The Work and the Business

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A SCHOOL is a community of inquiry, a gathering of people with intersecting purposes and affinities and passions, an outpost of the republic of letters, an eternal set of occasions to just do the work. A school is also a pile of money and power with intellectual and administrative layers wrapped thinly around it. I weave in and out of both understandings, trying to reckon just enough with the money-and-power part to put me in position to concentrate on the do-the-work part. When I'm in the classroom or the library, School feels like just the work itself, pure teaching-and-learning. When I'm in a department meeting, or doing my part in hiring or promotion, or looking out for the interests of my various tribes in the scramble for the university's resources, School feels like a business. That it's both at once makes it like writing and music and boxing and all kinds of other things I care about: the work itself comes first, but always within the frame of the business. You have to make a way through the barbed thicket of other people's calculations and maneuvers to extract a living and fashion a career from that work, and to cultivate institutional homes in which the work can be done.

As is true of writing and music and boxing, a lot has to go right for an academic career to survive its infancy and mature in any kind of satisfying shape. Sometimes the work and the business are opposed to each other, and sometimes you can get them to line up and make beautiful music together. Many scholars care deeply about the work but avoid paying much attention to the business, and this can make them vulnerable to getting screwed, even pushed out of the profession entirely. A few do the work so well—or at least so prolifically or prominently—that schools vie for them, and if they're lucky the business side of their careers mostly takes care of itself. Some are no more than good enough at the work but are virtuosos of the business, and that can be sufficient to make a way. For this latter group, the business

is the work, and the teaching-and-learning and research-and-writing parts become not much more than due diligence. Graduate school is, among many other things, a time to begin figuring out your relationship to School, so it's in part about learning to see the split as well as the affinities between the work and the business. In grad school you can begin to discern where you want to strike the balance and where you have to strike it, what you want to do and what you're willing to put up with.

In my case, the process of learning about this balance started a lot earlier than grad school. Spending my entire working life with at least one foot in one or another of School's branch offices has afforded me all sorts of opportunities to become intimate with the dual nature of School, but I've been aware of that duality as long as I can remember. I did go into the family business, after all. If I learned such lessons first from my parents, it's not because they taught them to me on purpose, or talked a lot of shop at home. And yet my mother, who has always been all about doing the work in the classroom and who's still teaching continuing-education courses at the age of ninety-one, read an essay I wrote about teaching and informed me that I teach just like her. And my father, who moved early in his career from classroom teaching to creating and running the institutions in which the work could happen, seems to have impressed upon me—Sicilian-style, without ever actually discussing it—the necessity of taking business-like steps to set myself up in my little shack by the Walden Pond of a university's endowment. As I've had occasion to remark more than once in a life of teaching-and-learning, you never know who's going to learn what from whom.

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Unlike almost everyone else who becomes a teacher, my mother, Pilar Vives Rotella, can't point to teachers in her past who served as inspirations, models, or guides for her path in life. The daughter of professional musicians, she grew up in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, which delayed her entry into school. The teachers she encountered in the equivalent of middle and high school ranged from forgettable to awful. "You have to remember that in my

time you were supposed to memorize and spew it out again," she told me. "The instruction was that the teacher lectured, you took notes, you read the book, you were called on in class, no volunteers, and you repeated what you had heard or read." There were a couple of teachers who seemed to know something and weren't unkind, "but I don't remember any who inspired me to love the subject or want to teach." One of her math teachers was particularly incompetent, a terrible man who came to class half-drunk and rambled semicoherently. She feared him and hated math, her academic Achilles' heel.

When she went on to the University of Barcelona, politically savvy classmates made her aware that some of their professors were connected to Franco's ruling Falangist party. These were known as *enchufados*, which means plugged-in, and "they were the worst teachers," she remembered. "There was a Fascist priest who taught ancient Greek. I have a vague picture of an older man, all in black, with an unpleasant face, droning on. He was a disaster. We realized that he wasn't teaching us anything, we weren't learning anything from him. He would just say, 'The Greeks—very important people,' vague, silly things like that." But the priest was tight with the Falangistas, so there was nothing anyone could do about him.

Her art history professor took his students on field trips to Romanesque churches and sometimes said interesting things, both of which she appreciated, but he was mean in class, making a spectacle of demolishing students whose recitations displeased him. One day, she remembers, he grew angry because the hundred or so students in the amphitheater-style room were not paying attention to his lecture, talking among themselves. He pointed up at them at random and said, "You. What are you saying?" He happened to be pointing at my mother, who, being a dutiful student, had been listening to the lecture and not goofing off. When she didn't respond, the professor followed up with a question about medieval architecture, and for the only time in her entire career as a student she didn't know the answer when called on—but only, she wishes to make clear even seven decades later, because the professor had told them that they would not have to recite on this topic, a promise that in his anger he forgot. She was struck dumb with terror because she was sure that if she failed to

answer the question he would flunk her on the spot to make an example of her. A pregnant pause ensued. "The guy who sat behind me was obviously from a rich family, and he was very selective in the girls he talked to," she told me. "I was not rich or flirty enough to merit his attention. But he whispered the answer to me, and I repeated it, and the professor was satisfied. I don't know why he helped me. I don't think I even thanked him. My friend Paquita and I were always together, we didn't know how to speak to boys, we were terrified of them, we didn't know anything. It was ridiculous how naive and innocent we were."

So, I asked her, without models other than negative ones, how did she ever become a teacher? How did she come to the work that would define her identity as a nearly lifelong citizen of School? There's a simple answer: as an extension of being a student. She started tutoring her peers at the age of fourteen or so—"first it was for friendship, then for money," she said. "Especially in Latin, and then in composition, I had people come to me. While I guided them through declensions and conjugation, I taught them the little tricks I had learned about translating, like looking for the verb first." It gave her pleasure to know how to do things and to show her friends how to do them and to feel their gratitude and admiration, and as acquaintances and then strangers heard of her skill and began coming to her she started charging for her services. The income was welcome in her household, musicians having suffered through an especially lean decade during the civil war and the world war for which it served as an opening act. "That was where my first desire to teach began," she said. "Because I loved learning, and I realized I could share my learning with others and make some money, too." The work of teaching flowed together neatly with the business, and she was launched toward her calling.

She had been the kind of star student who wrote poetry that she proudly read aloud in front of the class, who wrote plays for her classmates to perform, who had a head of Shirley Temple curls and wanted to be an actress. At the Instituto Verdaguer, the school where she did the equivalent of middle and high school, she'd had a rival for the status of most brilliant and accomplished student—a girl named Mercedes, "a frenemy, they would call it now"—who was better at

math but not as creative. At the university the competition between them had abated as they became just two more midsize fish in a suddenly enlarged and crowded pond. As my mother grew up and realized that her youthful enthusiasms and distinctions and even her sweet triumphs over Mercedes did not pay the bills, she diverted the urge to perform and the ambition to excel into teaching.

After graduating from the university, she took a job teaching Latin and Greek and literary history at a private academy for boys in Barcelona, but she didn't like the rote curriculum, the fecklessness of the students, or the grim disciplinarian couple who ran the school. My mother planned to go on to a doctorate at the university and become a better high-school teacher than those she had encountered so far, but a friend tipped her off about a job offer from a faraway place. The Sisters of Mercy had reached out through contacts in Spain to find a native speaker, a good Catholic girl with a sound classical education, to teach Spanish at a small college on the South Side of Chicago. The Sisters required permission from the prospective teacher's parents, and the friend's parents had said no. So my mother asked for and received her parents' blessing to go to America and went off on what she thought would be an adventure of a year or two. Her trip to America was her first time on an airplane. On the approach to Idlewild she had her first look at the skyscrapers of downtown Manhattan—"bathed in the golden light of a perfect summer day," as she put it in a memoir she wrote for her children and grandchildren a few years ago—and that sight endures in her mind's eye as one of the great moments of her life.

She was twenty-five, and she looked sixteen. Barely over five feet tall under her head of curly hair, she was usually the smallest person in the room. Her English was still weak, well behind her Latin and ancient Greek, and she'd had no preparation in how to teach. "Most of what I did as a teacher, especially at the beginning, was simply by instinct," she told me. "I had no models, nobody to pattern myself after." In Spain, she'd had no control of her courses. "I'd had a desire to do well, a feeling that I had to do something for the students, something special, to be prepared, but there was no motive and not much opportunity to do that." At St. Xavier, she was now free to teach her

subject in any way that made sense to her. She told me, "I would sit down and think, number one, how can I communicate with these people? My English was limited, and I was teaching Spanish grammar, syntax, vocabulary. So how can I communicate the rules? I had all the terms from Latin, direct and indirect object and all that. So I would have some rule in my mind, and I'd have to think of an exercise we could do, then the next rule." Her students were shocked and excited that she taught Spanish *in* Spanish, which was rare back then.

She never winged it. "I always was prepared," she told me. "I never improvised in class. Maybe that's a shortcoming, but I always had a plan. I was ready to depart from it if there were good questions or ideas that gave valid reasons to go off the plan, but I can't ever remember feeling that I wasn't prepared enough. I never felt like *What am I going to do?* I would always know first I will do this, then I will do that, we'll go over this section, I'll ask these questions." Beyond the nuts and bolts of lesson plans and classroom technique, "I always wanted to look nice and to be nice," a resolve to be the opposite of her teachers back in Spain. "I know that sounds superficial, but I always wanted to be nice-presentable, and nice-but-firm. I wanted them to see a young woman—because I *was* young then—who comes looking presentable and behaving pleasantly, explaining what we will do. I wanted it clear that I demand certain things, and if you do them we'll have a good experience together. I've been told many times that the message was very clear."

The character she played in the classroom was like her but more vivid and with a readier sense of humor, flashes of sharp playfulness to set off her inbuilt Catalan propriety and the air of orderly command that her preparation conveyed. "I always wanted to act, and I poured that into teaching, which is a form of theater," she said. "It's a bit of a performance. You're not faking it, but you make it more lively, pleasant, funny. I was wittier in class than I naturally am, to enliven the proceedings. I get a lot of satisfaction from teaching," and as far as she could tell, her students were satisfied as well, even though she was known as a hard grader. "You will always have some dissatisfied customers, but I've had very few."

She enrolled in the MA program in English and then the doctoral program in comparative literature at the University of Chicago while teaching full time at St. Xavier. Her English was still shaky, and reading regional dialect humorists with the celebrated Mark Twain scholar Walter Blair was torture, as was Faulkner. One sentence into *Light in August*, she was already lost: "I have come from Alabama: a fur piece." But though she remained hesitant to speak up in class, her English improved rapidly and her classical education stood her in good stead. She fondly remembers a discussion of Tom Jones's amorous exploits in which Donald Bond asked his students what "fruition" meant in that context. "Prolonged silence," she wrote in her memoir. "So prolonged that I feel compelled to speak. (I do know the meaning of 'fruition.') I tentatively raise my hand. Universal surprise. She is alive, she speaks! 'It means enjoyment. He finally enjoys her favors.' 'And how do you know?' asks the professor. 'Becomes it comes from the Latin *fruor*, to enjoy, one of the six deponent verbs.' 'Do you happen to know them all?' 'Yes, I do.' In an unseemly display of stored-up information, I rattle them off: *'fruor, fungor, utor, nitor, potior, vescor*.' Professor Bond is impressed and asks me to see him in his office, where we have a long conversation about my background, my aspirations, my plans for the future."

She met my father in 1959, they married in 1961, and they had three sons between 1962 and 1966. As her command of English improved, she expanded into teaching literature. When my brothers and I were little, she was regularly teaching four classes per semester at St. Xavier, plus Weekend College courses; for ten years, she also taught a three-semester sequence of evening classes in Spanish at the University of Chicago; and also summer courses at St. Xavier, the University of Chicago, and Roosevelt University. That's as many as twenty courses a year; I teach four, sometimes fewer. Meanwhile, she was also working on her dissertation on the influence of the Spanish picaresque and Cervantes on the Scottish writer Tobias Smollett. She would hustle home from campus, stop to pick up milk and any other essential supplies her ravenous offspring had yet again depleted, make dinner, rush up to her desk to prepare class, come back down to

prepare dinner again and eat with my father when he got home late from work, do the dishes, then go back to preparing class, perhaps squeezing in some work on her dissertation. "I am astonished when I think about how we did it," she says now. "We were both writing our dissertations on top of everything else." She even had to learn to pitch a rubber ball underhand to her tiny, bat-wielding American sons—"That's too *high*, Mom! Pitch it *low* and out*side*!"—in the backyard of our South Side bungalow or the sunken grass field of the Midway. She learned, too, to cover home as the fielder-sons chased down the ball while the batter-son raged around the makeshift bases, building up a head of steam for a Pete Rose-style collision at the plate.

In her fifties, after thirty years at St. Xavier, she remade herself into a Latin Americanist to take a position at Sarah Lawrence when my father's career necessitated a move from Chicago to New York, then at sixty she moved again to Chapman University when he took a community-college presidency in Riverside, California. Now, back in New York, retired and widowed and having reached ninety-one despite the best efforts of the Falangistas and the Luftwaffe to prevent her from surviving childhood, she teaches continuing education courses to students in their sixties and seventies. These courses are as purely about teaching and learning as one could imagine: no papers, no grades, just the books and the ideas. "Nothing against book groups, but it's not a book group," she says. "We're not talking about how we like this character or don't like that one. We're there to learn something."

I seem to be following her lead in several aspects of teaching. Like her, I can appear a bit forbidding at the beginning of the semester but unbend as it goes along. "They have to take you seriously," she says. "This is a serious business, but that doesn't mean we can't have a good time." Like her, in class I usually come at a text by way of questions about how it's put together and what effect its form—structure, diction, narration, imagery, character system, setting, and so on—has on meaning. "The main thing is to see *how* the story is told," she says. "I'm trying to lead them to see how a work of art is constructed so that it has an effect on the reader." Like her, I start from the premise that

meaning is plural, that a near-infinite number of readings are possible, and that a reading that holds up is not "right" but rather a product of an active reader's ability to assemble a convincing interpretive argument. "Cortázar said, 'The reader is my accomplice,'" she says. "It's important to me to help students see their role in helping to create meaning. I've always felt that the reader has an enormous responsibility. You have to be involved, there shouldn't be such a thing as a passive reader." She has an extended riff on what she calls the four kinds of reading—lying down, sitting up, standing up, on your toes—that former students have repeated back to her a half-century after graduating, assuring her that it's not only how they still conceive of reading but how they come at life. She and I both think of ourselves as the lead student, and we both believe that modeling, not the dissemination of knowledge, is the teacher's most important function. "The questions you ask—that's so important because that's how you show how you do it," she says. "Start with *how* the text is put together and what reaction that provokes in you, and show them *how* you use that to reach an interpretation. The important thing is not any particular interpretation but the way you do it. It's the procedure, the manner, the road."

I remarked that her influence on me seems to have happened by osmosis, as a by-product of the attitude and habits she modeled as she rushed about and got things done. She said, "In this, like in many other things in our family, it was something that was done, not talked about. It's how we were." She thought for a moment and then said, "I wonder now if we were good parents. We never sat down with you and talked about what to do and what not to do, what was deeply on your mind, anything like that. I never had those kinds of talks with my parents, either, and nothing at all when I reached puberty. Nobody ever told me anything. I guess we did the same. It's a good thing you were boys." I told her that it seemed to me that modeling plays a leading role in both teaching and raising kids, and that I had nothing to complain of on that score, or any other. That you are approachable, kind, firm, and consistent but flexible, and so on is also important, but none of these qualities rivals in importance the example you set as you

make a way through the world—and, if you're a teacher of literature, through literary worlds.

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I have a black-and-white photo of my father at a public ceremony held in 1980 to celebrate a deal that would lead to the growth and improvement of the City Colleges of Chicago. My father is standing behind a table, his Italian suit jacket pinching and riding up across the shoulders because it's buttoned and he's raising one hand in the air. He's holding high in that hand a piece of paper, and I can read on his face and in the set of his body a mix of hard-won triumph, satisfaction, relief, and an awareness that the favors called in and arms twisted to accomplish whatever the upraised paper represents will have consequences to be reckoned with. Meanwhile, seated below him and to one side, Jim Thompson, then the governor of Illinois, holds a dollar bill in front of his face with both hands and looks upon it with such naked delight that one fears for the well-being of anyone who might try to get between the man and the dollar. The pols and other interested parties assembled around them have on their faces a more veiled look that says, *Okay, Professor, you win this round and for now you get your way, and we understand that a world-class city is supposed to have colleges and such, and we even understand that working people should have some kind of reasonable shot at moving up by going to college, which also happens to upgrade the city's workforce, which is good for business, but money is power, and money is money, goddammit, and if you're getting it then somebody else isn't getting it, so watch your ass, and if we can figure out a way to get that dollar away from the motherfucking governor, we're gonna do that.*

This picture is one in a series of similar shots, a genre. My father rose up from professor of political science to department chair to dean to college president to chancellor of the whole system over the course of a three-decade run at the City Colleges that overlapped with most of the long reign of Richard J. Daley and the turbulent interregnum that followed the old man's death in 1976. Mike Bilandic, Jane Byrne, and Harold Washington succeeded to the throne, and then, briefly,

Otho and Vitellius, before Daley the Second effected a restoration of the dynastic line and commenced his own long reign in 1989, the year my parents left Chicago for New York City and then Riverside, California. In pictures of ceremonies marking a ribbon cutting or groundbreaking, the start of a new program or the opening of a new campus, my father will be in the foreground, smiling victoriously or looking serious and making a decisive vibrato gesture with his right hand and forearm as he explains yet again why the good people of Chicago need public higher education and what Ortega y Gasset really meant by "the revolt of the masses" and "the mission of the university." In the background there's always the pack of connected political players who can be relied on to come sniffing around any concentration of money and power, rolling on it to get its scent on themselves. In earlier versions of the picture, those players are usually white-ethnic guys, the standard Machine-era mix of Irish and Slavic and Italian peasant faces floating above boxy suits. In later photos, especially those taken after Harold Washington became mayor, the number of black and Hispanic faces increases from a scattering of token representatives to the majority. But the players, early and late, all look like cousins, united by an affinity that runs deeper than race or ethnicity. The picture with the dollar-entranced Jim Thompson is distinguished by the fact that actual money is in view. What moves beneath the surface of other pictures is right out in the open in this one.

This is a tableau of my father in a characteristic professional state: surrounded by contingent allies on whom he can count only to the extent that his or his sponsors' leverage compels them to behave, but forging ahead because he has spotted a breachable wrinkle in the barriers that the world puts up to prevent money and power from being expended on the education of people who aren't already rich and powerful. He was at his best in building public institutions like City-Wide College and the Public Service Institute in Chicago, or the School for the Arts and Passport to College in Riverside: vessels into which students and teachers and others could pour their lives, thereby giving fresh shape to those lives. For him, doing the work meant

putting other people in position to do the work, especially students of modest means who otherwise wouldn't get the chance to do it at all. That required taxpayers' money, lots of it, which he had to go get, not just from local sources controlled by mayors and aldermen but from legislators and bureaucrats in the state capital and in Washington who reposed their furnace-hot, winged reptilian bulk on much vaster treasure hoards. It became a significant part of his calling to squeeze serious money for public higher education out of those who did not necessarily share his commitment to it.

I once shook hands with Mike Bilandic when he was stark naked. The mayor was standing on a scale in a locker room at a police gym where my father used to run laps in bad weather. The scale was one of those big old industrial-looking iron affairs suitable for weighing hogs and lambs before they get a bolt through the forehead and end up hanging, flensed more than naked, from a hook. This was in the winter of 1978–1979, so I was fourteen. I remember that when the mayor stuck out his hand at me from the raised platform of the scale, exclaiming something along the lines of "So, Doctor, this is one of your boys," the mayor's business was close enough to my face to make me uncomfortable. Bilandic, though, appeared completely at his ease in the old-school manner of a man who goes for a schvitz with cronies and flunkies. A few weeks after this encounter, I made twenty bucks—a giant windfall for me at the time, which I hope I spent on records or used books and not weed—in a bet with my father on the outcome of the Democratic mayoral primary, which is the real election in Chicago. Bilandic was ahead in the polls right up until primary day, and the smart money was on him as Daley's anointed successor, but the Machine operated at less than peak efficiency without the Old Man to boss it, the city's botched response to a heavy snowfall alienated voters, and the hardboiled upstart Jane Byrne nosed him out at the wire.

When I try to trace my father's path from the classroom to that locker room and the rough-and-tumble of big-city politics, I find myself reaching the same fork every time. (This is when I think I'll give him a call to talk it over, and then remember, yet again, that

I can't.) One way is to try to identify some resonance between the ideas about politics he encountered as an academic political scientist and the practical political problems he had to solve outside it. I've tried going that route in another essay that places my father in the tradition of students of Leo Strauss who decided to find out how their teacher's abstract musing about tyranny and such actually works in the real world, and I didn't get all that far. My father liked and respected Strauss and his other teachers at the University of Chicago, but he was too practical to put much stock in vaporous notions of natural rights and the West. Another, perhaps more productive, way to trace his path is to recognize academic politics as a subset of politics in general, continuous with the higher-stakes kind practiced in City Hall, Springfield and Sacramento, and Washington. He became the founding chair of the department of social science at the brand-new Loop College while he was still a graduate student in his twenties, and what he had to do there—hire and manage faculty and staff, secure and stretch a budget, assemble and deliver a program of instruction, dicker with higher-ups, and so on, all in the service of educating students—eventually scaled up into what he had to do as the chancellor running the whole show. He went from dealing with deans and provost and college president to dealing with mayor and aldermen and trustees and legislators and bureaucrats and business leaders and activists (as well as deans, provosts, and college presidents, now coming at him from below), and the numbers got a lot bigger, but the nature of the problems he had to address didn't change all that much. And always there were the students and teachers, the eternal citizenry of School, the end users of whatever resources he could arrange to divert to them.

His management style was to move fast, creating new programs and institutions to meet needs as he recognized them, and to put the administrators and especially the faculty who worked for him in a position to do the same. Dan "Skip" Landt, who served as my father's all-purpose adjutant when he was chancellor in Chicago, told me, "He was impulsive, and he wasn't big on uniform practices, but he had imagination, energy, skills, and he had *confidence*." He told

me stories about my father going into a fraught situation--a meeting with disgruntled faculty or legislators, a sit-down with business big shots upset about problems cropping up in a partnership with the City Colleges—with no preparation and improvising a speech that broke the tension and warmed up the room, shifting the tone from confrontation to cooperative goodwill. I can see my father's face in such moments, the determined set of the mouth softened by the open enthusiasm of his smile, the steadiness of the gaze relieved by the light of contagious inspiration in his eyes. It's a round face with no obvious hard lines—he's not the lean, angular young man he once was—and yet it says *We're all in this together, and we can do something that's never been done before that will do a lot of good for a lot of people, and you'll get full credit for it, but let's not forget that if you fail me and this falls apart and turns into everybody for themselves, I'm going to take care of what matters to me and you're on your own, which means I'll find a way to come out all right and protect whoever I can protect, and you, well, maybe not*. Landt likened him to "one of those football players who get the ball and don't know exactly how they're going to get to the end zone, but they can intuit a path."

Where did all this wherewithal come from? My father never talked about it, of course. I should have asked him, and now it's too late. My best guess traces the roots of his efficacy to his experience of arriving in New York City at the age of seventeen on the ship *Vulcania* on St. Stephen's Day, the day after Christmas, in 1951, and finding his way to Hunter College without even bothering with high school. He had grown up in Asmara in Eritrea, the son of a Sicilian carpenter and seamstress who had moved to the colonies because there was work for them there. Faced with a return to Sicily after the war, it was my father, the youngest member of the family, who had argued most forcefully that they should leave behind the postwar chaos and privation of the Old World and make the move to America in the full flower of its prosperity and growth. Two potent impulses emerge from that crucial period. First, he felt for the rest of his life the upward momentum imparted by the nearly free public education available at Hunter (*Hunta*, as he said it, with a New York accent that surfaced for

the occasion), the rocket booster that launched him to the University of Chicago and into the professions beyond. That may well have been the source of his most essential conviction as an educator: affordable, accessible higher education provides the surest opportunity for hard-working people of modest means to get ahead in a world where the rules of the game are stacked against them to keep them in their place. Second, even more than my mother, who until she met him believed that she would be going back to Spain, my father had the committed immigrant's do-or-die attitude and habit of pushing forward no matter what. Like an outnumbered army that has burned the bridges over the river it has crossed in the face of the enemy and now has no choice but to attack and keep attacking, he radiated a willingness to go all-in on American success that people tended to respond to, or give in to.

When he saw that quality in others, he took it upon himself to nurture it and guide them toward success. He didn't teach much—a few years at the City Colleges before he jumped to administration, and a long-running course in basic political science for cops at the Illinois Institute of Technology—and he wasn't a natural at it, in part because he assumed that his students were as driven as he was. He didn't think it was weird to hand a student a volume of the works of Vico or a Latin textbook and say, "Here, learn this, and then come back and we'll talk." But he was a great mentor, it turned out. One curious thing that happened after he died is that a variety of people came forward to tell some version of the same story: *Sal Rotella changed my life because he saw the potential in me and pushed me to find my calling and flourish in it*. They included the publisher of Chicago's leading black online magazine, the publisher of New York's leading Italian American magazine, the first out gay Asian American member of Congress, a hotelier from Sicily, a dyslexic social scientist, and a harmonica-playing jug band enthusiast from Chicago with a talent for solving knotty administrative problems.

My brothers and I wondered who this Sal Rotella was that they were talking about, since we'd barely caught a glimpse of him in the father we knew. Though he was fiercely committed to his family and proud of us, my father never went in much for encouragement,

mentorship, or even conversation about the paths we took in life. About the closest he ever came to explicitly offering advice to me was something he said one evening in the late 1970s when he came home late from work and, still in suit and tie after a long day at the office, paused at the doorway of my room. I was at my desk, which his father had built, and I was playing a military board game with lots of tiny square pieces and absurdly complicated rules. I played those games a lot back then, often instead of doing what I was supposed to be doing. I think I was stalling to run out the clock on high school with the vague idea—the only kind I had back then—that I could call a do-over when I got to college. I was bent over a map of Borodino or Tobruk overlaid with a pattern of hexagons, playing both sides and plotting to outsmart myself, when, after a while, I became aware of him and looked back at him over my shoulder. Looking off into the distance rather than at me, he said to no one in particular, "Always playing games. He's always playing games."

He was so used to moving fast and with such great certainty that he often outstripped everybody else, as his wife and children were reminded every time we walked through an airport with him, or a museum. As a manager, he was the same way. He'd see something that needed doing, find somebody he thought could do it, and decide: *Okay, here's the task, and it's your baby; go*. Sometimes that produced heroic results—Skip Landt, who helped him create City-Wide College from spare parts, marveled that the two of them "made a college run by teachers that had no building, no library, no faculty offices, no counseling staff, and he got it accredited"—but sometimes it didn't work out. Wolde-Ab Isaac, my father's great friend and successor as chancellor of Riverside Community College, used to urge him to slow down and be less absolute in his ambitions. Wolde-Ab told me, "We disagreed about the School for the Arts," which my father envisioned as a single central gathering place where artists at every stage of life could teach and learn. "It was too big," Wolde-Ab said. "There were too many logistical problems, too many bureaucracies you had to deal with, because of the range of the ages he had in mind." Wolde-Ab also thought that my father moved too drastically to put the curriculum in

the hands of the faculty. "I thought he demolished the administration too much to favor the departments," he said. "He reduced the deans to nothing but schedule keepers." Wolde-Ab laughs when he talks about my father, especially in the latter stages of his career, when he took even less care than usual to protect the feelings of those who got in his way and didn't understand what he was doing. "He would tell them to go to hell, throw them out of his office, and I would always try to say, 'Sal, let's bring them along. Build a bridge.'"

The collapse of my father and Wolde-Ab's grand plan for Eritrea's higher education system was a reminder of how the work can run afoul of the business. In 2002 my father took a sabbatical from running the Riverside system to spend a couple of months in Asmara, the city of his childhood, on a Fulbright fellowship. He spent his days touring the country and talking to ministers, teachers, students, business leaders, anybody with an idea about what could be done to build up the colleges of the fledgling nation, which had recently split from Ethiopia, fighting the larger country to a bloody stalemate in an all-out war that the rest of the world largely ignored. There were not even a thousand college graduates among Eritrea's three million citizens, many of them abjectly poor. He and Wolde-Ab, who at the time was president of the University of Asmara, came up with a plan built around a central university to train faculty to staff a system of what amounted to community colleges distributed around the country, each focused on a specialty appropriate to its region. A college in the fertile highlands would house an agricultural program, another on the Red Sea coast would focus on marine biology and naval science, another would concentrate on health. The two of them had recruited a network of American and European universities to help bring the plan to fruition. It was bold but doable, a potentially transformative scheme to train the workforce and professional class who would rebuild Eritrea's economy, government, and civil society.

Wolde-Ab and my father, whom Wolde-Ab would come to refer to as "my brother," would fine-tune their plan over dinner every evening at Wolde-Ab's house in Asmara. On many nights, the president of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki, would join them after dinner, and the three

of them would sit up until 2 or 3 a.m., sipping scotch from tumblers and sketching a future in which Eritrea's colleges would help raise the whole country out of poverty and marginality. Isaias (they use first names in formal address there) envisioned Eritrea, known for the entrepreneurial zeal of its citizens, as the Singapore of Africa. He was suspicious of foreigners, but he seemed to like my father, and to trust him. "He thought of him as an Eritrean," said Wolde-Ab, in part because my father, who was the oldest of the three, knew the Asmara of the 1930s and 1940s with a street-by-street intimacy that the others did not. My father, who as a member of the Eritrean diaspora had cast his vote in favor of secession during the referendum of 1993, told childhood stories of hyenas roaming his neighborhood at night, and of taking his share of stinging blows from a long flexible switch across his bare legs in the course of learning his multiplication tables from the Christian Brothers who taught at the grade school he attended. Wolde-Ab said, "After Sal went home, the President would ask me, 'How's your brother in California?' Sal had a lot of emotion for Eritrea, and they charmed each other."

But Isaias, president-for-life in a one-party system and well on his way to a high ranking on the pound-for-pound list of the world's dictators, wasn't about to let School become a problem for him. The system that Wolde-Ab and my father envisioned would connect Eritrea to the world and build up an educated professional class and a competent civil service, and that all struck Isaias as threatening. "I don't know exactly why he changed his mind," Wolde-Ab said, "but there was that aspect of him thinking that the university, especially, would be too radical, pushing too much for accountability and democracy." So Isaias beheaded the plan, doing away with its central university component, which effectively killed the satellite campuses by denying them the trained faculty they needed to flourish and the civil servants needed to run the system. "The plan we had was designed to spread education throughout the country," Wolde-Ab said, "but he expanded mediocrity instead." The young men and women who should have filled the colleges ended up in the military instead.

Eventually, my father helped Wolde-Ab find his way to America and a deanship in Riverside, and then to succeed my father as

chancellor there. My father went to Eritrea again for a visit years later, and when he returned to California he advised his friend not to think about going back to the country they both loved. "He said that everything was breaking down in higher education, and the political situation was deteriorating," Wolde-Ab told me. "He said, 'The President kind of wants you back to help fix it, but going back would be reckless.'" In other words, *The schools are so bad that nobody can do the work in them, and Isaias won't let you fix that, and if you keep trying, sooner or later he's going to decide you're a problem, and then he'll make the problem go away*.

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I've learned enough from my parents' examples to realize that my optimal fit to School is not all that much like either of theirs. I'm more of a writer with a day job as a teacher than my mother, who has always been a teacher more than a researcher. "Family first, teaching second," she says, but I'd amend my version of that list to go something like family first, writing second, School a distant third. And, unlike my father, I'm strictly a denizen who pursues his own foraging path through the landscape of School, not a boss who plans and shapes and manages that landscape. Unlike my parents and colleagues, I don't use the first person plural when I talk about the particular school or department with which I am affiliated. Even when doing my part obliges me to run some small part of the university for a while, I keep squarely in mind that I just work at a particular branch office of School Inc. and can always move on to another one if I have to. I knit myself into a school enough to make it a more suitable habitat, but I forever have one foot in, one foot out.

I know in my bones that you can love School but a school can't love you, even when your students and colleagues and the people who run it express appreciation and even fondness for you. If you leave, are forced out, falter, die, they may miss you for a few minutes or even days, but the institution will go on without you, as it should. New cohorts of students will keep coming, and new teachers, new administrators, and pretty soon you won't even be a memory. My mother was a widely beloved and respected fixture at St. Xavier for thirty years,

but there are no more than a handful of people working there now who remember her. As for my father, those circling political operatives finally did a nasty little job on him, and his parting with Chicago was bitterly unjust. He built institutions that lasted there, as he went on to do in California, but he will have an enduring visible presence only in the latter because the main library at Riverside Community College, built on his watch, is named after him. (One indicator of the library's prominence in Riverside is that the San Bernardino terrorist shooters of 2015 originally planned to strike there.) My father also has a lecture hall named after him in Pavia because he left some money to the Collegio Carlo Borromeo, where he spent a year during graduate school, to help build it. And my parents, who were thrifty and prospered in the end, will leave modestly endowed scholarship programs in both their names at Riverside Community College, Hunter College, St. Xavier University, and the University of Chicago.

The only things with my name on them will be books and articles that bear my byline—though, as is the case for both of my parents, there's also a kind of continuing legacy in whatever former students remember of my classes. Those students' memories will remain almost entirely invisible to me, of course, but, still, you do the work and its consequences endure. And some of those students have become and will become teachers and writers, and maybe there's something in their work that resonates with what they got from me, just as my work owes a debt to my teachers and mentors and models.

But it's foolish to look to School for immortality. You do the work because doing the work feels worth doing. Ideally, it puts useful equipment for living in your students' toolkits, and in your own, and maybe, as a bonus, increases not only the efficacy but also the capacity for joy of everyone involved. That's plenty—though, as the twin example set by my parents reminds me, you also have to find a way to get right enough with the business to put yourself in a position to do the work at all.