

A chalk-dust hourglass

Rotella, Carlo . Boston Globe ; Boston, Mass. [Boston, Mass]13 Apr 2011: A.13.

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT

The Mystical Body of Boxing Gyms can manifest itself in a strip-mall storefront with a duct-taped heavy bag hanging in the corner or in a converted industrial loft with a sparring ring. [...] every school is part of Big School. The answer: read and write and be around other people who want to do the same. People aren't stupid, they're crazy.\n

FULL TEXT

THE GREGORIAN new year arrived three and half months ago, then came the Chinese new year, and now we're coming up fast on the one that may matter most around here: it's mid-April and the end of the academic year is within view. For many people in Boston, probably a larger proportion of the populace than in any other big American city, the most important annual turning of the calendar begins in May and June, proceeds in slow motion through the summer, and finally completes itself in early September.

That's because Boston is a company town, and the company is Big School. Branch offices can be found all around the city. There's variation among them, and some of the differences are crucial, but when you take a step back to look at the big picture you can see that places of teaching and learning are also all fundamentally the same.

The universality of school extends far beyond Boston, of course. Big School is a world-spanning enterprise. I've felt equally at home in, for instance, an all-ages classroom in an orphanage in Huangshi, China, and a lecture hall at Oxford University. In both places there were books on shelves, tables at which students could sit, a cleared space at one end for a teacher to stand, a door that closed and a window that opened and a board to write on in real big letters. Both places had the familiar classroom atmosphere of timeless routine shot through with eternally renewed expectations.

Schools are all the same in the way that libraries, bars, and boxing gyms are all the same. Every library is a local incarnation of the Master Library of All Time and Space. Every bar is a touchingly imperfect copy of the One True Universal Bar. The Mystical Body of Boxing Gyms can manifest itself in a strip-mall storefront with a duct-taped heavy bag hanging in the corner or in a converted industrial loft with a sparring ring.

And every school is part of Big School. I know that truth because I'm a Big School lifer. I will complete 40th grade next month, as I figure it. I graduated from high school (12th grade) in 1982, finished my senior year of college (let's call that 16th grade) in 1986, entered grad school in 1988, and have been either a grad student or a professor ever since. In those couple of years between college and grad school when I was "out," having sworn that I was done with school forever, I worked at an academic think tank and the Board of Education in New York.

Why did I accept the inevitable and come back to Big School? In part it was a rational decision. I asked myself

what I would do if I had so much money that I didn't need to work. The answer: read and write and be around other people who want to do the same. So, since I did in fact need to work, why not do that for a living? And there was a more visceral pull. Come September, I feel a swallows-to-Capistrano urge to be in a room with other people with our books open in front of us, a problem to solve, and rain driving against the windows.

Among the many lessons to be learned in Big School, there's one that organizes all the others for me: People aren't stupid, they're crazy. One of my teachers, Richard Slotkin, said that in class one day when I was an undergrad, and the passing years have deepened my appreciation of the wisdom of that approach to one's fellow humans. Assuming that people are crazy, rather than stupid, is a kind of generosity, a democratic commitment to believing in the complexity of minds and motives. My job, as an employee and citizen of Big School who studies culture, is to find patterns of meaning in the creative forms that people's inspirations can take - even, or especially, when their ideas and artistic handiwork seem utterly perplexing.

So out with the old year, and, eventually, at the usual stately academic pace, in with the new. I'm already looking forward to 41st grade.

Carlo Rotella is director of American Studies at Boston College. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

rotella.ART

Illustration

Caption: istockphoto/ heather hopp-bruce/globe staff

DETAILS

Subject:	Lifelong learning
Location:	Boston Massachusetts
Publication title:	Boston Globe; Boston, Mass.
Pages:	A.13
Publication year:	2011
Publication date:	Apr 13, 2011
Section:	Opinion
Publisher:	Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC
Place of publication:	Boston, Mass.
Country of publication:	United States, Boston, Mass.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States

ISSN: 07431791

Source type: Newspapers

Language of publication: English

Document type: Commentary

ProQuest document ID: 861513718

Document URL: <https://proxy.bc.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F861513718%3Faccountid%3D9673>

Copyright: (c) The Boston Globe Apr 13, 2011

Last updated: 2017-11-17

Database: Boston Globe

LINKS

[Linking Service](#)

Database copyright © 2018 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)