

Herding Instincts

Maybe it's important to mention that the me I am introducing, here, is one of those irrational left-wing "libruls;" one of those crazy people who chooses to work with culturally-complex, low-income, inner-city students on purpose.

Recently, as I was sitting over coffee with an ex-student, I found myself speaking about my latest concern: I worry, these days, about the diminishing number of culturally protective and fully inclusive neighborhood schools in our district. As our conversation moved on, and began to include previous students and favorite classes, my youthful companion reached across the table to stop me.

"Why do you do that?" she asked, touching my hand.

I raised my eyebrows. "Do what?"

"Why do you move your hands around like that when you talk about kids – in a kind of a circle. It's as if you're trying to pull something together."

Looking down, I noticed that my fingertips were indeed touching, each finger attracted to an opposite as if by magnetic force. Perhaps you've read stories about herding dogs: dogs specifically bred to keep livestock from straying, becoming lost or hurt. If no livestock presents itself, the instinct to herd doesn't disappear; frustrated, the dogs continue working, trying to round up people, rabbits, ducks, hamsters – whatever might be available. Protective by instinct, these dogs never stop worrying about the precarious balance of safe living.

I get that; I *do* that.

I brought that very same instinct to teaching.

One day when noise from unsupervised students caught my attention, I stepped into the hallway to find a group of boys throwing friendly punches outside a neighboring classroom. "Gentlemen!" I stated reactively, clearing my throat.

Happy to ignore extraneous interference, the boys continued their game.

"*Gentlemen!*" I said again, this time a little more loudly.

Straightening, the boys stopped to look my way. "Okay, *let's go*," I directed. "Aren't you supposed to be in class?"

"Aw, Miss," two or three grumbled as the small group broke up and began to move away. Pulling at chronically sagging pants while smoothing intricately braided hair, a tall, thin young man hung back. As a student who had attended one of my afternoon classes for more than six months, he knew me well. Watching his friends now amble unhurriedly down the hall, he turned to look at me in plaintive wonder.

"Aw, Miss," he protested. "Why is you always got to be trippn'?"

It was a good question.

Why *is* I always got to be trippin'?

The query itself, however, contains the answer. There is an instinct inside of me, something innate that knows a deeply important fact about kids, especially big-city, low-incomed teenaged kids. They need, almost more than they need any other thing in life, herding. As they labor so single-mindedly, burning up such amazing reserves of energy to gamble dispassionately with life's smorgasbord of choices, these children profoundly depend upon, and openly thrive when offered, an unvarying intervention.

If you don't take pains to hold them together?

If you don't step in, over and over (and then over again) to pull them circuitously inward towards success – sometimes with no other help than the full power of your will?

They struggle, they flounder; they deflate and fall apart. Desperately they count upon the people in their lives who make the effort to “trip.” The people who worry; the people who interfere; the people who draw them in, despite their endlessly manufactured resistance. The people who gather; the people who pull and guide; the people willing to forgive countless mistakes in their effort to patiently move them yet again, one more time, in the direction of success.

The people in their lives ready to step in and help them believe that no matter who they are? No matter what the media, testing data, privileged-class politicians, and big-wig educational reformers have been saying about them and their schools?

That they are being protectively watched – and tirelessly herded toward safety.