but these should be in addition to a core set of studies, so that they may continue to build a foundation as they start to branch off. Even in college and graduate school, students need the structure of a syllabus; they need to know the field in order to stake out independently in it. There are exceptions: some students may find their interests early on and do substantial work on their own. Yet even the most precocious students need some guidance.

Some argue that students will not be motivated unless schools give them

erty, addiction, death, injustice, car accidents, lost jobs, misspelled words, stutters, misunderstandings, and our daily mistakes and slippages. Those who take on the slogan “failure is not an option” wittingly or unwittingly paint over their lives and the lives of others, and the result is not only false but flat. Such a paint job can’t render anything close to a human life. Hochschild observes that “the ideology of the American dream includes no provision for failure; a failed dream denies the loser not only success but even a safe harbor within which to hide the loss.”<sup>17</sup> Failure happens, yet it isn’t supposed to be there. The contradiction is each person’s private secret; it has driven some to despair.

In rejecting failure, we reject a resource as well. Failure can be inconsequential, crushing, or anything in between, but we need it as much as we need success, and even when we don’t need it, it happens and must be taken into account. Our successes and failures, in combination, teach us about the world and ourselves; they push us beyond ourselves. They help us understand history, literature, science, and the arts; they show us who we are, what we do well, whom we love, what we desire, what our limits are and aren’t, and how our private and public lives meet and part.

When they have no explanation, they stand as stubborn reminders that not all of life bends to our will or understanding. Explained or unexplained, they are not always what they seem.

The narrator of Robert Browning’s poem “Rabbi Ben Ezra” (1864) suggests that failures may be successes in disguise and vice versa.<sup>18</sup> The poem is solemn, exuberant, witty, soulful, and jagged—a vigorous call to repose. Its overall meaning is that old age is the mirror opposite of youth; where youth strives, old age rests and contemplates; where youth acts, old age trusts in the action of God. The ideas are somewhat cryptic until one grasps the underlying symmetry of youth and old age, and with it, the ambiguity of success and failure. Near the beginning, the narrator tells us:

For thence,—a paradox  
Which comforts while it mocks,—  
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:  
What I aspired to be,  
And was not, comforts me:  
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i’ the scale.

Toward the end, he repeats the idea, but in stronger, more

opportunities to choose what to read, what to learn, and which topics to pursue. But students will not be motivated unless they know something about the subjects in the first place. Students may find excitement and possibility in specific assignments, as they open up new knowledge and associations. I remember the delight of memorizing the declension of the Latin demonstrative pronoun *hic, haec, hoc*. The sounds were enjoyable; they reminded me of “kuplink, kuplank, kuplunk” in Robert McCloskey’s *Blueberries for Sal*. Later, when taking poetics and linguistics courses, I became interested in the ablaut (the linguistic term for a vowel gradation that distinguishes closely related words, such as *sing, sang, and sung*). Besides awakening new interests, structured study allows students to look more closely at a problem than they might otherwise. Students do need some time for exploration, but much of this will spring from the specifics they learn in class. There is room for a degree of choice (of essay topic, for instance), but choices may be richer when they are fewer and more focused.

Students’ lack of motivation comes not from structured study, but from elsewhere. Many students are distracted by mild or severe despair, overt or concealed: a sense that their studies don’t really matter and are not as important as personal concerns, and that it will soon be over anyway (school or even life itself). Schools try to give students a sense of urgency, but their methods are often misguided. They may try to make the learning superficially relevant

to students’ lives, whip up their enthusiasm through chants and pep rallies, or impress upon them that their studies will help them toward their career or college goals. None of these approaches is sufficient. The “relevance” approach confirms for students that their personal preoccupations come first; the pep rally is off-putting to many; the “goal-oriented” approach ignores the questions: What happens when the goal is met? Does all of this lose its meaning? The

## The student gets good grades, graduates, goes on to college or gets a job, and what then? What is the larger point?

student gets good grades, passes the courses for the year, goes on to the next grade, graduates, goes on to college or gets a job, and what then? What is the larger point?

**B**eyond giving students a foundation, schools must teach them what commitment means. Without apology, they should teach students to read, write, and practice without any distractions from the Internet, cell phone, or TV, and to make a daily habit of this. It doesn’t matter if they claim to know how to “multitask”; multitasking amounts to compromise, and they need to learn to offer more of themselves. Schools should make use of technology but should also teach students how to do without it.

Otherwise they will depend on text messages during class, musical practice, lectures, daydreams, and even rest. Over the long run, the setting aside of distractions will give students permission to take the work seriously. Many young people latch onto a casual attitude about their studies; they need to be helped out of this. Many secretly long to be pushed into greater seriousness.

Schools must assign homework that

goes beyond the trivial, that requires persistence and sustained concentration. When asked what he would recommend to readers who had trouble understanding his work after reading it three times, William Faulkner answered: “Read it four times.”<sup>2</sup> This advice could apply to many endeavors. Students should learn to read closely and carefully, bearing with things they do not immediately understand. Assignments should be designed to combine routine practice with difficult challenges. Teachers should not hesitate to correct students, as students need to strive for accuracy when working alone. Students should learn how to put their full mind into their work, sometimes heartily, sometimes grudgingly, but with regularity and determination.

The psychologist K. Anders Ericsson

resolved language, as he speaks no more of comfort, but of isolation and God:

Thoughts hardly to be packed  
Into a narrow act,  
Fancies that broke through  
language and escaped;  
All I could never be,  
All, men ignored in me,  
This, I was worth to God,  
whose wheel the pitcher  
shaped.

“All I could never be”—what does that mean? There is a sense that his failures are, in God’s eyes, part of his beauty, part of the shape of his life. Yes, the failures themselves—unrecognized, unmitigated, unrepaired.

Our failures may count among our greatest assets; they may show us the outlines of who we are. In her note to the second edition of *Wise Blood*, Flannery O’Connor writes, “Does one’s

integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be

asked to deepen.”<sup>19</sup> By this she means that our impossibilities and incapacities end up defining what we *can and must* do. A person may try to be someone or something else, but will eventually hit upon an obstacle. That obstacle—which seems to make us fail—ultimately brings us back to ourselves.

This does not mean that failure is always illuminating or redemptive, or that we are always capable of seeing it that way. The shame of

failure drives people to suicide; the fear of failure can overpower the mind. The writer who feels she has passed her peak may not be able to put that thought away; each new work, even each sentence, seems to limp along while the earlier writings surged and sang and

## Our successes and failures, in combination, show us who we are, whom we love, what our limits are and aren’t, and how our private and public lives meet and part.

refers to this kind of work as “deliberate practice”: sustained, analytical, regular, focused practice that makes the difference between an amateur and an expert, or a good expert and a top expert. Students engage in deliberate practice in between lessons; professionals engage in it on their own. According to Ericsson and colleagues, deliberate practice is not inherently enjoyable; individuals practice not because they like doing so, but because they know that such practice improves their performance. Upon conducting several studies of the practice habits of musicians, they found, among other things, that expert performers practice more than others over the years; practice alone, with full attention; practice regularly, for limited periods at a time; and get plenty of rest.<sup>3</sup>

This idea of deliberate practice is promising, if one recognizes a few caveats. First, practice can be inherently enjoyable. For many it is a private, precise dialogue between the self and instrument (or pen and paper, or other material). It is a time for close listening and watching, for tuning and tinkering. It can be dull or painful at times, but there are also times of insight and amazement. It is possible to conceive of a somewhat warmer version of deliberate practice, with all of the focus and structure but with love of the work as well. Second, there are many principles of practice, but it is still idiosyncratic. One might learn from the example of the Scottish virtuoso percussionist Evelyn Glennie, who as a child persuaded a teacher

(and later the Royal Academy of Music) to take her on even though she was deaf. She showed them that deafness in the ears did not impede her from hearing; she could hear with her body. What fueled and sustained her practice, it seems, was not just pursuit of a goal, not just the belief that she would get better over time, but

## Teachers who practice their subjects—who think about them and work on them in their own time—can show students a way of life.

love of the sounds right then and there, and her own forays into them.<sup>4</sup>

Many practices of solitude can be conveyed only through example. Teachers who practice their subjects—who think about them and work on them in their own time—can show students a way of life. They need not “model” for the students in any canned way; their very conduct is a model. When a teacher reads a poem aloud or presents a mathematical proof, her tone conveys whether she has thought about it at length, played with it, argued about it, and more. Students will likewise learn from teachers’ handling of conflicts that arise in class and in school. Problems and dilemmas will arise, and teachers will be put to the test. How does a teacher respond when one student taunts another, when one student seems far more advanced (or less advanced) than the others, or when one of the

students objects to the tenor of discussion or the premises of the lesson? How does the teacher respond to events affecting the whole school—a new principal, a change in the rules, or an emergency? A teacher’s bearing in these situations is complex and influences students enormously. But teachers must also let themselves be

fallible; students will not be harmed by a teacher’s minor mistakes. And when a teacher handles a large mistake with grace, students learn that they, too, will survive mistakes.

There is some truth to the existentialist idea that we give things their meaning and importance. Practice allows for this; through honoring something regularly, we come to value it more.

Students find their way by knocking their heads against a subject, by struggling with ideas, by learning things by heart and then carrying them around. They find themselves on their own, through their wanderings, friendships, and thoughts, but this takes place alongside structured study. Sometimes, when working on an assigned essay, a student sees an unusual phrase wriggle

sparkled. The scientist who has spent decades trying to solve a problem may feel that all the effort went to nothing. The immigrant worker who spent long hours, day after day, year after year, cleaning homes, only to see her children drop out of school, may wonder what all that labor was for. The retired stockbroker who made him-

self a decent living but had longed to do something different all along may ask whether the money was worth it. In these cases, there may be nothing rewarding about the situation except for the questioning itself, which may or may not open the way to more understanding.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* can be regarded as a parable of the ambivalence of success and failure. The old man catches the marlin but loses the flesh; he comes home with the skeleton, proof of both his defeat and his victory. But the skeleton cannot tell the private part of the story: the conversations with a bird, with the fish, with himself. A tourist spots the skeleton tied to his skiff and asks a waiter what it is. He replies, "Tiburón.... Eshark," meaning that the sharks ate it. The tourist misunderstands him and replies that she didn't know sharks had "such handsome, beautifully formed tails."<sup>20</sup> Already the history has been lost, through broken telling and misunderstanding. The old man is alone with his experi-

though I hope less angular, will be just as odd if not odder than the nine chapters you have now. The question is: is Rinehart interested in publishing this kind of novel?

The "aloneness" of *Wise Blood* is part of its magnificence. O'Connor had the strength and wisdom not to give it up for the sake of a book contract. She would accept criticism, but only if it meshed with what she was doing. This is the practice of solitude: distinguishing what is essential from what is not, and standing firm on the former. It is difficult, if not impossible, to teach aloneness of this kind, but if students see it, if they read *Wise Blood* and take in the language, they may come to love its jagged clarity and understand why it should not be softened for anything in the world.

—D.S.

#### Endnotes

1. Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), 247.
2. Jean Stein, "William Faulkner," in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking, 1958), 134.
3. K. Anders Ericsson, Ralf Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Römer, "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance," *Psychological Review* 100, no. 3 (1993): 366–369, 375.
4. TED Talks, "Evelyn Glennie Shows How to Listen," video, filmed February 2003, posted April 2007, accessed May 22, 2011, [www.ted.com/talks/evelyn\\_glennie\\_shows\\_how\\_to\\_listen.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/evelyn_glennie_shows_how_to_listen.html).
5. Excerpt from "Letter to John Selby," from *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald. Copyright © 1979 by Regina O'Connor. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.



through, or stumbles on a source that lights up the topic and leads to more sources. That may be the first sign of an individual voice; it grows stronger as the student learns, listens, and writes more. Through such practice, students learn how to be alone; they learn that they will always have something to do in solitude, including nothing at all. For some, solitude becomes the only place where they can do what they truly want. For others, it remains difficult and unpleasant, but they make room for it in some way. The relationships with solitude vary widely, but students learn that it is essential to doing certain things well.

But there is more to the practice of solitude than simply doing something well or working toward good performance. The person who shapes something is also shaped. We think of "character building" as something that takes place outside, in the world, but much of it happens in private. Reading, playing an instrument, memorizing the elements, all of this makes a person just a little different from before. Seeing the world a little differently, he is slightly altered in turn. All he needs to do is

honor this new shape, not apologize for it, not slur its syllables. It is possible, even with abundant foibles, to live up to the way one sees the world. We learn, over time, what we will not and cannot do, what we will not and cannot give up. Sometimes the practice of solitude comes down to a simple "no." That "no" protects all sorts of other possibilities. It guards a life.

In February 1949, Flannery O'Connor wrote<sup>5</sup> to editor John Selby at Rinehart in response to his comments on the manuscript of *Wise Blood*:

I can only hope that in the finished novel the direction will be clearer, but I can tell you that I would not like at all to work with you as do other writers on your list. I feel that whatever virtues the novel may have are very much connected with the limitations you mention. I am not writing a conventional novel, and I think that the quality of the novel I write will derive precisely from the peculiarity or aloneness, if you will, of the experience I write from....

In short, I am amenable to criticism but only within the sphere of what I am trying to do; I will not be persuaded to do otherwise. The finished book,

# Republic of Noise

## *The Loss of Solitude in Schools and Culture*

This book examines ways in which individuals, schools, and culture are pushing solitude aside. It looks at what solitude is, why we need it and avoid it, and what can happen when we drive it away.

At the outset, I take on the notion of “we.” It is one of the trickiest words in the book. When I use “we” to describe a cultural tendency, I recognize that there are many outliers. Personal observations, psychological and sociological studies, and historical and literary works help define this “we”—but how can I claim to be part of this group when, by virtue of writing about it, I stand outside it? I answer that I am part of this “we” even as I view it from the outside. I am more deeply affected by the current culture than I would like. The concept of “we” is complex, and I return to it over the course of the book. I wish there were a more fitting pronoun, something between “we” and “I.” There is “one,” of course, but one can only use “one” so often before one starts sounding awkward. For now, “we” refers to a general societal tendency with many variations and exceptions. On the whole, in schools, work, and life, we are driving solitude to the edges, even as we become lonelier and more isolated in some ways.

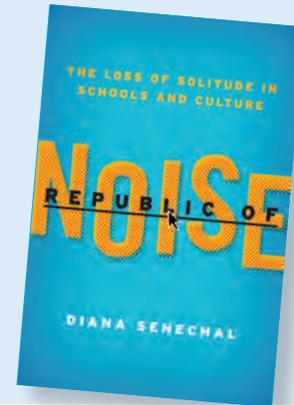
Our public schools, which should encourage students to see beyond the claims of the moment, have instead caved in to the immediate demands of the larger culture and economy. Convinced that the outside world calls for collaboration, school leaders and policymakers expect teachers to incorporate group work in their lessons, the more of it the better. They do not pay enough attention to the ingredients of good collaboration: independent thought, careful pondering of a topic, knowledge of the subject, and attentive listening.

One oft-touted practice in elementary school is the “turn and talk” activity, where a teacher pauses in a story she is reading aloud, asks a question, and has the students talk to their partners about it. When they are done, they join hands and raise them in the air. Instead of losing themselves in the story, they must immediately contend with the reactions of their peers. Many districts require small-group activities, throughout the grades, because such activities presumably allow all students to talk in a given lesson. Those who set

and enforce such policies do not consider the drawbacks of so much talk. Talk needs a counterbalance of thought; without thought, it turns into chatter.

Outside of school, young people and adults surround themselves with “friends” they have never met or have met but do not know personally: strangers who “friend” them on Facebook or connect with them on some other network. Not only have the meanings of “friend” and “like” become trivial, but people judge themselves, at least somewhat, by the number and status of friends and followers they can amass. Those who use online dating services may rely on “friends’” recommendations or votes. Those who keep a personal blog may take pride or

shame in the number of hits or “visits” they receive every day, though they have no



*Republic of Noise*, published by Rowman & Littlefield Education, is available on Amazon for \$16.83.

ence; be it success or failure, it is unknown to anyone but himself, and perhaps not even to himself. His explanation to himself is that he went out too far; perhaps this means that he has no explanation or that he went out to a place where there were no answers. Perhaps this is the nature of a serious endeavor: if we go very far, we reach a point of private conversation, where nothing is clear and where success and failure are no longer opposites.

**W**hat, then, might success be, if our current understanding is too narrow? It is not simply personal fulfillment; fulfillment in itself can be empty. One can take Prozac and feel fulfilled for a while, or at least less unfulfilled; does that make one successful? One can join a group of like-minded people and shut out conflicts; is that success? One can be electronically matched to the things one likes, and only those things, but what happens, then, to ruggedness and adventure? Why not take a rougher route? Success may have to do with wending our way through swamps and clambering over logs. It may have something to do with living ourselves out, as Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche suggested—becoming strongly and purely ourselves. But there is more. Success has to do with a certain empty-handedness, a willingness to do something out of love or dedication or curiosity, without predictable reward. That

includes spending time with a partner, child, or close friend; it includes playing an instrument and hearing the tones grow fuller and clearer. Maybe there is grace in it too. Ferry writes, “What is the use of growing old? ... To enlarge one’s view: to love the singular and once in a while to experience the abolition of time that the presence of the singular permits us.”<sup>21</sup> We are not used to thinking in these terms, but perhaps true success is something we may achieve when false success falls away.

The preoccupation with outward success (money, image, power, and success itself) deceives us out of a harder success. Failure, our twin, becomes the exiled leper, so we come to loathe ourselves even as we buff and propagate our image. Whatever seems awkward, unformed, or tentative gets pushed aside. Confidence trumps competence; we hesitate to do things that we do not already do well. But in ridding ourselves of all unsuccessful things, we make a bleak utopia, an empty dome. Our internal misfits may be things in motion: ideas in formation, projects in progress, difficult challenges. They may be private thoughts or things for which we do not yet have words. They may be concerns and hopes for another person. They may be part of the human rumble: suffering, confusion, unexpected joy. They may not always shape themselves for job applications, promotions, or million-dollar prizes, but we do not live by such shapes alone. □

idea in what spirit those visits occurred—whether someone landed on their blog by chance, visited it out of boredom, or came to read it out of genuine interest. As a result, a person winds up with a lot of virtual “stuff”—data, personal connections, votes—but little sense of the value of these things.

There are many problems intertwined here, but most can be traced to our weakened capacity for being alone and our dwindling sense of any life beyond the immediate scramble.

How to respond to the incessant polls, updates, ringtones, throbbing lights? Leaving society and taking up residence in the woods is one option, but most of us need others and wish to be involved in lives beyond our own. Even the so-called recluses throughout history had close relationships; Emily Dickinson had passionate friendships. Henry David Thoreau had guests in his hut and loved to go into town and strike up conversations. We should not have to choose between nagging buzz and lake-like stillness. There are flies buzzing on any lake, and lakes below every buzz.

It is not the isolation, but the consciousness that we need: the knowledge that an hour listening to a piano piece might give us more than a month of Internet-filled evenings. Besides consciousness, we need the strength to do what we find most rewarding. The strength takes time to build. Mark Bauerlein writes that today’s

“screen intelligence,” while good for certain kinds of mental agility, “conditions minds against quiet, concerted study, against imagination unassisted by visuals, against linear, sequential analysis of texts, against an idle afternoon with a detective story and nothing else.” Nicholas Carr puts it eerily: “What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation.”\*

Technology can be a boon if it serves rather than dominates us. I marvel at the 16th-century books that I can download. I envy those studying foreign languages today, especially Russian; there are many ways to read and listen to the language online. The Internet also lets us track down long-lost friends and acquaintances who might otherwise be hard to locate. In some ways, it can offer us quiet; instead of having the phone ringing constantly, we can put thought into an e-mail at our own convenience. The web can connect us with others who have similar interests; it provides community for those who live in isolation. Yet we give up much in return for these services. We become so accustomed to quick answers that we lose the habit of slow browsing and reading. We

\*Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Their Future* (New York: Tarcher, 2008), 95; and Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid? What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,” *The Atlantic*, July–August 2008, 57.

give information about ourselves, often unwittingly, and put up with animated advertisements and other intrusions. We are just starting to tackle the privacy issues and other complications of recent technology. We may come to grips with them, over time, if we stand back and consider what we are doing.

Standing alone is not easy or always enjoyable, but we would flail without some room for solitude. We cannot have meaningful relationships with others unless we know how to stand apart. We cannot learn unless we make room for learning in our minds. We cannot make sound decisions unless we are able to examine the options on our own, in quiet, along with any advice or information at hand. We cannot distinguish fads from sound ideas if we have never questioned social pressures and fashions. We cannot participate in a democracy without deep understanding of the issues at stake. We cannot accomplish anything of beauty unless we are willing to spend many hours working on it alone. We cannot endure disappointment, rejection, bereavement, or distress unless we have a place to go in ourselves. Without solitude, our very thoughts tend toward one-liners. Without solitude, we set ourselves up for half-hearted pursuits. The catch is that solitude, by its nature, cannot be a movement. Each person must find it alone.

–D.S.

## Endnotes

1. Donal O’Shea, *The Poincaré Conjecture: In Search of the Shape of the Universe* (New York: Walker, 2007), 1–5.

2. Jacques Steinberg, “Is Going to an Elite College Worth the Cost?” *New York Times*, December 17, 2010; and William Deresiewicz, “Solitude and Leadership,” *American Scholar* 79, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 22.

3. Luc Ferry, *What Is the Good Life?* trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5; for the original French version, see Ferry, *Qu’est-ce qu’une vie réussie?* (Paris: Grasset, 2002), 14.

4. Yale College Undergraduate Admissions, “Video: The Yale Musical,” accessed May 22, 2011, <http://admissions.yale.edu/cinema-yale>.

5. Eric Hoover, “Application Inflation: When Is Enough Enough?” *New York Times*, November 5, 2010.

6. Heather Grossmann, “Fuzzy Math,” *School Stories* (blog), May 16, 2009, accessed May 22, 2011, [www.coveringeducation.org/schoolstories09/?p=2222](http://www.coveringeducation.org/schoolstories09/?p=2222); and Jennifer Medina, “Pressed by Charters, Public Schools Try Marketing,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2010.

7. Tennessee Williams, “On a Streetcar Named Success,” *New York Times*, November 30, 1947; reprinted as “The Catastrophe of Success,” *Story: The Magazine of the Short Story* 32, no. 128 (Spring 1948), 71; and “The Catastrophe of Success,” introduction to *The Glass Menagerie* (New York: New Directions, 1949), viii. Later the word “volition” was mistakenly changed to “violation.”

8. Frank Channing Haddock, *Business Power: A Practical Manual in Financial Ability and Commercial Leadership* (Meriden, CT: Pelton, 1920), 275.

9. Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 13, 163; and Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1952), 55.

10. Eric A. Hanushek, “There Is No ‘War on Teachers,’” *Wall Street Journal*, October

19, 2010; Jason Felch, Jason Song, and Doug Smith, “Who’s Teaching L.A.’s Kids?” *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2010; and Jason Felch and Jason Song, “U.S. Schools Chief Endorses Release of Teacher Data,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 2010.

11. Amanda Ripley, “What Makes a Great Teacher?” *The Atlantic*, January/February 2010; Haberman Educational Foundation, “The Star Teacher Pre-Screener,” accessed May 22, 2011, [www.habermanfoundation.org/StarTeacherPreScreener.aspx](http://www.habermanfoundation.org/StarTeacherPreScreener.aspx); and Dale Singer, “When Teachers Don’t Make the Grade,” *St. Louis Beacon*, August 23, 2010.

12. Sarah D. Sparks, “Experts Begin to Identify Nonacademic Skills Key to Success,” *Education Week*, December 23, 2010.

13. Dakarai I. Aarons, “Focus on Instruction Turns Around Chicago Schools,” *Education Week*, January 6, 2010; and Philip N. Johnson-Laird, *How We Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 369–386.

14. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), 128.

15. Jennifer Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 29.

16. Geoffrey Canada, “New York Politicians Who Fight Against School Choice Had Plenty of It Themselves,” *New York Daily News*, March 27, 2010; and Paul Tough, *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada’s Quest to Change Harlem and America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 234–235, 240–242.

17. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream*, 30.

18. Robert Browning, “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” in *Dramatis Personae* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1864), 79, 85.

19. Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Noonday, 1967), 5.

20. Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 139–140.

21. Ferry, *What Is the Good Life?* 286–287.