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Staff Notes
January 12-16, 2009
Be Nice. Work Hard. – Rafe Esquith

Time to Write: 3 hours 8 minutes



School Culture Focus *(Formal Space for Culture-Related Thoughts)*

I. My Short-lived Career in the Culinary Arts

Some of you may know that I once had a brief career in the culinary arts. Let me explain. Before 2002, I was a notoriously bad cook, downright “dangerous” if you asked my college roommates. Growing up, the kitchen was my stepmother’s domain and in my post-college years, I grew accustomed to reheating frozen Lean Cuisine containers, boiling spaghetti or picking up cheap Chinese take-out on the way home from my first teaching job in Boston. In my fourth year of teaching, however, the near-impossible happened: I took a part-time job as a cook.

One Saturday afternoon in the spring of 2002, I was doing my laundry near a small Italian restaurant that I often frequented for take-out when Ronnie Armany, the restaurant’s proprietor, asked me for a favor. He needed to run an errand...could I watch the counter in his absence? Those few minutes soon turned into hours as I was roped into doing odd jobs. At the end of that day, I struck up a quid pro quo with Mr. Armany: on my free Saturdays, I would come in and do whatever needed to be done - wash the dishes, make deliveries, fold pizza boxes. In return, he would “pay” me by teaching me how to cook one dish each day.

And so, for the next four months (until I started the KIPP fellowship), I spent every Saturday from 11am to 10pm working at Armany’s Italian restaurant in Boston’s West Roxbury neighborhood. In addition to learning how to sautee a shrimp scampi using butter and white wine, I noticed a few similarities between restaurants and schools. Both restaurants and schools are fast-paced and highly-intense environments where preparation and planning play a crucial (and largely unseen) role. Both are places where people, motivated by a labor of love (rather than money), are serving others. And in both

restaurants and schools, a team of adults creates a unique operating culture, one of excellence, mediocrity or somewhere in-between.

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II. The French Laundry and the Pursuit of Excellence

Over this past winter break, I re-read a favorite book about professional cooking, Michael Ruhlman's *The Soul of a Chef* (2001). (Ruhlman is America's most famous food writer and a judge on the Food Network's *Next Iron Chef*) While reading this portrait of three leading professional chefs, I dog-eared about three passages that I wanted to share with you. My favorite section of the book was the profile of Thomas Keller, the chef who started the French Laundry in 1994.



Located in the Napa Valley, the French Laundry is commonly viewed as the best restaurant in America (and one of the best in the world). On this year's Michelin guides, it is one of only six restaurants in the US to earn three stars. To eat at the French Laundry, you have to place a reservation two months to the day in advance; for example, the reservations for this March 12th will be fully booked by 10am tomorrow morning. The \$240 menu serves seven to nine creative masterpieces, such as "Oysters and Pearls" (oyster and caviar served on a pearl tapioca custard) and "Peas and Carrots" (lobster knuckle meat wrapped in a pancake with carrot and butter emulsion sauce and pea shoots). The meals themselves take between four and six hours to savor.¹

Reading about the French Laundry, it's clear that the kitchen staff there fanatically cares about the details that no one else cares about. They are obsessed by seemingly-insignificant details. Here are a few examples. When cooking, the chefs there are always cleaning - sometimes four times a day - including scrubbing the oil off bottles. Why? That same oil gets on your hands and the oily fingerprints are left on a plate when you pull it from a warmer. Most restaurants store their fish in random assortment. At the French Laundry, they pack their fish in ice in the same position it swims. Why? To "avoid stressing the flesh of the fish unnecessarily."² The attention to detail there is simply incredible.

Dave Levin would call these guys "productively neurotic." Ruhlman describes hanging out with one of the assistant chefs there: "One night during service, we left the kitchen for the office to talk. He was dressed for work and had helped prep but was not on tonight. On the way out, he stopped to wipe crumbs off a cutting board used by the cheese station to slice bread, and in the parking lot he picked up a cigarette butt." Ruhlman asked him why he cleaned up on his free time. The assistant chef told him, "Is the guest going to notice the cigarette butt in the driveway? Consciously, no...but it's all those unconscious things that make this a beautiful place."³

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III. Rake!l

The driving force behind the French Laundry is Thomas Keller, the older man in the picture on the previous page standing with the Asian guy who looks like a bald me ☺. Keller is a 53-year old, self-taught cook with a relentless drive towards perfection. Ruhlman wrote, "I think a lot of chefs are creative with food, are passionate about it, are smart, have good staffs, find good products, manage their business well, but the pursuit of perfection, the relentless pursuit, had made Keller who he was and was, more than anything responsible for his acclaim, his success, and the fantastic food he served at the French Laundry."

What's interesting about Keller is that his first restaurant was a failure. In January 1987, he started a high-end French restaurant in the SoHo part of downtown New York called Rake!l. In October of that year, the stock market crashed causing expense accounts to dry up and diners to eat in. The mood for Keller's cooking – creative and sophisticated French-inspired foods – died down. Keller was faced with a

¹ For a mouth-watering description of a French Laundry meal from a food writer's perspective, see the attached pdf.

² Michael Ruhlman, *The Soul of a Chef: The Journey toward Perfection*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001. p.288

³ Ruhlman, 288.

choice: either lower his standards and serve bistro food or close down the restaurant. He chose the latter. Ruhlman describes what happened here:

“He had never relinquished his standards. When it became clear that Rakel could not survive the sluggish economy that followed the 1987 market crash, his partner, Serge Raoul, told Keller he’d have to scale back, turn Rakel into a bistro and serve the bistro food that had become so popular. Keller wasn’t interested. He hadn’t spent his life cooking in order to make money, and so he always felt comfortable cooking, both in lean years and in fat years...and so when he was given an ultimatum – change your cooking style (and therefore your standards) or leave, the decision was clear. ‘I wasn’t changing,’ he told the interviewer. ‘If I would compromise my standards, it would be the end of me.’ To renounce his standards, would be to renounce his very being.”⁴

It’s always been my goal for us to be the French Laundry of schools, and I often think about what happened to Rakel. There are so many daily pressures on us – from parents and students - to compromise our standards. Recently, our school has been under tremendous pressure from the Fresno Unified, largely because we’ve been so insistent on maintaining our standards. If we ever relented and were forced to become another “average” (read: mediocre) school, I would much rather our school not exist at all.

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IV. Where does excellence come from?

At the end of the book, Ruhlman asks Keller about where his perfectionist drive came from. For that matter, what makes *anyone* strive to do his or her best? Here’s Keller’s response.

“In hindsight, I was very lucky to have been raised by my mother in such an ideal way as to allow me to understand the details of things. A lot of it is based on having to do certain chores around the house. You clean the bathroom, which was my job. There was only one way to do it. Everything had to shine. Everything had to be just perfect. **Her definition of perfect. Which became my definition of perfect. To this day, no matter what I do, it’s kind of based on cleaning the bathroom.**

“So I’ve taken one deal that she taught me and compounded it into who and what I am. Paying attention to detail and making sure that it was done and done right. You put a piece of tape on a box in the refrigerator, it should be straight, because why would you put it on crooked? You cut a piece of foie gras, it should be perfect because if it’s not, it’s a waste. If you’re cooking something in the oven, you should make sure you take it out at the right time. At one point in the oven, it is perfect, and that’s when you should be aware of it and take it out.”⁵

In other words, here’s a guy who, at first, just wanted to please his mom. Yet later on, that translated into doing every simple task the right way, which in turn created the culture of excellence at the best restaurant in America.

This short example, to me, exemplifies the power of teaching. The bar that we set for our kids – how we define “good enough” – has the potential to change their lives and others. If we define “perfect” in a certain way, who knows...one of them may someday start the next French Laundry.

⁴ Ruhlman, 313-314.

⁵ Ibid, 318.

Links to News Here and Elsewhere

- Over the vacation, there were two interesting stories in the New York Times about the trend of increasing pressure on younger kids.
The first was about 6th graders in New York taking cram test-prep classes to place into Hunter College Prep, an exam school: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/03/education/03cram.html?_r=1
The second was about the first-ever national all-star football game for 7th and 8th graders: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/04/sports/ncaafotball/04youth.html?ref=sports>
- I saw these two fascinating websites on the daily habits and routines of interesting people. For those of us curious about how Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Ernest Hemingway, Roald Dahl, Napoleon Bonaparte and other luminaries used their time in a typical day...
<http://www.mentalfloss.com/blogs/archives/20833>
http://dailyroutines.typepad.com/daily_routines/
- TEAM Academy was featured in this Newsweek editorial: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/177203>

Reflections from Life and Thoughts for KIPP (*Formal Space for Random Thoughts*)

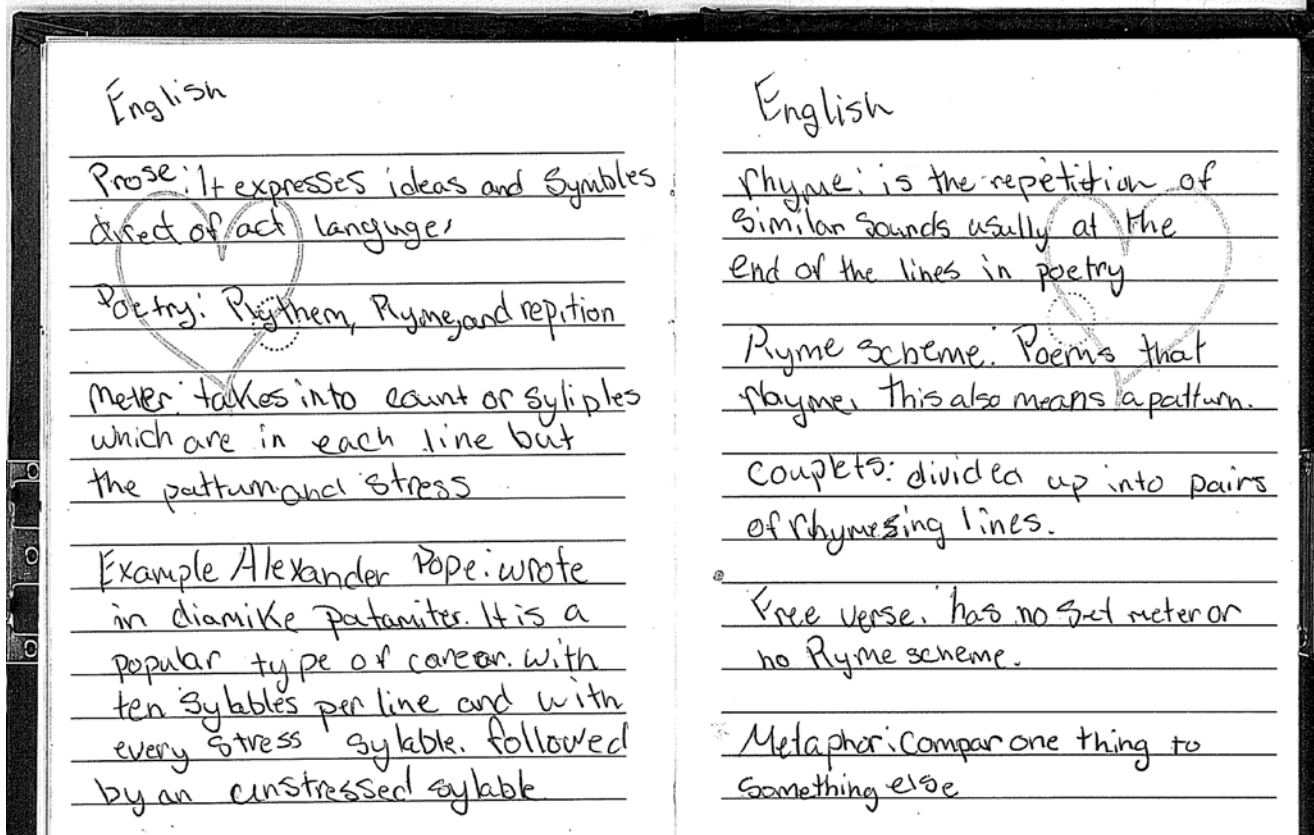
- On the last day before Christmas break, I met with a few parents over breakfast. I was pretty surprised to hear from Daisy Vidal that before coming to KIPP, Erica was (believe it or not) a C-student...she was bored and not challenged. Mrs. Vidal looked everywhere for a good school and could not find one until she came across KIPP. Once Erica started coming to KIPP a year ago, she began singing songs about math and was much more motivated. Here are the two things Erica's mom likes the most about KIPP: getting a list of all the teachers' phone numbers and watching the kids walk out at the end of the day (calmly and slowly, not like other schools where kids are running out).
- Sarah Velasco's mom told me that she really appreciated the emphasis here on character. She recently started substitute teaching at other Fresno Unified schools, and she sees the difference. Here, kids are taught to treat teachers and each other with respect, when unfortunately you don't see that at a lot of other schools.
- After the breakfast meeting, Diane Pajouh (Nikolaus's mom) sent me the following e-mail:

"Mr. Tschang,

I love KIPP and all the teachers there. You have hired tremendous talent. I truly believe you and your staff do an amazing job and will soon not be such a kept Fresno secret. [Mayor] Ashley [Swearingen] as a mother and a strong minded business person is a very strong supporter of schools and so is one of her campaign managers, Kristine Walter, founder of Read Fresno. If I can make any introductions for you I would be very happy to introduce you to whoever you need to meet, obviously as long as I know them!

Enjoy the Holiday and I am always directly available to you on my cell.
Diane Pajouh"

- On Friday afternoon right before we left on vacation, Delchanna Gibson approached me and said that she did some research on the internet the previous night. "About what?" I inquired. When she told me it was about poetry, my first thought was of the "roses are red, violets are blue..." variety Wrong...she was thinking Alexander Pope. Delchanna whipped out her Betty Boop journal and showed me the notes she took from the internet (see below). She told me that her 4th grade teacher at Yokomi last year suggested her go to brainstorm.com and look up information there. That teacher's name? Alice Hawke. What a wonderful reminder of a child's inherent curiosity and how easy it is for an adult to spark it.



Calendar

(Failing to plan is planning to fail.)

This Week

Monday (1/12)

- ☞ Boys Basketball Practice, 4:15-5:30pm

Tuesday (1/13)

- ☞ College shirt day
- ☞ Boys Basketball @ Clovis Christian, 3:30-5:00pm
- ☞ Staff Meeting, 4:30-5:30pm

Wednesday (1/14)

- ☞ Boys Basketball Practice, 4:15-5:30pm

Thursday (1/15)

- ☞ Weekly parent letter goes home

Friday (1/16)

- ☞ Fancy Dress Friday
- ☞ Math Department Friday
- ☞ Boys Basketball Practice, 4:15-5:30pm