

WRONG LANES HAVE RIGHT TURNS

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A PARDONED MAN'S ESCAPE FROM
THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE AND
WHAT WE CAN DO TO DISMANTLE IT

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MICHAEL
PHILLIPS

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HAVE RIGHT
TURNS**



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A Pardoned Man's Escape from
the School-to-Prison Pipeline and
What We Can Do to Dismantle It

MICHAEL PHILLIPS



WATERBROOK

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For my father, Richard Wellington Phillips.

*You modeled manhood, love for family,
service to community, and moral courage for
social justice. Your love for humanity and
faith in God is my greatest inheritance.*

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Prologue

We all share a similar story, but the difference in the details makes us believe we're not the same.

In 2012 my eyes were opened to a collective story unfolding in my city. As the pastor of an amazing church in the great city of Baltimore, I was asked to convene a meeting with local faith leaders to better connect with some of our local schools. At that meeting, our host, the Maryland Campaign for Achievement Now (MarylandCAN), shared data that stunned me. Examining the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores that broke down the demographics of our city schools, I learned that out of approximately eighty-six thousand students, 46 percent were African American males. Of that group, only 9 percent were proficient in reading.

Nine percent.

That meant 91 *percent* of Black males were not reading at their proper grade level. At first, I couldn't believe it. It was inconceivable to me.

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The report did not focus solely on deficiencies; it also focused on hope and community. And the data informed us of schools that were defying the odds. The report called these Opportunity Schools because they afforded students from both low-income households and higher-income households the opportunity to succeed. “Seven public elementary school programs and one public middle school program . . . repeatedly [led] children from low-income families to outperform overall state proficiency rates.”

I left the meeting shocked and a little jaded. I was frustrated about how the opportunity gap for kids in certain locations is so massive, and I wondered how we were trying—if at all—to close that gap. But what was clear was that we can’t close the gap in achievement without closing the gap in opportunity. If kids don’t have opportunity, what difference does achievement make?

That was the day I altered course and began advocating for change in education. I wish it was the same day that the change countless children and families were hoping for became a reality, but systemic modification takes time. It also takes policy transformation. While serving on the Maryland State Board of Education, I made another course correction toward reimagining education. At a teacher appreciation dinner, I was seated at the same table as the chief executive officer of Baltimore City Public Schools. So during dinner I leaned over to ask her a question burning in my mind.

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“What would it look like,” I asked, “if somebody intentionally took on some of your lowest-performing schools with the intention of turning them around? What if they created a network among those schools? What would that look like in partnership with the district—would you even be interested in something like that?”

Without a blink, she simply asked, “When do you want to get started?”

“I’ll get started right away,” I replied.

And with that invitation, a journey began. I began to visit local schools. I wanted to know how they worked—and how we could replicate successes across our city without replicating what *wasn’t* working. I then began to tour schools that were doing well at giving kids from low-income households an opportunity to succeed. Not just tours in Baltimore, by the way, but tours all over the United States. I went just about everywhere to see what was working and how other districts were addressing the challenges we faced. As I saw the odds against the project, it made me only more determined. *It’s gonna have to work*, I decided. *We have to figure it out.*

You see, I knew that this was not just an education issue. For many kids, it was a survival issue. Schools are never just schools. Statistics never tell the full story, but seeing the raw data on those educational reports was not just a rallying cry for me to act. It was a reminder of how very different my life nearly was.

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I realized I was staring into my own story—the story of a young soul turned around, but just barely, because of a second chance at education. I had almost been just another statistic. My feverish work in trying to solve a problem that was putting young men and women at chaotic intersections was a result of once being at one myself.

I knew I was part of another story, another group of young men that seemed predestined to have a location set for them: on the street corners or behind prison bars. I had accepted that world and the familiar narrative it often brings.

But one day in 1993, as I was speeding south toward Richmond and closing in on that chaotic intersection between I-95 and I-64, I received a phone call from my mother that changed my story. She asked me to come back home, and even though I knew this was putting me right in harm's way, I knew it was the right thing to do.

At that intersection I chose to make the right turn.

This book is the story of how one life turned around. I want to share it with you because I believe we're all at our own intersections of what is possible and what is purposeful. But if we don't make the right turns, we might not reach our destinations. My story, in more than one way, is about school—the ways it doesn't work for everyone and the ways I dream it can. As you read the story of one young man's experience, I pray you'll take from it the principles and passion that *any* of us can use to change the world of a child or a classroom for the better, right where we are.

Prologue

Just look at the headlines. Or the statistics. Or the eyes of kids in classrooms all over America. Maybe we're all headed in the wrong direction right now. But I have good news.

You see, I'm living proof that even wrong lanes have right turns.

CHAPTER ONE



My Soul Looks Back and Wonders

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

—LANGSTON HUGHES

My childhood dreams resembled red construction paper pasted on white cardboard. I can still picture a little report I made for career day in first grade. We had to show our class what profession we wanted to have—who we thought we could eventually become when we grew up. For me there was no question. I wanted to be a lawyer.

My mother and grandmother had inspired this ambition by regularly watching *Perry Mason* reruns on CBS. The black-and-white television show starred Raymond Burr as a bril-

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liant defense lawyer working in Los Angeles. Each episode involved a different crime and trial and was memorably named after a case, such as “The Case of the Moth-Eaten Mink” and “The Case of the Polka Dot Pony.” The mystery of every plot and the creative ways Perry Mason battled for justice ignited my young mind. I would watch, riveted. I day-dreamed about walking into a courtroom under a sharp fedora. *I could be a smooth lawyer like Perry one day*, I felt.

I’ve always been a dreamer. I grew up in Baltimore’s Park Heights, son of a working middle-class family. Our duplex didn’t have much of a yard. My father was a full-time pastor *and* somehow a full-time truck driver; my mother worked for the Maryland state lottery until she decided to stay at home full-time with me and my three siblings.

I had every right to dream, and Park Heights made dreaming easy. I loved my neighborhood. Every corner was lively, each with its distinct sound. On one corner you could hear the trash talk of old men playing checkers outside the row-houses; then just a block down the street, you could hear hip-hop music coming from someone’s stoop with young men arguing over a game of dice. I was inspired by those simple echoes. But sometimes the beautiful noise was silenced by the crashing cries that came from other corners in my neighborhood—corners that weren’t so safe. Cries of crime and violence. Those dueling reverberations were normal where I grew up. Kids played outside either until the street-lamps came on . . . or until sirens sent everyone indoors.

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Though we inevitably had rough elements to deal with, such as the drug corners around us, the addicts that occupied them, or the violence that took place—sometimes right in front of us—I still didn't have a problem dreaming big. In those clattering moments, I would sit in my grandmother's kitchen, sneaking too-hot bites of some of her famous gumbo from the pot bubbling on the stove, and listen to her talk about her heroes.

My grandmother loved not only watching *Perry Mason* on television but also talking about a *real* lawyer from Baltimore. Thurgood Marshall studied law at Howard University and graduated first in his class. After Howard, Marshall opened a private practice firm in Baltimore. He was the first African American member of the U.S. Supreme Court and served on it for twenty-four years until 1991. He also just so happened to have grown up not so far away from Park Heights.

In 1954, while chief counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Thurgood Marshall served as chief attorney in a landmark case before the Supreme Court. It was one of the greatest and most meaningful court decisions in US history. Simply, *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. It became one of the cornerstones of the civil rights movement, beginning a new—but still deeply complicated—period in American life.

For almost six decades, the Supreme Court's ruling in

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Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) had made it legal to have racially segregated public facilities as long as the facilities were “equal” for both Blacks and Whites. This would become known as the “separate but equal” doctrine. *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned this ideology. During the arguments for the case, Marshall was asked what he meant by *equal*, and he quickly replied, “Equal means getting the same thing, at the same time, and in the same place.”

Those are the words of a hero. Thurgood Marshall gave me a model for success, something to believe in when I was still too young to realize the odds against me and too naïve to know the hard road ahead.

Marshall was solid proof that dreams could happen. But he also knew what it took to achieve them. As he once explained, “A man can make what he wants of himself if he truly believes that he must be ready for hard work and many heartbreaks.”

Little did I know that on the day I would be declaring to my first-grade class my dream of following in Thurgood Marshall’s footsteps, I would experience the latter part of that formula for success.

Heartbreak.



I often hated going to school. This was not because of the learning but because of the fighting. It was a good day if I got from home to school and back again without punches thrown.

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No one likes being forced to fight, but in our neighborhood, you learned quickly that if you didn't stand up for yourself, you would perpetually be picking yourself up off the ground.

One reason guys picked fights with me in the first place was because of the way Mom dressed us. She made me wear sweaters and collared shirts to school. Not cool, Mom. I looked like a little doctor walking into the classroom. This was *not* a good thing for a first grader who was already a quiet kid. I looked different, "smart." And that was the *last* thing any of us kids in Park Heights wanted. Just at a glance, the very idea that I might be intellectually curious prompted other kids to want to punch my enlightened face.

My elementary school was a little over a mile from our house. I walked there, along with my sister and other classmates. We didn't think anything about the blight we saw, the occasional needles we had to step over, or the homeless people we passed. The city sidewalks littered with broken bottles and occupied with interesting characters weren't the things I dreaded. The fighting didn't matter. It was the school itself.

The place felt more like a prison than a school, with small, crowded rooms and cage-like bars over the windows and doors. A predominantly White staff oversaw our crowded all-Black student body. Sometimes it seemed that our principal and teachers were more like a warden and guards whose real job was just to keep us there until the bell finally rang and our time was served.

My first-grade teacher was Miss Battle, and I will never

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forget her. She was a surly woman who seemed to have already made up her mind about me before we ever met. On the first day of class, she placed me in the back of the classroom. A kid named Dontae Eliot sat right next to me. Picture the character of Pigpen from Charlie Brown (you know, the kid always surrounded by a cloud of bugs and dust). Dontae Eliot *smelled*, and I had to experience his aroma every single day. He also thought he was some sort of black-belt martial artist, so he was constantly trying to do Bruce Lee-style kicks on me. We regularly got into it, and Miss Battle always had to break it up.

Our teacher couldn't distinguish between one student looking like a little lawyer and the other resembling a homeless kid from the street. It didn't matter that Dontae was loud and obnoxious while I was quiet. I wanted to be helpful and engage in the class while Dontae just wanted to antagonize me. Apparently Miss Battle saw us as one and the same: poor Black kids she stuck in the back of the classroom.

I will never forget when Miss Battle walked up to my desk and looked at the report I had made with red paper lining the white.

"I want to be a lawyer," I said to her.

"That will never happen," she told me with a cruel smirk.

The comment stunned me. It felt like time stood still, as my face turned hot with shame and surprise. I wondered who was watching and whether Dontae Eliot was taking this all in with a smug smile to taunt me later.

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Why can't I be a lawyer? I didn't get to ask my question. My voice was gone for a few seconds, and Miss Battle stalked away, leaving me sitting quiet and withdrawn at my desk.

My teacher had apparently decided my potential—or lack of potential, as it was. And with a word, the woman in charge of educating and inspiring me landed a blow on me that was more effective than any kick from my desk mate.

But I took exception with her assessment and argued that I could be whatever I wanted to be. Soon my disagreement became shouting, and by the time I was screaming in an attempt to stand up for myself, I found myself shut down and sent to the principal's office. I was never able to argue my case before the court. My judge and jury made their decision before I even said a word.

Despite standing up for myself in the moment, for a long time after she spoke those words, I was convinced that Miss Battle was correct in her assumption about Michael Phillips. The weight of her disbelief hung heavily on me.

You carry the words heard during childhood with you throughout life. Sometimes it takes many years to realize where those words—and the messages behind them—came from.

“What is the quality of your intent?” Thurgood Marshall once asked. “Certain people have a way of saying things that shake us at the core. Even when the words do not seem harsh or offensive, the impact is shattering. What we could be experiencing is the intent behind the words. When we intend to do

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good, we do. When we intend to do harm, it happens. What each of us must come to realize is that our intent always comes through.”

A compliment can carry you into a career you never might have imagined. Discouraging words can demoralize you and delay the dreams you once envisioned.

That day, Miss Battle’s words shook me. In seconds I went from having the eagerness for self-discovery to having feelings of self-denial. Maybe she was right. After all, wasn’t she the teacher?



I wondered for a long time how a teacher could say such a thing to a child. *Maybe*, I considered, *Miss Battle was speaking out of her own pain*. One day while thinking about this, I realized something.

Wait a second. She lived two blocks up the street from our home.

Miss Battle lived in the same place I came from. Just a few yards separated our worlds. Perhaps it was her world—no, *our* world—that caused her to think so little of me. Perhaps her expectations were shaped by old stereotypes. Perhaps she had just seen too much, had her hopes for one promising student or another dashed as year followed year. Was something wrong with her that day? Maybe she was just speaking out of fatigue or out of her institutional memory. The body has the uncanny ability to keep score. We carry our wins and losses

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through memories, accomplishments, failures, and hurts. Maybe Miss Battle couldn't believe in my dreams because she had lost faith in her *own* dreams years ago. Perhaps in some way we were both being affected by our community's diffidence and difficulties.

All of the above could have been the answer. I could not know her past or what she carried with her. But what is most likely, based on the stark reality of her vitriolic response, is this: Miss Battle had deep implicit and explicit biases. If our encounter was any evidence, she simply didn't believe in the children she taught. She didn't believe we were capable of great things.

Bias. As a kid, I didn't know what the terms *redlining* or *white flight* meant (even though they affected my neighborhood), nor had I ever heard of the Fair Housing Act of 1968. I couldn't have comprehended the systems that were in place and once backed by the US government that prevented Black men and women from buying homes in certain neighborhoods by denying them mortgages. It didn't matter that I lived in a community of individuals who woke up every day and worked just as hard as anybody else—men and women who paid their taxes and families who went to church. The people in my neighborhood were “as American as apple pie,” even though they didn't have an equal slice. The only difference between them and the White families who lived a couple of blocks away was the distance. The only difference between Miss Battle's address and mine was the invisible red line that

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had been drawn by the biased hands of individuals that I would never meet. The disconcerting policy for housing created a gap within a few blocks that was enough to leave my community locked out of the American dream, with less wealth, more crime, and underfunded schools. Miss Battle's actions in the classroom were a microcosm of society. As it turns out, we both carried societal weight to school, the heavy cultural burdens that create a significant amount of trauma generationally.

I was in an education system where kids were, so to speak, incarcerated by their zip codes, and I felt it. Park Heights was an interesting place where you had mostly White families residing on one side and Black families on the other, buffered by the Pimlico Race Course. The invisible line determined where you went to school and where you could afford to live. If you were to drive just a few blocks up from where I lived on Rogers Avenue, you would pass the racetrack and come to The Suburban Club, an exclusive golf course and country club.

I used to ride my bike to the other side and stand outside the country club watching all these guys playing golf and wondering what it was like. Never once did I see someone who resembled me on the course hitting balls or driving a cart. A few *blocks* away from my neighborhood, it felt like an entirely different universe. That world of caddies and five irons felt totally out of reach for me. No matter how much I visualized being there, the awkward stares from the people

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on the other side of the fence told me that I could only visit . . . and reinforced the idea that my dreams were, somehow, invalid.



When dreams die, the human spirit dies. The greatest injustice that can be imposed on the human spirit is the termination of its ability to dream, and too often, this takes place during our childhood.

The studies show that spending two years under an ineffective teacher demonstrably destroys a child's potential, while two years under an effective teacher can create a scholar and unlock genius. According to the Learning Policy Institute, there is "a positive link between teacher professional development, teaching practices, and student outcomes." Simply, this is stating an obvious but profound truth: *how we teach shapes how kids learn.*

On the surface, my experience with Miss Battle could seem small and insignificant. It was my moment of encountering the low expectations of an ineffective teacher, someone who had no passion to fan the spark in my eyes. Yet it underscores the severity of implicit and explicit bias, the stiffness of structural inequality and inequity, and the generative nature of disadvantage. Note that equality is not the same as equity. Equity is tailored to the continuity of every child's purpose. It means for any practice, program, decision, or action, the impact on all students is addressed. As the saying goes, equality

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will give everyone a pair of shoes, but equity will give everyone a pair of shoes that fit. I don't know everything about Miss Battle or her inner motivations. But based on her attitude and actions, it sure seems that because I lived where I lived and looked how I looked, my teacher judged me callously and predetermined my life's outcome as easily as if she were changing channels on a television.

The opportunity to dream was not provided for me that day; instead, I was sent to the office for arguing with the teacher. The institution that was charged to prepare me for my dreams almost suspended me for articulating them.



In our society, the most important factor that impacts the educational future of children is where they happen to live. Unfortunately this factor—not related to merit, hard work, academic interest, or other more nuanced aspects of character—largely determines the opportunities children receive or never get to experience. Your zip code has inordinate power to dictate your educational future.

And it largely wields this influence through teachers—whose various levels of resources, training, and skill in their work often (but of course not always!) bear some relationship to the affluence of the school district. For schools like the one I attended, the same red lines that were drawn around the communities were also drawn around the teachers. It's about quality. The awful thing about redlining is that all

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property is innately valuable. However, the narrative is controlled by individuals who do not see a certain property or person as valuable. Even though only a few blocks separated me and Miss Battle, an invisible line stood between us that made her house more valuable than mine. When we provide schools with teachers who aren't quality, we do the same thing that we do with home values. President Barack Obama said, "From the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success is not the color of their skin or the income of their parents, it's the person standing at the front of the classroom." But if that person doesn't love and believe in the children she is teaching, then how can we have successful outcomes?

I believe every person has genius inside him. That of course can be demonstrated in different ways, through avenues like the arts, athletics, academics, or working with one's hands. I believe that the overwhelming majority of teachers who fight as hard as they can every day for the kids that they educate believe this as well. However, I'm not certain whether the overwhelming majority of educators today can admit to working in a system that is still inherently unequal. And if we're not willing to see the impact this has, how will we be able to find workable solutions together? With any problem, the first step to solving it is *naming* it.

The etymology of the word *educate* indicates that it means to "bring up, to train" and to "bring out, lead forth . . . with . . . nurture and support." So it is fair for us to ask

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whether our system of education is presently doing that. Yet as of the twenty-first century, the United States has largely designed a school system whose effects often do not look much like education. Ours is a compulsory system that is generally one-size-fits-all, widely divergent in quality based on place and affluence, and built on the premise of instilling conformity rather than cultivating creativity. As bad as that is, inherent in the idea of standardization is the reality that Black and Brown children have often not been fairly included in the concept of *all*. From the overt segregation of Jim Crow-era schools to the “softer” segregation that we usually see today, it is clear that the system is not working as its own ideals would demand. Speaking as a Black man, I recognize that we were not the individuals that the system seemed to care much about or intended to invest in. In policies such as residential assignment and practices such as not allowing kids to be tested for giftedness, the apparent belief (like Miss Battle held) of a hierarchy of human value is deeply imprinted in education.

Intelligence isn’t learned; it’s discerned. We are all born with unique genius. Every single person has her own unique set of talents and gifts and potentials. There is not a child who does not hold something precious with which to live a useful and beautiful life. This idea is evident in the instruction God gave to Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful.” You cannot be fruitful unless you’re “seed-full.” The implication is that each of us holds huge potential. Each and every one of us has the

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seeds of genius—would we not need that to be fruitful? Of course. Potential doesn't need to be added to our lives; it needs to be cultivated. And with this incredible backdrop of the potential present in each and every child, here is the great tragedy: arguably, our system of education doesn't cultivate genius; instead, it anesthetizes it.

Our individual genius comes not from what we know but from how we disseminate and articulate the information we have accumulated and how we contribute by means of that to society. Our genius does not depend on education. But education can massively empower or suppress it.

For an example, let's look at two musicians of genius: Stevie Wonder and Miles Davis.

I had an old soul as a kid. My uncle had a basement full of albums from the '60s and '70s, mostly R&B, jazz, and funk, so I spent many hours listening to and loving those records. Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life* is still one of my favorites. When you study both Stevie Wonder and Miles Davis, you see two respective geniuses who excelled in their craft as songwriters and performers. While they worked in different genres and produced very different music, their genius was rooted in everything they brought to their pieces—but it was also *cultivated* by a rich culture of the arts. Their souls came out in their songs because their inherent gifts were nurtured, trained, and supported. Miles's father was a prosperous dentist, while his mother was an accomplished keyboard player and violinist. His father gave him a trumpet at

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age thirteen, and by the time he was eighteen, Miles convinced his parents to send him to the Juilliard School in New York. Stevie sang in his church choir as a child and learned to play the piano, harmonica, and drums at a young age.

My Bruce Lee-kicking adversary in Miss Battle's class could have been Miles while I could have been Stevie. What if we had that type of school system where all kids could be confident in their imaginations? What if what we were good at was valued or, at the least, cultivated at school? Inopportunistly, our system causes a significant number of individuals to lose confidence over time. As a result, before we become adults, many of us have not found our passions or purposes. We've been taught to believe that conventionality is the way to success. Dreaming impossible dreams isn't an option when you have to conform to mediocre standards. What if many of our educational problems today are not because we expect too much of our young people but because we expect too little? What if we began to see our schools not primarily as dispensaries of knowledge but as keys to unlock the inner genius of our students—by means of rigorous learning?

Education should drive us to our passions. When life brings detours, education should also provide some guardrails. The system that we have, in which teachers have to do their best to nurture, support, and bring out the latent potential of their students, doesn't support the teachers adequately either. In my opinion, teachers are champions. They do incredible things. They represent the second line of defense for

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the potential of our children. After parents they are this nation's greatest advocates for young people.

I was unfortunate enough to have the antithesis. Miss Battle looked at what I *didn't* appear to have, simply based on a superficial impression. She didn't bother trying to find out what I could offer. If a child knows what he's got, if his genius has been unearthed, he will pursue and go after it. But creating a system of deficiency that produces the sort of school I was in makes it too easy for a student to say, "Yeah, this isn't for me. I'm dropping out." Creating a system of deficiency causes students to live on the edges of those lines, making it easier for them to fall off. Kids who drop out have been asked to live life on the margins where there's no room, where they eventually ask, "Where's my life? What can I do? You never showed me."

"None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps," Thurgood Marshall said. "We got here because somebody—a parent, a teacher, an Ivy League crony or a few nuns—bent down and helped us pick up our boots."

The very person who was supposed to bend down and help me pick up my boots—or notice if I even had a pair of boots to pick up—crushed my hopes and dreams. I was six years old, and someone was telling me who I couldn't be. It felt like being punched in the face. With just a few cruel words, Miss Battle shut down my dreaming.

It would seem that the significant work of Thurgood Mar-

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shall to integrate schools and promote equity in education should have distanced me from the racial bias explicit in Miss Battle's expectations of my capacity and perhaps that of many other students. But time reflecting on this experience has allowed me to come to the discovery of this bitter truth: tragedy and silence often live on the same block.



My experience in first grade in the early 1980s was symptomatic of an educational reality that would later become a national emergency. I was in a declining school system where only about 5 percent of the student population was proficient in reading and math. For years this system would fail to educate students. The rapid decline in our school was perpetuated by a wider slippery slope of troubling social realities in our community. Safety and support deteriorated, and academic achievement got worse each year.

But the pinnacle of the problem in my school and community was a decline in care. Little by little, I began to see boarded-up houses and addicted people and unkempt lawns and closing businesses. The landscape of the community completely changed, and when people see something dwindling and deteriorating, they find it easier to trash it. As the community goes down, everything goes further downhill with it, especially the schools. Seeing that type of blight every day creates indifference. That same indifference was found in our education system.

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When something you love begins to fall apart, it builds a certain level of indifference in you that makes you feel powerless, like it's never going to change. You develop an attitude of *Why bother?* You can take the boards off the doors and mow the lawns, but indifference doesn't allow that type of optimism.

In 1983, indifference seemed to sweep all over our country as a report stated that the greatest threat to national security was our inability to cultivate our collective brilliance. We'd become used to seeing individuals suffer. In the same way my community was deteriorating, so was the country. This tidal wave of indifference prompted the famous report *A Nation at Risk*, released by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in April 1983. The commission was created by then US education secretary Terrel Bell, and the report took eighteen months to complete. The summary was ominous instead of optimistic, with warnings such as "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people." The report, addressed as an "open letter" to all Americans, declared the public school system was in "desperate" need of improvement.

In first grade, I sat in a classroom seat dealing firsthand with the mediocrity and bias that were threatening the future of the nation, but I wonder if the purpose and potential of a Black boy were a part of that risk assessment. My elementary school did not believe I had much to offer.

WRONG LANES HAVE RIGHT TURNS

I've never liked sitting still. I also like to learn visually. My way of connecting with material I'm learning is to paint pictures in my head of the concepts being taught and then to look for aspects of them in my surroundings—to connect where I am with what we're talking about. But my visual-spatial learning style was not conducive to the regimented confines of my teachers' classrooms. By third grade one of my teachers wanted me to be tested for special needs. My mother refused, saying that if they wanted to test me, I needed to be tested for being gifted and talented, not for special needs. Looking back now, I think I just had BOOMM syndrome. (I was *bored out of my mind*.) By fourth grade? Yet *another* teacher told me that I would end up in jail . . . just because I couldn't sit still in my seat.

Were we not being cared for because we were Black and because of where we lived? Was this equal education? Did the much-lauded *Brown v. Board of Education* case have an unintended impact on the most vulnerable communities?

Despite the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* over sixty-five years ago, the arguments about racial inequalities in the nation's educational system persist today. Residential assignment continues to drive discrepancies in resources between schools in affluent and disadvantaged communities. Segregation still haunts the halls of our schools not just by race but also by income. In 2019, the *New York Times* wrote that “more than half of the nation's schoolchildren are in racially concentrated districts,

where over 75 percent of students are either white or non-white.” A later article stated, “The nexus of racial and economic segregation has intensified educational gaps between rich and poor students, and between White students and students of color.” Looking through the lens of equity, we see that non-White schools receive \$23 billion less in funding even though they serve the same number of students.

While we applaud what we gained in the *Brown* case—equal access—we cannot either ignore the equity that we lost or deny that there is some equity we never had. The rich and culturally competent pedagogy of Black educators was decimated by the *Brown v. Board* decision, which split the ends of the unequal educational rope that many Black and Brown children held on to.

Brown had the tragic effect of triggering the expulsion, demotion, or involuntary retirement of a variety of highly qualified Black educators who served in Black-only schools. There was no effective plan to value or adequately preserve their excellence or expertise after integration. “After the decision, tens of thousands of black teachers and principals lost their jobs as white superintendents began to integrate schools but balked at putting black educators in positions of authority over white teachers or students.” This was an unintended and disastrous result of the *Brown* decision, especially in the South. Arguably, the continued shortage of Black teachers in American education today is *still* linked to the long-term effects of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.

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And is this a loss? Absolutely. Besides the anecdotal evidence—the power of having a teacher who looks like you and understands many of the realities that you experience—“a growing body of research has found that black students benefit from having a black teacher, both academically and socially.” A 2017 Johns Hopkins study found that “low-income black students who have at least one black teacher in elementary school are significantly more likely to graduate high school and consider attending college.” Unfortunately, my first Black instructor came when I was in middle school.

Black children who have Black teachers are “less likely to be suspended, expelled, or placed in detention,” and they are more likely to be accepted in gifted-education classes. Johns Hopkins research from 2016 also shows that Black instructors’ expectations for Black students are higher than those of White instructors. The silencing of Black educational voices created the disciplinary trenches that would come to feed the school-to-prison pipeline.

Behind every piece of data is an individual destiny.

Have you ever paused to think of the impact that statistics like these have—not only on minority communities but also on our nation and culture? Think of the lost years, the squandered potential, the lives ruined because our system is out of balance and unfairly skewed so that it does not represent its students. What have we all lost in this often-ignored pattern of tragedy?

Miss Battle sent me to the office for disciplinary reasons

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more often than she gave us homework. If I asked a question without raising my hand, I was sent to the office. If I said I didn't understand what she was talking about, I was sent to the office. If I decided to go to the bathroom because I couldn't hold it, I was sent to the office and suspended for it.

This is considered exclusionary discipline, which is any kind of school discipline “that removes or excludes a student from his or her usual educational setting,” and it is without question a discriminatory practice. It pushes children out of school and into the criminal justice system with no intention or way of restoring them to a learning environment, leaving most entangled in the conditions of punitive justice. A report by the American Psychological Association Services stated that “disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline can lead to a school-to-prison pipeline for some of the most vulnerable members of our society.”

Have you ever wondered how a bright, hardworking kid could go from school to the streets and from the streets to a prison cell? It is a question we should be asking ourselves every day. *How?* People will offer all sorts of answers. But they will ignore the big one behind them all: *us*. We are how, through inaction and inequity as a culture. All the children are not well.

The only way to untangle this systemic Gordian knot of inequity and exclusion is to cut through it. We have to deal with race, trauma, and memory in education if we are going to uncouple our system from injustice. “Empirical and quali-

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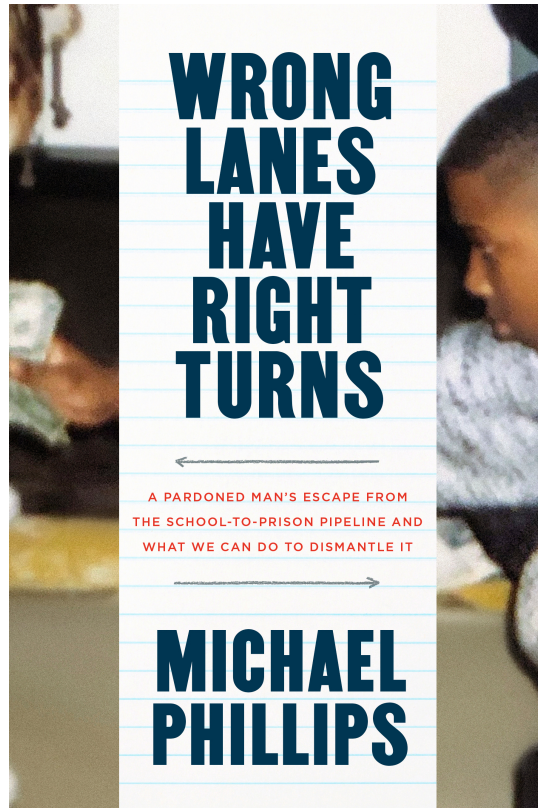
tative evidence . . . show that children thrive academically, behaviorally, and socially when they are part of inclusive and supportive school communities and have strong relationships with their teachers.” For that to happen, the gap in teacher diversity has to close. Today approximately 79 percent of public school teachers are White, 9.3 percent are Hispanic, 7 percent are Black, and 2 percent are Asian. In the meantime, “slightly more than half of public school students are nonwhite.”

When I was in school, I found myself fighting not to be pushed into the social chasm that bias creates. Most days I stood on the edge of that chasm in silence as I entered the classroom, my stomach tied in knots, hoping that one day I wouldn’t feel this way.

This was the beginning of my journey through school to the streets, and I wondered how things would turn out.

I wondered if I could ever escape the feeling of inadequacy.

I wondered, thinking of the words of the old gospel hymn, how my soul would make it over.



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