

Fargo, ND, is not your first thought for a summer destination spot. It is, however, the place where my nephew recently graduated high school, thus I was able to enjoy the vast expanse of the prairie and time with family over the Memorial Day weekend. The time away was salutary, and I really do enjoy the family that I did not choose. I find my parents and siblings endlessly interesting and wonderful human beings.

As I told a friend upon returning, I love going back to Minnesota to hear the stories that my sister tells about her work with young people in her local St. Paul school. This year was no different. She works with first graders who are from disadvantaged backgrounds and who are high achievers. One day one of her students came up and gave her a hug and was smelling her arm. “Oh,” he said, “it smells just like Florida.” The class continued on to a project in another room where the temperature was quite hot. As they were making their way back to the main classroom after the project, the little boy hugged my sister again. This time she was sweating quite profusely, and the boy’s response was priceless. “Hmmm,” he noted, “now it smells like my hockey bag!”

While many of the stories that come out of my sister’s classroom are humorous, there are also those that break the heart. As I watched the numerous classmates of my nephew congregate at his home for his reception and then don their robes, mortar boards, and tassels for graduation, I was struck by the aura of possibility and promise that imbue these moments. What will happen next? What do you want to do? Where will you end up? The questions, of course, are not unique to graduation, but they seem heightened at those particular times when so many stand upon the cusp of a moment in life that leads to the next thing.

Now, I certainly don’t want to sentimentalize this reality, and the 15 minute slide presentation of my nephew’s class during the graduation ceremony stopped that emotion pretty quickly. There is this sense of life moving quickly, passing us by, and we are caught in the undertow. I know that in the minds of many of those graduates, they believe the clichés of the speakers who exhort them to seize the day and create a life that they will enjoy or be proud of. All of which, of course, is important. Yet, while this was taking place, I could not help but return again and again to thoughts about the miracle of birth that allows them—and so many of us—to even have the possibility of control over our destiny or path.

The little boy in my sister’s classroom possesses good gifts. The school he attends wants to offer him as many chances to succeed as possible. A foundation is being developed with and for him. And, yet, what are his chances? What are the pressures and experiences and moments that will control, in larger part, what becomes of his life? I am truly amazed at how we continue to survive and, at times, thrive. I am also acutely aware of the need to work to provide more opportunities to more people from an earlier age to emerge in a place where they possess real and substantive agency to make decisions for themselves.

When you think about it, such work is an investment not only in the future of those who benefit from such support. We all benefit. Years ago I read that the construction of prisons in the United States is based upon the reading scores of students in the second grade. Interesting. We know that there is a relationship here. What does the world look like when we take the money we spend on incarceration and use it to promote the possibility and promise of the youngest and

the most vulnerable among us? It is a daunting task, particularly in the complex world in which we live. It is, however, nothing short of holy action, for, again, the lives of so many depend upon it, and the life of our world is also intertwined with it.