
A Personal Prologue:
The Student I Was,
the Student I Became,
the Teacher I Am



JIM BURKE

Jim Burke teaches English at Burlingame High School, where he has worked since 1992. He is the author of more than twenty books. After graduating near the bottom of his high school class, Burke attended several community colleges before earning a BA in psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and an MA in education from San Francisco State University. In "A Personal Prologue: The Student I Was, the Student I Became, the Teacher I Am," first published in *School Smarts: The 4 Cs of Academic Success* (2004), Burke discusses his transformation from a high school student lacking in direction and study skills to a successful and passionate learner and, later, educator.



Dear Mr. and Mrs. Burke:

This letter is to inform you that your son Jim Burke will be ineligible to graduate or to participate in the graduation ceremonies on June 8th unless he passes his English class. Enclosed you will find a copy of his most recent progress report and his current transcript. His teacher, Mr. Kitchener, has informed us that Jim's grade in his senior English class as of June 3rd is an F. He must pass this class, as it is a graduation requirement; it is also the last five units he needs to achieve the required number of units to graduate.

Students who do not have the required 210 units in the proper subject areas will not participate in the graduation ceremony. Students can complete any graduation deficits over the summer to earn a diploma. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call me.

Sincerely,
Bruce Wells
Counselor

I would like to be able to tell you that when this letter arrived in the last weeks of my high school career, I was working hard on the latest assignment I had decided not to do; the truth, however, is that I was lounging by the pool in our backyard with my friends Dave and Doug, both of whom were heading off to college in the fall.

When my mother erupted out of the house waving the letter in her hand, I already knew something was up: I could hear her voice from the front hall, where she had stood reading the letter that capped years of academic mediocrity and, at times, failure.

"What the hell is this all about?" she demanded as Dave and Doug dove into the pool for a little refreshment—and distance.

"Oh . . . that? I thought they said they weren't going to send that. It's all taken care of, Mom. I swear. I didn't turn that project in to Ken [my English teacher, who insisted we call him by his first name] on time, so he hadn't graded it. He said he'd grade it this weekend. Not to worry, Mom."

"It better be squared away, that's all I have to say." With that, she retreated to the cool interior of the house, leaving me to wonder how I would get out of such a mess this time. Doug and Dave both propped themselves up on the edge of the pool, grinning, shaking their heads at me, saying only that their parents would kill them if they got into such a situation.

Over the next week I would consult with Ken—ironically, the teacher most responsible for me becoming a teacher—about my standing, asking what I could do to pass his class. It's a conversation those of you reading this know too well. And ultimately it worked out: I received the "gift D—" I needed to walk the stage. The problem was that on the other side of that stage stood the realization that all my friends were leaving for college by summer's end to begin preparing for a future I had never allowed myself to consider.

As my transcript shows (see next page), I drifted between what appealed to me and what the school required.

My poor academic performance was by no means limited to senior year or even high school. I can still see my great friend John Russell and myself trying to "fix" our middle school report cards so that the Ds resembled Bs—*sort of*. I spent much more time in middle school trying to see the legendary hickies on Renee Mell's neck than trying to jot down what Mr. Longwell told us about math or Mrs. Cook said about history as she stood straight and stared at the red dot on the back wall, so uncomfortable was she about speaking in front of groups. When I wasn't doctoring report cards or speculating about

| NAME: Burko, James R | | DOB: 11-29-61 | SEX: M | EDUC: 11-29-61 | EDUC: Sacramento | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| 200 SUBJECT | TEACHER | SCHE | CL | HR | PR | CR | GR | EX | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| PHOTO 1 | HAYNES | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ART 1 | SUGIMOTO | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ENGLISH 2 | ANDERSON | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| U.S. HISTORY | ALBERA I | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| SPANISH 1 | KASSEN | A | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| CIVIC AWARENESS | SHAD REE | A | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <table border="1"> <tr> <th>200 SUBJECT</th> <th>TEACHER</th> <th>SCHE</th> <th>CL</th> <th>HR</th> <th>PR</th> <th>CR</th> <th>GR</th> <th>EX</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> </tr> <tr> <td>SPANISH 2</td> <td>NILLER H</td> <td>A</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>ADV ST WOOD</td> <td>MARTIN</td> <td>B</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>BIOLOGY</td> <td>JONES S</td> <td>C</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>ALGEBRA I</td> <td>HANSEN L</td> <td>B</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>SPANISH 1</td> <td>HILLER B</td> <td>B</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table> | | | | | | 200 SUBJECT | TEACHER | SCHE | CL | HR | PR | CR | GR | EX | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | SPANISH 2 | NILLER H | A | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | ADV ST WOOD | MARTIN | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | BIOLOGY | JONES S | C | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | ALGEBRA I | HANSEN L | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | SPANISH 1 | HILLER B | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 200 SUBJECT | TEACHER | SCHE | CL | HR | PR | CR | GR | EX | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| SPANISH 2 | NILLER H | A | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ADV ST WOOD | MARTIN | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| BIOLOGY | JONES S | C | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ALGEBRA I | HANSEN L | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| SPANISH 1 | HILLER B | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <table border="1"> <tr> <th>200 SUBJECT</th> <th>TEACHER</th> <th>SCHE</th> <th>CL</th> <th>HR</th> <th>PR</th> <th>CR</th> <th>GR</th> <th>EX</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> </tr> <tr> <td>ART TCHR ASST</td> <td>CONROD</td> <td>B</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>PHOTO 2</td> <td>PETERSON</td> <td>A</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>ECONOMICS</td> <td>THORN</td> <td>D</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>ADV BIOLOGY</td> <td>LEACH</td> <td>B</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>YEARBOOK</td> <td>SUGIMOTO</td> <td>A</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>AMER LIT</td> <td>BARTER</td> <td>C</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table> | | | | | | 200 SUBJECT | TEACHER | SCHE | CL | HR | PR | CR | GR | EX | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | ART TCHR ASST | CONROD | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | PHOTO 2 | PETERSON | A | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | ECONOMICS | THORN | D | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | ADV BIOLOGY | LEACH | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | YEARBOOK | SUGIMOTO | A | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | AMER LIT | BARTER | C | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 200 SUBJECT | TEACHER | SCHE | CL | HR | PR | CR | GR | EX | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ART TCHR ASST | CONROD | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| PHOTO 2 | PETERSON | A | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ECONOMICS | THORN | D | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ADV BIOLOGY | LEACH | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| YEARBOOK | SUGIMOTO | A | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| AMER LIT | BARTER | C | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <table border="1"> <tr> <th>200 SUBJECT</th> <th>TEACHER</th> <th>SCHE</th> <th>CL</th> <th>HR</th> <th>PR</th> <th>CR</th> <th>GR</th> <th>EX</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> <th>RE</th> </tr> <tr> <td>ART TCHR ASST</td> <td>PETERSON</td> <td>C</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>0.0</td> <td>C</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>PHOTO 2</td> <td>HAYNES</td> <td>B</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>ENGLISH 4</td> <td>KITCHENER</td> <td>D</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>AM GOVT/DECSIO</td> <td>KERNICK</td> <td>B</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>4TH PERIOD OPE</td> <td>DO</td> <td>B</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>4TH PERIOD OPE</td> <td>DO</td> <td>B</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>5.0</td> <td>A</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table> | | | | | | 200 SUBJECT | TEACHER | SCHE | CL | HR | PR | CR | GR | EX | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | ART TCHR ASST | PETERSON | C | 5.0 | 0.0 | C | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | PHOTO 2 | HAYNES | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | ENGLISH 4 | KITCHENER | D | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | AM GOVT/DECSIO | KERNICK | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 4TH PERIOD OPE | DO | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 4TH PERIOD OPE | DO | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 200 SUBJECT | TEACHER | SCHE | CL | HR | PR | CR | GR | EX | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ART TCHR ASST | PETERSON | C | 5.0 | 0.0 | C | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| PHOTO 2 | HAYNES | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ENGLISH 4 | KITCHENER | D | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| AM GOVT/DECSIO | KERNICK | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4TH PERIOD OPE | DO | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4TH PERIOD OPE | DO | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| 200 SUBJECT | TEACHER | SCHE | CL | HR | PR | CR | GR | EX | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| BIOLOGY | MARTIN | D | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| WTH SAFETY | RUGGIERO | B | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| 200 SUBJECT | TEACHER | SCHE | CL | HR | PR | CR | GR | EX | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | RE | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| 3RD PERIOD OPE | PETERSONS | C | 5.0 | 5.0 | A | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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My high school transcript. While my cumulative GPA was 2.5, my academic GPA (based on required academic classes) was 1.7.

Renee's neck, I was playing basketball or waiting to get into the woodshop to work on my lathe projects, which offered a pleasant calm in the middle of an otherwise disorienting day.

Only one teacher stands out in my mind from middle school: Mr. Rothshiller, the hardest, most demanding, and most unique teacher in the whole school. He taught zoology, had arms covered with tattoos, had been a boxer, and demanded more of students than all the other teachers combined. You knew you were in for it on those days when you entered his class and saw the dreaded skull perched atop his desk: this meant a pop quiz on something like the bones of the hand or the respiratory system of sharks.

Something in me responded to Mr. Rothshiller: he was one of those teachers you wanted to please, whose opinion of you mattered, and who asked you to go inside yourself and find the stuff needed to do what he asked. Try as I might, however, I lacked the academic sensibilities that told others which pieces of information mattered most, or how to solve a complicated problem such as dissecting a shark and then displaying it, properly labeled, and *without* formaldehyde dripping all over the posterboard. Tests were just another chance to fail, as they would be through much of high school. Somehow school smarts seemed a genetic gift I had not received. My dad taught me how to build and fix things, how to hunt and fish, how to throw a curveball, but somehow note-taking and test-taking never got onto our menu.

In some misguided effort to prove my intelligence to both Mr. Rothshiller and myself, I spent an entire weekend holed up in my room staring at what passed for notes so that I might not just pass but excel on the next test. Lacking any method, any strategies, any sense of my own mind and how it learned, I was beaten before I began. I might as well have been down at the

river hunting lizards or riding my motorcycle through the fields that surrounded our house. When I failed the big zoology test that prevented me from continuing on in the class, I did not pitch a fit or cry; I probably went home and watched television or rode my motorcycle.

By eighth grade, however, something entered my life that would eventually change me in ways I could not then anticipate: tennis. Everything else became irrelevant as I sought to master this sport that I had somehow stumbled upon one Saturday morning when my buddy Wayne Schloemer asked me if I wanted to go play tennis. From the age of eleven until the end of high school, despite failure or general lack of direction in other areas of my life, I devoted myself to tennis with a passion that gave my life a sense of purpose and let me taste success on a daily basis. It established my identity as a successful person, a competent person, a feeling I rarely experienced in school. Eventually I would rank among the top fourteen-year-olds in California.

Meanwhile, I was also beginning high school when I was fourteen. Though my father had dropped out of high school to begin working for the Office of State Printing, he had worked hard to get our family into nicer parts of Sacramento, hoping that better schools could make the difference in our lives that they did not in his when he was younger. My mother provided a different example, but one no less influential: a high school graduate who had her first child (me) at nineteen, she pursued her interest in real estate, locking herself away in their bedroom to study for her license, a process of intense self-education and focused study that culminated in her success on the test and in the business.

Ours was not a literate household in the same way my friend Micky's was. His father, who was a doctor, routinely sat at the kitchen table, where all could see him reading articles, journals, newspapers, contracts, and stock reports. Micky grew

up surrounded by expectations that he would go to college, swathed in reminders of the importance of doing well in school, and supported in those endeavors early on by parents and siblings who offered resources, guidance, strategies, and whatever else was needed to help him succeed in school. In elementary school Mick focused on school, while John Russell and I planned out how many suckers we should buy after school to sell the next day, or while I used my budding writing skills to court girls, asking Kim Simmons if she wanted to “go study with me,” by which I meant “go steady.” Thus began the first of many two-week school relationships that would prepare me for the day, years later, when I would write the woman I would eventually marry, asking her to “stop by and visit me in Tunisia,” where I was serving in the Peace Corps; she was living in Japan at the time and I had not yet addressed my gross lack of geographical knowledge. No doubt Kim Simmons, reading my note of proposal, thought, as my wife did when she read my note in Japan, “He’s a nice guy. Not too bright, but nice.”

In many respects, this sums up the way I saw myself and others saw me during the high school years: nice and not too bright. I had no real sense of what it was all for, what it led to, how it might help me. Some ask me if I was just bored, felt uninspired or not challenged; but this just wasn’t the case. As my report card shows, I showed up and behaved well (thus getting good-citizenship grades) and rarely did my work. I had no real sense of how to do the work I was asked to complete; so much of it seemed to require skills and capacities that I lacked. When friends like Micky turned their work in, on time, done well, it just confirmed my own sense that I was not cut out for academic work. In biology, when assigned a big group project, I had no idea how to approach such work, leaving it to greater minds to tell me what to do.

No matter how badly I did in school, however, I was unable to see myself as incompetent for the simple fact that I had an area—tennis—that earned me others’ respect and established that I could do something well. The only problem was that during my junior year of high school, I grew restless and eventually stopped playing competitive tennis. This would be the logical place in this abbreviated memoir to describe my academic awakening, to tell about the day when the clouds parted and I realized that everything I did to master tennis—repetitive drills to improve my skills, weightlifting and running to develop my strength and stamina, *even reading books* about the great tennis players to learn their secrets—could help me master school. Instead of turning my attention to school, however, I did what many kids do at that age: got my first girlfriend, got my driver’s license, got a job (at the Bubble Machine car wash, where my flawed mathematical skills earned me the weekly privilege of cleaning out the trough that collected the dirt from all the cars), hung out with my friends—and did not do my schoolwork. Occasionally I played at being a student, the most memorable time being when I signed up to take the PSAT. I did this because my buddies, who were all college-bound, were taking it. I did not prepare for it; in fact, the night before the test turned out to be an unfortunate and untimely rite of passage: getting drunk for the first time at a party. I was so hungover the morning of the PSAT that I had to run out of the cafeteria before even completing the personal information page.

Ironically, this crucial failure led to an important but brief awakening. After running out of the cafeteria and getting sick behind the woodshop building, I fell asleep under the tree outside my English teacher’s room. On that Saturday, while the good children of my high school tackled the PSAT and dreamt of their future, I slept until the sun woke me hours later. The test

was over and everyone was long gone. Instead of going home, I did something that still amazes me: I went to my locker and retrieved *Bless the Beasts and the Children*, which I was supposed to be reading in English, then sat down under the tree outside Mr. Baxter's class and read—and read, and read, as I never had before. Hours later, having lost myself in that book, I lifted my head up to realize it was getting on toward dinner and my parents had no idea where I was. After returning the book to my locker, I began the long walk home.

You already know from the opening that my conversion did not last long. By the end of my senior year, I was ranked 301st out of 365 students and had an academic GPA of 1.7. After graduating, I took a job working in a printing shop downtown, where I spent my days working alongside women who lived to smoke cigarettes, drink Coke, and talk about soap operas before going back to the table where we stood folding and stuffing envelopes with brochures for weekend vacations none of us would ever be able to afford. As soon as I got off work the first week, I headed south to visit my friend Micky at the University of the Pacific, where he was just beginning his freshman year. Driving back home after the weekend, thinking about what his life—and mine—was like, I decided it was time to see what school had to offer, and so that Monday I headed straight to American River Community College when I clocked out, and registered for classes.

Over the course of the next year I began to realize how complex school is, how demanding academic study is. I had no idea how to take notes during lectures or what to do while I read. So I began to watch others. Everyone else had highlighters, so I got one. The problem was that I thought every sentence was important, so I highlighted them all. I would have been better off reading with a can of spray paint; honestly, I highlighted whole pages. Only later did I realize how useless this was. I began to

ask others if I could see their notes, to learn from them what was essential to write down and how to organize it on the page. My mind was something like a balloon that was being stretched for the first time; thus it became more elastic, more flexible, more capacious. I began to understand how academic classes worked, to recognize the different demands they made on writers, readers, thinkers, and speakers. Still, it was a slow process, as evidenced by my professor's response to my paper on *Hamlet*. He simply crossed out the front page and wrote in three-inch-high letters: "So what?!" Eventually I gathered up the courage to visit him during his office hours, something I hadn't realized you could do. This conference led to the beginning of a relationship that would help sustain me through that first year, a relationship that taught me to ask for what I needed to succeed and to take the necessary risks to achieve that success. Throughout this process, I had to learn not only about sociology but sociology professors; not just economics but listening, note-taking, and test-taking. Gradually my investment began to show returns: I earned Cs on papers and tests and could learn from those mistakes so I could do better next time. By the time I transferred to a four-year college, where I found professors like Dr. Triplet—he could draw and write with both hands simultaneously on the overhead, while explaining the concepts out loud—I was ready, but only because people began to teach me the culture, language, and customs of this strange new country called School.

I still lacked a full understanding of the purpose of education. 20
Having come from a family in which no one had ever graduated from college, I thought you went to college to make money, which is why I majored in economics—until a summer job with kids revealed that my gifts lay elsewhere. By the time I graduated from college, I was already teaching kids with developmental disabilities. Soon thereafter I joined the Peace Corps and went

to teach similar kids in Tunisia, an experience that required me to learn to speak Arabic, but by that point I knew how I learned. More important, I knew that I *could* learn. Two years later, having created a small school in the back of a mosque for kids with learning difficulties, I came home and completed the courses needed to become an English teacher, which is all I dreamt of doing after reading on my verandah in Tunisia those last two years.

The story ends where it began: students much like myself arriving at Castro Valley High School, where I began my teaching career, not knowing how to “do school,” most of them from families like mine, some from other countries, and all of them wanting the same thing—success in school and in life. On occasion, during heated discussions in class, a student might ask me about my own faith, about what I believe in; my answer to this question has always been the same: I believe in education.