



Eduardo Padrón

UPFRONT

SOME TIME AGO I READ A WONDERFUL ESSAY BY THE *Wall Street Journal* columnist and former White House speech-writer Peggy Noonan. The essay was written in 1998 and its primary theme was time, or more precisely, our inability to appreciate, to savor the time we have.

We own all the time-saving devices that ingenuity can fathom, but we have no time. The essay was a post-9/11 sensation, though, because Ms. Noonan gave voice to a foreboding that touched a nerve: All the earth's creature comforts could not quiet the feeling that something had gone awry.

"Everything's wonderful," she wrote, "but a world is ending and we sense it."

We have yet to tally what was lost or changed on 9/11. But might we be at a different sort of turning point today?

I am amazed at this. Hardwired as I am to political and economic realities, I remain amazed at the brinkmanship applied to educational opportunity.

More amazed than I, however, is the parent whose child lacks for the chance to learn. Or the parent who watches a child suffer through illness, one of the 47 million without health-care. Or the God-awful experience of grieving for a child lost in war.

Did you know that 153,000 students could attend college with Pell grants on one day's expenditures in Iraq? That 53,000 kids could enroll in Headstart with that money? How about 9,000 new

police officers for the same price as one day of fighting?

The list goes on, from Darfur to New Orleans and places in between where the voices are too muted and the cameras and microphones never show up.

The question that comes

to mind is, have we had enough? Have we backed ourselves so tightly into the corner that we have but one option—to find a way out? Just as Peggy Noonan no longer felt safe in the lap of historic prosperity, felt an end coming, could we now be in the midst of the wreckage sensing a new beginning?

We teach our students about possibility. We urge them to look within, to uncover the vast potential of their own lives, and then to be bold and courageous in addressing the world around them. We require them to think deeply and critically and perhaps, most importantly, to question their assumptions. Adopting a viewpoint, dare I say an ideology, should never be a free ride. The price for passion is openness.

Of course, beyond the campus such a creed is a pipedream, ridiculed as naive and even foolhardy.

We are proud partisans and welcome to the real world. Well, who says? A critique of Sen. Barack Obama's recent speech on

race suggested it was too deep, too complex—too rich for Americans who feed on sound bytes. Such a critique should make us all shudder.

Our politics and our problems have been paved over in black and white. Are you for the past or the future, conservative or liberal, victory or defeat. Are you with us or against us.

But living life day-to-day is not a black and white polemic. Our lives and the world we encounter are rich with nuance and subtlety. And therein rests the way out of the corner.

We can no more relate to the challenges of the day—race, war, the economy, and goodness knows, each other—as flat, one-dimensional events, any more than we can afford to relate to ourselves in that fashion.

Who would want that? The young people who surround me each day would not tolerate it. Why should we? **H**

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In Florida, for example, we are beset by the worst funding crisis in public education in the last 30 years. From K-12 to the community college and university systems, we are on the brink of surrendering a critical level of quality.

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