



The Woman in the Burka

UPFRONT

A LITTLE CHILD IS DRAWING A PICTURE IN HER first grade classroom. For reasons that bedevil countless children, particularly in impoverished neighborhoods, she is veiled and withdrawn.

Her teacher arrives and beams at the child's project, leans in close and tells her how beautiful her work is. The child bursts in a smile that lights the room.

Now let's change the scene. Shouting and gunfire pierce the stench of tear gas. A small woman, cloaked in a dark burka, appears from the crowd of protesters and marches alone toward a phalanx of iron clad soldiers. She raises a finger in the face of the commander who appears to recoil ever so

of defiance or the ill-fated decision to fire into a crowd sets off an emotional contagion. Then, what lay dormant within people suddenly roars to life, because as Brooks states so simply and clearly, "The most important changes happen invisibly inside peoples' heads." When that tripwire is pulled, the velocity of change is startling and impossible to calculate.

Most of my life has been spent in learning environments, guided by thoughtful people and policies, strategies culled from reliable research. But the experience of learning, the

high school or attend college in alarming numbers, suffer a tyranny of mind that destroys possibility. They have been allowed to lose their connection to the value—to the thrill—of learning, and in that sense, they have lost touch with themselves. Within themselves they hear repeated the lies and propaganda that they're not good enough, not smart enough. Intimidated, they are shorn of aspiration.

Needless to say, the children are blameless. It is the eager and impatient adults who need to assuage their appetite for marketable results, who have crafted education policy that validates itself via standardized test scores. And so we have incremental progress, maybe negligible, in the face of a dispiriting epidemic. We're counting heads and affixing labels when we should be looking for the woman in the burka.

When an infant is born without the strength to survive, we place it in an incubator. We give it every chance to find its natural strength. Well, learning is a birthright and America's students need intensive care today, because their only chance of survival lies not in test-taking skills but in the rediscovery of themselves.

The learning incubator should be staffed by more teachers and smaller classrooms; more advisors guiding students toward the right learning pathways; continual research in teaching methods, new curriculum and classroom technology; and the support of parents and mentors throughout the community. Every time that tyrannical voice whispers "you can't," someone should be there to refute it until that student stands on the solid ground of his or her own understanding.

Every 26 seconds, a student drops out of our public schools. One million a year discount the value of learning and lose touch with the most real and valuable part of themselves. Such numbers mark us as a nation on a precarious path, a nation losing touch with itself.

I'm sure the woman in the burka knew the danger of losing touch. But she also knew what was at stake. And I'm certain she knew the power she held. So can our students if we're willing to help them reach for it.

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slightly. No one who witnesses this event is ever the same.

If you're searching for a connection between a first grade classroom and the recent turmoil in Iran, you're probably not alone. But consider the insight of *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks on the fate of nations. Societal change, he notes, is most often tedious and incremental, mired in endless negotiation and posturing. Until a spontaneous act

spark of recognition and understanding, is radicalizing. For our first grader, that moment of connection and praise has inestimable value. No one can fathom the door that opened in that child's psyche.

But students across this country bear a disquieting resemblance to those living under repressive rule, people who have been lulled and frightened into acquiescence. Our students, failing to graduate

Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón is president of Miami Dade College, the largest institution of higher education in the nation, and chair of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.