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Home Run

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But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive. (Alice Walker, 1982, *The Color Purple*, Letter 11)

In my thirteenth year of teaching, a young man named Khalid was entrusted to me in three of my classes: Social Studies 13, English 13, and Reading 10. He arrived mid-September, as had I, hired late after enrollment numbers exceeded expectation. Khalid had come straight from the Middle East, and the only other classes he had were ESL, or English As A Second Language.

Only his smile saved Khalid that year. He was bullied and shoved and propelled along the burgeoning corridors at class-change, enduring with a shy, patient, perpetually confused grin, white teeth bared, in hope of another day's reprieve on the planet without being killed.

He sat alone. He arrived first, every class. He always had his books, pencils, papers, and work attempts. He had no idea how to write, how to speak English, how to understand what was going on around him. After multiple inquiries on my part to the administration, I was, in the end (September 30), simply to allow him to "be a warm body in class" and heard, "He'll pick up what he can; no one expects him to do anything this year anyway." No knowledge of family or friends was available. A social worker had registered him.

So every day he sat, and we grinned at each other for at least three weeks and mumbled, "Hi." The first English I heard him try to say to me was my name. He asked me how to say Miss Maple and practised forty or fifty times that day until he was satisfied that he could call me by name and get my attention if he needed to. I, in turn, practised and practised his name, "Khalid", until he grinned widely and nodded his head. From our mutual naming, we began to develop a relationship.

That year was also the first time I had ever taught Social Studies, and I had to learn along with the students. Of course, I did a better job because I had a better sense of the time that is needed in learning. Together we studied government, maps, Canada's history and economic systems, human rights, and immigration policies. Most of the students could name only five or six of the provinces, and most could not even accurately place their own city on a map of their province, let alone construct convincing, supported arguments for persuasive essay writing.

One day I got a huge, old globe from an abandoned resource room (the globe was about five feet in diameter), set it in the middle of the room, and asked, "Where in the world are we?" The students were fascinated with the relic.

I asked each one to go to the globe and locate herself or himself on the earth's referent. When Khalid took his turn, his face lit up as his fingers floated over the surface of the world and came to rest with his index finger firmly pressed on Iraq. And then the smile began to fade into a weak grimace as he located our city.

"Khalid, we are very glad you are here with us, but do you wish to go back to Iraq?"

He sadly shook his head and watched his feet: "No. Too vi-o-lent!" and returned to his seat. That was December.

Not once in any of the three classes during the year would this disparate bunch of kids at risk interact with Khalid; they all had their own difficulties. In spite of a lot of group work, contrived assignments, and "cooperative" curriculum, he would anticipate their reluctance and always say, "I work alone, okay, Ms. Maple?" twirling his pen deftly over his fingers and putting down his head to work close by the paper. When pressed to join others, he would whisper, "No, please," and I respected his request, while trying again to plan some other way to involve him.

Khalid may not have been "expected to do anything," but he did begin to learn English and began to get 20-30 percent on his assignments. He was enormously pleased with himself because he could see that he was making progress.

By June of that year, the students and I had exhausted more than was prescribed in the syllabus, viewed all the "classics" on film from the school library, and certainly exhausted many more activities with possibilities for development of cohesive group process. I tried to think up interesting reviews and games on content to fill up those last two long, hot weeks and to increase the students' chances at success (50 percent magic of a passing grade) on their final exams so they could get on with their lives. But we were all getting impatient and crabby with one another and I needed to think of something else for us to explore together. I wasn't used to negative culminations with year-long classes.

One lazy, hot June morning, I phoned the principal from the classroom and said, "I know this contravenes 'previous permission policy' for field trips, but forgiveness is easier to get than permission, so I am taking my double-period Social 13s to the park by the river. If you have to report the pedagogical value, we will be playing parliamentary baseball," and hung up.

I phoned the cafeteria and then sent two students to get three dozen doughnuts for us, charged to Maple who would pay at noon. Another two students were dispatched to bring back bats, balls, and gloves. Off we went. The students hooted and shouted and whistled and raced each other to the park. Except Khalid. He watched everybody very closely, walked right next to me, his shoulder gently bumping into mine, and asked worriedly, "Ms. Maple, why we are not in classroom? What we do now?"

"Baseball, Khalid. We are going to play baseball at the park. For a little break. We need to get out of the classroom and just have fun together for a while. That will relax us so we can work better tomorrow. If not, well, we will at least have fun now. Have you played baseball before?"

Appearing puzzled, Khalid responded, "No."

Bette, a "gutsy tough street chick" as she called herself, overheard our conversation and Khalid's quiet "no." "What!" she yelled, "Ya never played baseball? Jeez . . . whatta you guys do over there in Iraq?"

"They fight and kill my family, so I go away to here," said Khalid.

"Jee-sus. Is that true, Ms. Maple? ... Khalid, I'm real sorry. Wow! You're a real gentle dude and kind too--I seen ya. Who'da figured you had all that terrible stuff happen to ya. C'mon, I'll show ya how ta play. No problem."

And she began to teach him. And one by one each of the other students added baseball advice and tips and explanations and rules to the bewildered but happy Khalid. We ran and skipped and nudged each other the rest of the way to the ball diamond.

Sides were chosen (PCs and Liberals), umpire named (Speaker of the House), and suddenly they invented

parliamentary baseball and used all the right terms. I was benched (back "bencher" from a small riding, they said).

When it was Khalid's turn to bat, having watched a few batters ahead of him, he stood in the batting position, getting advice on how to "choke up on the bat," where to place the ball past the center fielder, and was promised by the pitcher (leader of the opposition) that he'd get a gentle pitch on the first throw. Khalid nodded and smiled throughout and pointed several times to the outfield--"Over there? Hit this ball, that place, very far?"

"Yes, yes," he was assured by twenty-two other voices. I sat on the bench cheering, providing the Senate function and periodic "stadium waves."

Khalid connected with the "sweet spot" on that first throw and the ball hurtled like an Exocet missile over the pitcher, over the center fielder, out of the diamond, out of the park, and deep into the bush near the river, never to be found again.

Khalid stood beaming on home plate. "Like that?" he asked. And twenty-two students yelled, "Home run, Khalid, home run. Run. Run! Holy crap, did ja see that?" and "Jeez, Khalid, try out for the Jays. No, run . . . run . . . run!"

"Run where?" he asked.

His whole team took him by the hand in turn and ran him around all the bases back to home plate. The whole class stood there cheering and yelling. "Welcome to Canada, Khalid, " said Bette. The group sighed, "Yeah, Khalid, Welcome to Canada, sorry we didn't try harder to get to you ya before. But now we can."

The next day when I entered class, Khalid was there on time as usual with his books waiting, but this time he was listening intently as Bette talked her usual nonstop monologues, listening because she was talking *to* him. On my desk was a note:

Dear Ms. Maple,

Thank you that we left the classroom. I never forget yesterday.

Your student,

Khalid

He looked over Bette's talking head and we grinned at each other. I was sorry it was June; I wanted to begin again with him.