

Published: September 14, 2011

THE EDUCATION ISSUE

TWITTER | LINKEDIN | COMMENTS | SIGN IN TO E-MAIL | SHARE

# The Educational Experiences That Change a Life

The intellectual glamour couple of Oak Forest High, Frank Lloyd Wright's Baghdad, a draconian English boarding school ... [Comments \(6\)](#)

## Michael Bloomberg

- Zaha Hadid
- Lewis Lapham
- Caterina Fake
- Robert Storr
- Junot Diaz
- Michelle A. Rhee
- Pico Iyer
- David Leonhardt
- Gay Talese
- Wes Anderson
- Amy Klein
- Patterson Hood
- Lisa Randall
- George Saunders



Spencer Tucker

## Saturday Morning at the Museum

By MICHAEL BLOOMBERG, *Mayor, New York City*

When I was growing up, Saturday mornings meant one thing only to me: a trip to the Boston Museum of Science. I loved science — still do — and there was nowhere else I'd rather be. The museum's instructors would give these fascinating two-hour lectures and demonstrate the laws of physics using hands-on experiments. They would also quiz us on the museum's exhibits, and all the kids would try to show off by having every answer. Those visits to the museum stretched my mind in ways that my schoolwork didn't. They taught me to listen, question, test and analyze. Figuring out how things work — and how they can work better — is what led me to become an engineer, a technology entrepreneur, a philanthropist and a mayor. I guess I can count my lucky stars that there were no Saturday morning cartoons when I was kid.

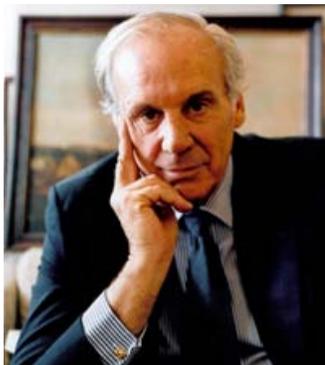


Philip Sinden

## A Liberal Nun in Baghdad

By ZAHA HADID, *architect*

The teachers who taught sciences in the school I went to when I was growing up in Baghdad were all from the university, and so the levels of the science courses were really incredible. The headmistress, who was a nun, was very interested in the education of women, so in a way she was a kind of pioneer in that part of the world. We were all these girls from different religions — Muslim, Christian, Jewish — we had no ideas what our religions were. As in so many places in the developing world at the time, the '60s, there was an unbroken belief in progress and a great sense of optimism. People respected history but also believed in liberating themselves from the pressure of history. They were creating a new Arab state — democratic, liberal, open to education, and that carried with it also an interest in building. One reason I became interested in architecture is that I remember being taken to an exhibition — I was only 6 or 7 years old, but I remember seeing models and things — of Frank Lloyd Wright's plan for Baghdad.



Matthew Septimus

## The Price of Fur in Byzantium

By LEWIS LAPHAM, *editor, Lapham's Quarterly*

I don't now remember the name of the don assigned to conduct my first tutorial at Cambridge University in the autumn of 1956, but I remember the setting — late-afternoon fog, coals burning in an ancient grate, the don in academic gown seated behind a silver tea service. Five months earlier I graduated from Yale University with the intention of becoming a licensed historian who could be counted upon to attach the name of a dead poet or an unhorsed king to the appropriate zeitgeist.

My tutor was delighted to learn of my ambition. Great news, he said, but maybe you could spare a few moments for the 12th century? I managed to sustain the illusion of scholarship for about the length of time it takes to see five deals of blackjack. When I exhausted my supply of talking points, the tutor poured us both a second cup of tea, and for the next quarter of an hour, he asked questions about aspects of the 12th century that I had possibly overlooked. In Byzantium, for instance, the prices bid and asked for Russian fur and Christian slaves?

My failure to hazard even so much as a plausible guess moved the don to a murmur of mild regret. Yes, well, he said, you Americans have this wonderful talent for broad statement and grand abstraction that hasn't been granted to their poorer cousins here in England. Before reaching the general theory, you see, we like to have in hand a passing acquaintance with at least some of the facts.

---



Richard Morgenstein

## Smaller, Better

By CATERINA FAKE, *co-founder, Flickr and Hunch*

When I was 9 and 10 years old, there was a program in the New Jersey public schools for “gifted children.” Several afternoons a week, we would be excused from our regular classrooms and go to a separate room with a separate teacher, Mrs. Lachel. One semester I wrote and directed a play, cast it, designed costumes, built sets and finally performed it for the whole school. Another time Mrs. Lachel and I joined a parapsychological society, then devised tests for telepathy and tested all the teachers and principals. (We found no evidence of psychic ability.)

The program was cut due to lack of funding, and by middle school I was back in the regular classes of roughly 25 students to a teacher. I continued to accumulate A's, cutting classes whenever I could, learning nothing. It is because of the experience I had in the gifted program that I decided to home-school my daughter. That model — an adult serving a small number of children, helping them learn what they themselves want to learn — seemed the best, and maybe only, way to learn. I have little recollection of what I was taught in my class of 25, but I remember everything I learned in my class of 3.

---



Lyle Ashton Harris

## The Lifelong Incomplete

By ROBERT STORR, *artist and critic*

Back in the 1960s Bruno Bettelheim gave a talk to my senior class in high school. He explained that in prewar Vienna he studied several subjects in depth as a graduate student — chiefly art and philosophy, as I recall — but each time stopped short of completing the final requirements because doing so would have decided his professional fate prematurely, given his many intense interests. (Hitler then prevented his receiving a doctorate in psychology, his ultimate field.) He told us to beware of committing to anything until we knew for sure what we wanted to be, but recommended that we set out to become dedicated ABD (all-but-degree) students of everything that excited our minds. Biographers say that Bettelheim was a compulsive fabulist, but I am grateful for his insight even if the story he told wasn't true. His example — fictional or real — was more useful to me than all the “practical” advice I was given.

---



Luis Blackaller

## In Mrs. Crowell's Library

By JUNOT DIAZ, *author*

I remember her as a small woman, but what do I know? I was small myself. She's in none of the official photographs I have from my elementary-school days, but in my memory, my first librarian is a gentlewhitewoman who wore glasses and was exceedingly kind to this new immigrant. I do not remember her voice, but I do remember that every time I saw her, she called me to her desk and showed me with an almost conspiratorial glee a book she had picked out for me, a book I always read and often loved.

Every now and then you get lucky in your education and you make a teacher-friend; Mrs. Crowell was my first. By second grade she was allowing me to take out more books than the prescribed limit. By third grade I was granted admission to her librarian's office. My love of books was born of hers. As a newcomer with almost no knowledge of the country in which I'd found myself, I was desperate to understand where the hell I was, who I was. I sought those answers in books. It was in Mrs. Crowell's library that I found my first harbor, my first truly safe place in the United States. I still feel a happy pulse every time I see a library. I'm with Borges in imagining Paradise as “a kind of library.” Where instead of angels there will be a corps of excellent librarians.

---

## Calvin in Motion

By MICHELLE A. RHEE, *founder and chief executive, Students First*

When I was teaching second grade in Baltimore, there was an adorable but disruptive boy in my class named Calvin. He talked over me, talked over his friends and couldn't participate in an appropriate way. I was constantly urging him to sit still and be quiet, and I even held one of those awfully serious what-do-we-do meetings with his father. Nothing worked. Until the day I put a dustpan in Calvin's hand. It all started when he threw a pile of



Randy Sager

moving. From that day on, Calvin would play with manipulative toys and sometimes even take a lap around the classroom while I was instructing. He taught me that all kids learn in wildly different ways and that all children are reachable and teachable.

pencil-sharpener shavings all over the room during story time. I gave Calvin the dustpan and a brush and told him to clean up the mess. Then, I proceeded with the story. As I read, I heard Calvin mumbling while he twirled around with that dustpan. After a few minutes, to my astonishment, I realized Calvin was answering my questions about the story. He sounded like a model student. Never before had I imagined that I would get Calvin on task by telling him to do an activity that was entirely unrelated to my lesson. Because Calvin was a kinesthetic kid, or a physical learner, he could only focus on school if he was up and



Derek Shapton

you how to govern yourself and how, as the Buddhists say, to live joyfully in a world of sorrows.

## Boarding-School Blues

By PICO IYER, *author*

Older boys were allowed to beat younger ones at my 15th-century English boarding school, and every boy had to run a five-mile annual steeplechase through the sludge and rain of an October day, as horses do. We wrote poems in dead languages and recited the Lord's Prayer in Latin every Sunday night. At my previous school, in preparation, we had to race through cold showers every morning at dawn before a breakfast of lukewarm kippers or porridge. Fourteen of us, aged 9, shared a single damp chamber and, clutching teddy bears, thought of parents in faraway Hong Kong or Nairobi or (in my case) California. Well-meaning friends shudder when I recall my school days for them now; I glow nostalgically. Forty years on, I see my relentless training in these ancient institutions (partly monastic and largely military) as the most benign influence in my life, and one of its happiest memories. The world is tough, the system was saying, and to find happiness in it you have to summon resilience, resolve and self-sufficiency. This is a process developed over centuries to teach



Earl Wilson/The New York Times

## The Mathematical Universe

By DAVID LEONHARDT, *Washington Bureau Chief, The New York Times*

My second-grade teacher, Ms. Sandler, taught me that math was nothing more complicated than a way to describe the world around us. It's a lesson I still use every day.



Joyce Tenneson

## The Quick Brown Fox...

By GAY TALESE, *author*

In my high-school typing class, taught by a buxom woman who resembled Eleanor Roosevelt, we used Royal Standard machines and were taught to close our eyes and type to the rhythm of a Xavier Cugat cha-cha number. I don't know why I was the top typist in the class, but the teacher said I had long, lissome fingers and that I should have been a pianist or perhaps a middle-infielder.

After graduating from college (the University of Alabama, 1953), I came to New York to apply for a newspaper job. During my interview with The Times's personnel director, I was asked if I could type. I said I probably held the world record for speed typing. I was asked to prove it, and though I missed the record by an hour, the personnel director gave me a job as a copy boy in the newsroom.

I still use some of the typewriters I used 50 years ago (and I know a typewriter repairman in New York who performs house

calls). What I learned as a sophomore in high school still serves me well today on my old and trusted Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter (circa 1949), my I.B.M. electric (circa 1983) and the Apple laptop I am using now. There is nothing so useful that I learned, carried from the middle of one century to the next, as what I am doing now, typing.

---



Andrew Medichini/AP Photo

## The Fantastic Mr. Burris

By WES ANDERSON, *filmmaker*

He was a friend of my mother's. They studied together in the anthropology department at Rice University. This was in the late 1970s. He must have been in his early 30s. He had always been an academic, and he had just finished some degree or other, and I think he was not quite sure what he wanted to do next. She suggested that he consider teaching at the middle school where her sons were students. My brothers and I had to stop calling him Harold and switch to Mr. Burris.

He was nothing like our other teachers. For one thing, he was a man. The only man in the school who did not teach P.E. Also, he had a computer. I think he built it himself. His handwriting was neat but somehow exotic. He spoke briskly and seriously, and he pointed his finger at us a lot. It was immediately apparent that the range of his knowledge went far beyond anything we were ever going to touch on in class. He invented games for us. In the fall, we were each assigned countries that we represented in an international trade market. Wars were declared. Mineral deposits were discovered. Fortunes were made and lost. In the spring, he put up a poster on which he had pasted a hundred faces cut out of newspapers and magazines. All semester we searched for clues and slowly learned who they were, but he had to finally give us Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. (This was in pre-algebra, by the way.)

One day, he came back from lunch in a dark mood. He made a few mysterious remarks, then coldly dictated his qualifications to us. It was a long list, and somewhere in the middle of it, I remember: "Two years Indonesian, intense." Shortly after that, he quit our school and became head of the science department at a bigger school on the other side of the city. On a Saturday at midnight a year later, we saw him kissing our former Spanish teacher in the parking lot of a Baskin-Robbins.

---



Bek Andersen

## Girls in the Band

By AMY KLEIN, *guitarist, Titus Andronicus*

I volunteer as a guitar teacher and a band coach at the Willie Mae Rock Camp for Girls. It's totally punk. Many of the girls have no prior musical experience — and that's the point: We present them with a challenge and encourage them to grow.

I was coaching a band of 8-year-olds. On the day of the concert, the lead singer was suddenly overcome by stage fright. "I don't want to do this anymore," she whispered. I told her that she would be amazing and that her bandmates needed her right now. About a minute before the performance, I finally asked, "What would make you feel safe right now?" She responded, "If you held my hand." I stood in the wings with my arm outstretched, the singer holding on.

When it was time for the chorus, she chimed in, at first shyly, then louder. By the end of the chorus, she had let go of my hand. She ran out to the center of the stage, and an enormous cheer swept through the crowd. Hundreds of hands clapped to the beat. Fists were raised. Eyes teared up. A huge smile broke out on the singer's face. She had grasped what it is to feel powerful.

---



Jason Thrasher

## Grade-School Dylan

By PATTERSON HOOD, *guitarist and lead singer, Drive-By Truckers*

I was a terrible student from about third grade on. I started writing songs at about that exact same time, which couldn't be a coincidence. I wrote a thousand songs by the time I graduated from high school. I would hear a song on the radio and try to write one like it. It was the '70s, and I loved Elton John, Todd Rundgren, Pink Floyd and Neil Young. I had their music in my head, and I would sit in class and write songs all day, every day, instead of listening to my teachers. I made up names for imaginary bands and drew rough sketches of what their album covers should look like. By the sixth grade, I was writing songs for about half a dozen fictional bands, including a funk band, a prog-rock band, a metal band and a country band. I've always considered that to be my education — an education in fantasy and imitation.

---

## Just Ask. Then Keep Asking.

By LISA RANDALL, *professor of physics, Harvard University and author of "Knocking on Heaven's Door"*



Chris Kim

I was shy the way many geeky girls can be. Professors hardly noticed that they rarely answered girls' questions before some boy who didn't actually know the answer interrupted. But a professor who later became my adviser gave me the best advice I ever received, which was to not be afraid to speak up and ask questions. Suddenly teachers were speaking directly to me, and my questions were usually good enough that I could detect the relief of other students who actually had the same ones, reassuring me I was doing the right thing. Now, as a professor, I know not to see classes as passive experiences. The occasional interruption keeps people engaged and illuminates subtle points, and in research even leads to new research directions. Just participating and questioning makes your mind work better. Don't you agree?



Caitlin Saunders

## The Secret Mansion

By GEORGE SAUNDERS, *author*

When I was a senior in high school, my career plan was: There was this kid in our school who knew someone who knew someone who knew this guy who knew someone in the Eagles. This kid was putting together a sort of all-star band that would, through the special intervention of the guy who knew the guy who knew the guy, be opening, next fall, for the band that opened for the band that sometimes opened for The Eagles. My initial incredulity was disabled a bit when I went with this kid to a local music store, and he pulled out a check, to the store, from United Artists, in the sum of \$10,000, to buy a new P.A. I still don't understand what the heck was actually going on there. But, flash-forwarding: the band never played a single gig.

I was, in other words, on the path to nowhere — but would have only found this out a year or two later.

Luckily I was in the sphere of influence of two wonderful teachers.

In Ms. Williams's English classes, she sometimes showed filmstrips on the topic of "great American authors." Here was Melville, gesturing at a whale, who was obligingly surfacing. Here was Nathaniel Hawthorne, looking pensive under a cherry tree. Ms. Williams seemed to love these writers. Like every other kid in our school with any taste, I had a big crush on Ms. Williams. She was beautiful, luminous: her intelligence fierce, her sense of humor dry. What did she love about these American authors anyway? I sat entranced, wondering. Their minds, it seemed, their boldness, the lives they'd led, full of thinking and caring, devoid of indifference, habit, servility. I longed to be worthy of her attention, someone who might appear in a filmstrip himself someday. Perhaps that filmstrip would show me sitting right here, in my little fold-down desk, at Oak Forest High School, praying for Ms. Williams to glance my way and approve.

Ms. Williams was actually dating my geology teacher, Mr. Lindbloom. They made a kind of intellectual power couple. Every Friday he gave his class over to free discussion. Why are we here? Why does evil so often win? How should we live? Those things that you know: how do you know them? Are you sure about them? During one of the Friday sessions, I raised my hand and said . . . something. I don't remember what it was. Given my reading at the time (Kahlil Gibran and liner notes for art-rock bands), it was probably something along the lines of: "Suffer the children to learn that love, shall leaven the bread by which, children of the stars, ye shall thrive, if only you do not, like sages of yore, wrest your eyes in futile languor." Whatever it was, Mr. Lindbloom saw something in it, and after class, asked me to write it down. It was always better if you wrote it down, he said. It was good discipline. It clarified the thought.

That night, as I sat in front of a clean sheet of paper, I imagined — well, I imagined Mr. Lindbloom and Ms. Williams and a few of the other young teachers, gathered at a bar in . . . not a bar, no. That was common. A mansion. A secret mansion one of them owned, reserved for intellectual discussion.

Mr. Lindbloom takes out my paper.

"Here's something interesting," he says to his friends. "I won't tell you who wrote it. But see if you can guess."

Then he reads: "Even as the stars are aloft, so too may we, rending unto Zeus, saying nay to Mordor, rise above the blackened plain of the Timid, exalting the stars, even unto the generation."

A respectful silence.

"Shakespeare?" someone says.

"Kahlil Gibran?" someone else says.

"Lincoln?"

"Actually," Mr. Lindbloom says. "This was written by one of my students."

"Must be someone pretty special," Ms. Williams says.

“Saunders,” Mr. Lindbloom says.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” says one of the lesser members of the group, who will soon get kicked out for being so mundane.

“I had a feeling,” Ms. Williams says. “There’s definitely something going on there.”

A more honest part of me knew very well where this was headed and was thinking: I’m going to all this trouble and he’ll never even mention it again. He probably already forgot he asked for it. And then I’ll have to stop loving him. That’s sort of how it was in our school. Teachers were busy. Most of them seemed a little heartbroken to me, as if the time when they’d actually expected a kid to benefit from their attention was long past.

I wrote it out anyway.

I handed it over on Friday. Mr. Lindbloom pulled me aside on Monday. To thank me. That afternoon Ms. Williams told me that she read it, too, and thought it was good, really interesting, I should keep it up, keep writing things down as they came to me.

Together, they conspired to get me a copy of “Atlas Shrugged,” and I took it home over Christmas break. I read all 1,084 pages of it, on a car trip, and when I finished the novel, there in the back seat of Andy Fiedler’s Nova, I had a sudden image of myself, wearing what I thought of as “a college sweater,” pacing feverishly across a tree-dense campus, strenuously explaining my philosophical viewpoint to a group of braless co-eds much taken with philosophers and philosophy, and then we all headed over to the football game, holding those little shouting-cone deals.

When I got home, I called the guy who knew the guy who knew the guy, quit the band and started trying to get into college.

But there was a problem: I had flunked two classes and had literally never studied outside of school, except once, when I made a cassette of the answers to a biology quiz and went to sleep with the tape on, hoping to learn by aural osmosis. I was rejected by Notre Dame (fair enough) and the Berklee College of Music (ditto, didn’t actually read music) but got into a state school where the main requirement seemed to be ownership of a bong. Mr. Lindbloom felt I deserved better. He made a call, to the Colorado School of Mines. As a grad student in geology, he’d met a number of heavy-hitters in the field who had gone there. Somehow, in a single 10-minute call, he persuaded them to give me a try.

How did he do it? Why did he do it? Would I have done it? Would I go to such lengths for one of my students, now that I’m a teacher myself? Good Lord, I hope so. But I don’t know. Time moves fast, and, in teaching, at a real-life pace, you never really know who needs what.

All I had to do, the School of Mines said, was pass 18 summer-school hours of remedial math and science.

Which, appalled at the thought of letting Mr. Lindbloom/Ms. Williams down, I did.

And that fall I went off to college.

Now, at this distance, I can see how important and unlikely these teacherly interventions were. They were young teachers (in their mid-20s), they were making lives for themselves, they were surrounded every day by hundreds of us blustering, cynical, musk-smelling 1970s kids, resisting positive influence with all our sneering Aerosmith-inflected might. It all could have been different for me and would have been, if not for whatever it is that makes an older person — busy person, tired person, finite person — turn toward a young person and say, in whatever way is needed: “Of course you can. Why not? Give it a try.”

Slight p.s.: Mr. Lindbloom and Ms. Williams married a few years later, taught in that same school another 30 years and only recently retired. I do the math of that sometimes: how many kids, over the course of those years, got the benefit of their loving attention? How many people are incrementally more thoughtful, curious, and open — how many people think slightly better of themselves and their abilities, are more capable of change, love, generosity, rebound — because of these two examples of that precious race, the true teacher?

It must run into the hundreds, even thousands, if you count (as you must) the children of those children directly influenced. As one of those thus benefited, I retain the mute, head-shaking gratitude of someone snatched back from the edge of an abyss.

I would have lived, sure, but not nearly as well.

---

Produced by MEGHAN LOUITTIT, YURI CHONG and CHRISTINE WALSH/The New York Times | [Send Feedback](#)

Because of an editing error, an article on Page 48 this weekend about the different educational experiences of a variety of writers misstates the surname of the second-grade teacher of one writer, David Leonhardt. She is Ms. Sandler, not Sander.

---

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y. / Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Autos](#) | [Site Map](#)

© 2011 The New York Times Company | [Privacy](#) | [Your Ad Choices](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Terms of Sale](#) | [Corrections](#) |  [RSS](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Advertise](#)