

John McFarland Writes

Two score and ten years ago, you and I departed at the same time from the halls of Serra High. Many of us went in quest of yet more academically administered knowledge. Those of you who entered college could use the scaffolding Serra provided. My experience in building that structure secured a teaching assistantship at UC Santa Barbara.

Recent medical alerts have confined me to Sacramento, where I rely on a Charley Chaplin prop, a cane. But if it were my decision, I would be with you for this half-century regathering.

If you are the product, or parents, of a large family, you know that the first and last siblings yield the most poignant memories. It was with the class of 1961 that I began my apprenticeship in the occult art of the classroom. And in teaching the class of 1966 I could most enjoy exercising those professional skills.

This was not my initial goal. Teaching provided three months a year when I could write The Great American Novel. But my first summer break was flooded by a tsunami of tasks to prepare for the upcoming September. And then, partway through my Sophomore year, I discovered that curating American History and World Literature to 17 year olds, not to mention appreciating the ambition and freshness with which they wrote, was great fun. Who needed to be the next William Faulkner?

But there was more to learn. The principal ordered me to attend the 1963 graduation ceremonies – a bullet I had previously dodged. It was worth the effort. Astonished at how enormous the turnout was I asked Bro. Da Silva why as many came for the class of 140 as would show up for the thousand grads at – say – a Fairfax High. Oh, Da Silva said, that's easy. Many of Serra's students are the first or second in their families to finish high school and that mandates the appearance of their entire clan. His explanation stayed with me through another summer without a novel. Slowly it sank in that what we were doing at Serra was not only fun; it was important. Hugely important.

This brings me to tonight's reading assignment. It is a book by a UCLA Ed Psych researcher. And it contains a chapter in which its author, Mike Rose, class of 1962, remembers his four years at St. Catherine's Our Lady of Mercy, the name he gave to Serra High. Assignments by sociologists and psychologists have kept his book in print for thirty years. They recognize in Rose's life quandaries similar to those experienced by many of the freshman they teach. Rose came to Serra from South Central, transferring busses twice each day. And all of this transportational ado brought him to a combat zone where war was waged on values he had left back home. Here were rehearsals for drama yet to come. It was to be staged in the

groves of academe, where they spoke an alien vocabulary and ignited shocking ideas like fireworks. The whole of it backgrounded by a canned laughter called irony.

Recently I asked Mike how many copies of his book, Lives on the Boundary, had been printed. Approximately 250,000 copies, but then he added: The Serra High chapter by itself is often included in anthologies for English composition classes. Well over a million college freshman have read about an obscure Catholic school in a nondescript L.A. suburb. Probably the child or grandchild of someone in this room wrote unknowingly about St. Catherine's Our Lady of Mercy. Far more people have read about life at Serra than about the ambience of such heavyweights as Bronx High School of Science, Boston Latin School, the University High not far from tonight's festivities of Galileo in San Francisco. What the professors who assigned Lives on the Boundary saw was how students like their own struggled with and mastered what high school was supposed to demand. For you, Rose supplies much more to recognize – Mr. Balakian, for instance, the typing teacher who talked like a typewriter. But I would recommend a deeper immersion in nostalgia. Visit the old campus. Its 1950s architecture is frozen in time. Then, in the old library hang over sixty years of class portraits. You will see that the Irish, Italian and Polish pictures of yore have been replaced by those of Hispanics and African Americans. To its glory, Serra still educates the working class. It never gentrified.

Mark Rutter, my Demosthenes, will have to render what I wish I could iterate in person. The tuition your parents struggled to meet fell far short of paying the school's bills. Our Serra depended on the kindness of strangers. And today's Cavaliers do as well. Please reward the promising zeal of a new generation, as the Catholic archdiocese did yours.

And thank you for listening this last time.

John McFarland

June 6, 2016

