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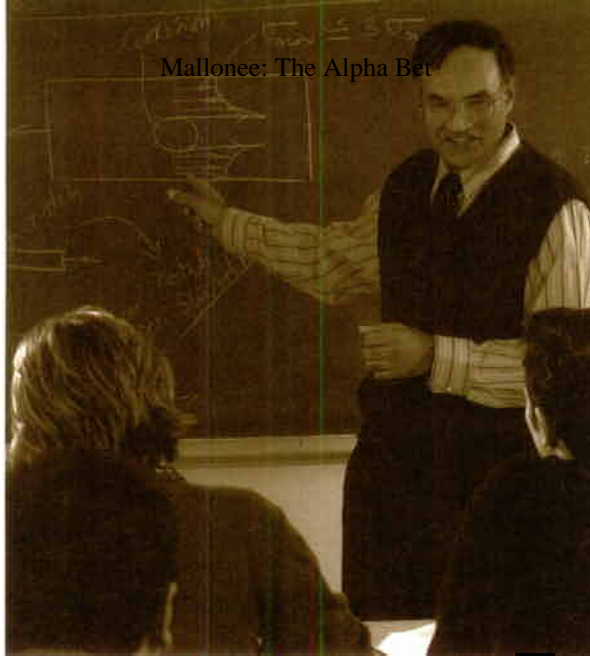
Barbara Mallonee

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# The Alpha Bet

BARBARA MALLONEE

*The Alpha Program at Loyola College in Maryland is an experimental initiative, focused on freshman seminars, that seeks as one of its goals to enrich the experience of the core curriculum for students and faculty alike. The author is director of the program.*

At four in the morning, time melts like moonlight streaming across the carpet. I could be four years old. Four thousand years old. On this dark winter night, half-awake in this hour before the sun rises and the earth begins a new day, I sit at the dining room table in the soft shadows of a stained-glass lamp, doodling with pencil on paper, trying to remember. *Alpha*. How does one make an alpha symbol? How did I once make the alpha symbol? I pad off to the den where I keep a dictionary next to Scrabble. I carry the dictionary back to the table, look up *alpha*, begin to copy the symbol.

It is learning to write all over again, the painstaking protocols of penmanship, this particular letter an odd first letter for any scribe to have made with a finger in the dust, stylus on clay, pen on parchment, lead pencil on lined pad.

Lost in time, in recollection, I place my pencil on the paper. First, thumb and fingers fluid, I sweep the pen backward to the left, backward with an odd sense of speed, of flourish; then, reverse to make a rise, a hill, an ellipse, the descending swoop through the first line a stroke that brings me back, in vertical measure, to the place I started as though this first letter of this early alphabet, this beginning, is achieved not by going forward, but

by going back.

*Alpha*, an ancient letter, is also a modern letter. Pictographs, ideographs, or hieroglyphics depict what they represent, but alphabets are a highly developed code, where symbols represent not sights or insights but sounds. Phonetic symbols have great lasting power; the twenty-six letters of our alphabet are easily learned, even by children, and they are adaptable—3,000 years old, our alphabet passed from language to language. The Semitic *aleph* became the Greek *alpha* and eventually our *a*, all first in a succession of letters that form systems for writing stories and histories in order to capture events that, with the dawning of each day, are swallowed otherwise into the yawning canyons of the past. Through channels of script and inscription, memory runs through time as a bright river runs from source to sea.

And, in the dark of this cold night, a driving rain falling across the Maryland landscape, over and over again I draw my *alpha*. Entranced as though it were a mantra, a refrain, a prayer, I fill a page with marks that swim about like fish. To make the letter feels wonderful! With increasing ease and momentum, I master the letter. There is a distinct pleasure in making this particular mark.

I don't sleep much these days. I am sleepless because restless, unable to rest because restive, wrestling with the details of a program at Loyola College, now in its first experimental year, that is to make serious scholars of first-year men and women.

The Alpha Program is one outcome of a three-year strategic planning exercise at Loyola College that culminated in 1997 in a document called *Magis*. As Loyola College evolves from a regional college to one with aspirations to national prominence, our pool of students grows in intellectual promise. Under the leadership of Harold Ridley, S.J., president of the College since 1994, faculty are determined to ignite in freshmen at the very beginning of their college career a passion for academic learning that they often do not feel before they enter a major field of study in their junior year. To that end, the College is banking yet again on the institutional power of a core curriculum in place since its founding in 1852 and last reaffirmed in Spring 1993. Loyola will continue to require of all students in both the College of Arts and Sciences and the Sellinger School of Business and Management a traditional eighteen-course core curriculum that constitutes almost half the forty courses required for graduation and is the centerpiece of our Jesuit education. Although the core is located in the College of Arts and Sciences (its courses drawn from all three divisions—three in the sciences, two in the social sciences, and thirteen in the humanities), still, the entire faculty—Arts and Sciences faculty and Business School faculty—believe the core curriculum important to the teaching that they do. In fact, in all its hiring, the College looks for faculty who will weave into their classes, as they teach, all that the core represents.

And what does the core represent? According to the mission statement in the college catalogue, "Education in the liberal arts is central to the mission of Loyola College, and the cornerstone of each student's education is the core curriculum":

Although the College now offers majors in 26 disciplines, all students bring a shared foundation in the liberal arts to their specialized studies as a result of their work in the core program. . . . Yet, the unifying objective of the core curriculum extends beyond the provision of fundamental knowledge to the setting of the foundations of intellectual, moral, and spiritual excellence. A liberal education in the Jesuit tradition seeks, ultimately, to provide a rigorous intellectual basis for the development of moral convictions, and for a life of continuous learning and action in service of those convictions.

While entering freshmen understand the terms "moral convictions" and "action in service of those convictions," they cannot yet grasp what the core represents as a "shared foundation in the liberal arts" and as a "rigorous intellectual basis." In a year in which the *New York Times* of December 29 can report that even the venerable University of Chicago is questioning the usefulness of its twenty-course core curriculum, the College must provide entering students some overview of our core. At Loyola, we have two programs to do that.

Fifty-four of our 850 freshmen are recruited for the Honors Program, a formalized four-year interdisciplinary structure grounded in a four-semester historical sequence taught by faculty from English, History, Philosophy and Theology, with additional seminars required in freshmen writing, in ethics, and in world literature. Honors freshmen are made immediately self-conscious about the core curriculum within the Honors classroom and also as they participate as a community in colloquia and in excursions to the symphony, theaters, museums, and annual trips to New York, Washington, or Philadelphia.

The new Alpha Program is designed to affect all other freshmen during their first year at Loyola. If two pilot years are successful, the program will expand to serve 800 freshmen through a structure of academic freshmen seminars that follows a model found at such schools as Boston College, Bucknell University, the College of the Holy Cross, Dickinson College, Cornell University, and Harvard University.

At Loyola, we project that, in 2000-2001, the full Alpha Program will be a two-semester program. During the two experimental years, the College's Advising Office has invited newly accepted freshmen to enroll, during summer orientation, in fall seminars with a class size of sixteen. In the fall of 1998, the College offered ten Alpha seminars, all of them core courses taught by tenured faculty whose engagement with their disciplines made strikingly engaging even their applications to the program! The first ten seminars ranged across the curriculum:

Art in Context: Renaissance to Present (Janet Headley, Fine Arts); Ecology, Evolution, and Diversity (Elissa Derrickson, Biology); Living Literature: Poetry, Fiction, and Drama (Brennan O'Donnell, English); Macroeconomic Principles—From Wall Street to Main Street and Toward Ancient Greece (Francis G. Hilton, S.J., Economics); Calculus: The Art of Problem Solving (Dipa Choudhury, Mathematical Sciences); Culture and Power: A History of Western Civilization (Jonathan Petropoulos, History); Learning from Baltimore: The Urban History of

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Western Civilization (John Breihan, History); The Philosophical Adventure of the Ancient World (Richard Boothby, Philosophy); Philosophy and the Origins of Wonder (Timothy Stapleton); Why Do We Obey? Freedom and Power, Race and Gender (Janine Holc, Political Science).

An even broader range of departments will be represented in the second year of Alpha seminars.

Not all of the twenty courses for 1999-2000 are core courses, and so the College will test the presumption that, at Loyola, it is the architecture of an entire curriculum, in which major and elective courses draw on the core, that enables faculty to build academic excellence.

It should be emphasized that, while the Alpha Program seems to be an adventure in curricular design, it is first and foremost an opportunity for an enriched faculty to enrich students' lives through deepening their understanding of their education. And while faculty receive a generous stipend for participation in the program, the more meaningful reward is the influence they have on their first-year Alpha students from the moment they send them welcoming letters in August. Five special features make the Alpha Program central to the freshman experience.

**The Fourth Hour:** Faculty spend the equivalent of an extra class hour with students each week. The fourth hour is intended to allow for flexibility, and this fall faculty have used the time for a range of activities including writing workshops, extra discussion sessions, field trips and outings, and meetings with guest speakers.

**The Alpha Advisor:** Each Alpha faculty member serves as core advisor to his or her sixteen Alpha students, allowing a measure of friendship, academic and social oversight, and thoughtful crafting of a semester schedule that binds each course to the whole fabric of a student's life.

**The Class Budget:** Faculty have a budget of fifty dollars per student to use as they see fit for enrichment. This past fall, one instructor took students camping on Assateague Island; another arranged an afternoon of sailing on the Chesapeake Bay. Others took students to plays, films, concerts, and dinners on and off campus.

**The Alpha Faculty Summer Workshop:** A five-day Alpha Summer Workshop provides a grand opportunity for faculty development. In this workshop, faculty explore and extend the academic reach of the Alpha Program, and they put their courses in the broader context of the entire freshman experience through touring campus facilities, talking with students, and meeting with staff and administrative colleagues whose work with first-year students overlaps with faculty responsibilities.

**The Alpha Faculty, The Freshman Faculty:** The Alpha Faculty are important in their own right—and as a subset of the Freshman Faculty, who are to be organized in 1999-2000 under the leadership of a new Freshman Dean. Over and above the seminars is the umbrella of the Alpha Program, which has a budget with which to build a larger academic community. This year, the Alpha Faculty sponsored speakers, a fall picnic, and other social gatherings. Faculty also launched the Alpha Film Series in hopes that, on a campus with too much student drinking, it may be possible to “take back Thursday nights.”

Through the Alpha Program, Loyola hopes to realize the success other institutions report in improving retention through freshman seminars. But, as I draw *alpha* upon *alpha* in the still of this night, I think that the real Alpha bet is that our approach to students will somehow shape our changing institution’s sense of identity.

We are wagering that the success of our freshman seminars will come from more than extra time and attention from professors, from more than their energy and enthusiasm, from more than the sense of curricular choice that comes with thoughtful advising, from more than the incentive that faculty excitement and rigor can provide for students to lead disciplined daily dorm life.

Loyola College is a Jesuit institution. Our success, we believe, will come through the strong vision of the core curriculum that emerges as the Loyola community explores, in its freshman seminar courses, the intersection of liberal arts education with the faith-based tradition that embodies an Ignatian view of the world.

And explore we must. While the century about to end has seen continual reexamination of Jesuit education by the twenty-eight Jesuit colleges and universities, by national organizations such as the Jesuit Education Association (JEA) and Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU), and by a range of publications ranging from *Conversations* to the relevant decrees of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation, still, according to William C. McInnes, S.J., there is no one canonized philosophy of Jesuit education and no modern version of the *Ratio Studiorum* either. In his essay “The Current State of the Jesuit Philosophy of Higher Education,” Father McInnes writes, “Jesuit educators may define many things and they may experiment with many different structures and still be true to their Jesuit heritage” (44).

On a campus seeking to identify academic features of a Jesuit education beyond *cura personalis*, the Freshman Year Task Force, which conceived the Alpha Program, and the first ten Alpha faculty overlaid the freshman seminar structure with four goals that seem explicitly Jesuit in origin:

**History.** To know the history of the Jesuit order and of Jesuit education seems essential in an institution named after St. Ignatius Loyola. In its first year, following the lead of the Honors Program, the Alpha Program sponsored two educational events for the entire Alpha community. In a first panel discussion in October, a scholastic in his 20s and four priests in their 40s, 50s, 70s, and 80s shared their life stories. In a second panel discussion in November, faculty and administrators explored the history of Jesuit higher education and of Loyola College.

**Mystery.** Any course can become a typical freshman seminar course if its professor introduces students to a particular academic discipline and then encourages them to move freely among disciplines by modeling the sheer pleasure a scholar takes in his or her own ever-broadening academic work for its own sake and as a career or profession. But, at Loyola, the Alpha faculty is invited to see the academic exercise as companion to the Spiritual Exercises devised by St. Ignatius Loyola. In Jesuit institutions, academics sharpen their minds and spirits to plumb the wondrous mysteries of creation that are our heritage. In the seminars, Alpha professors seek to model for students the joys of apprehending and appreciating the world through devouring an eclectic and ever-growing list of books; through writing for journals, magazines, books; through meeting in and out of classes, often over dinner or lunch; through venturing off to hear “Finlandia,” to see a courtroom in action, to watch shooting stars on a dark hilltop far from the glow of the city. “What is all this juice and all this joy?” wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins. Flexibility and fluidity are built into a program where faculty move beyond the conventional curriculum and class to nurture wonder and enthusiasm.

**The Habits.** In the Alpha Program, the ten Freshman Seminars follow the model of those at other institutions: Small classes are taught by a professor whose enthusiasm for the subject spills beyond the regular curriculum, fostering a deep dedication to serious study. But, at Loyola, we ask that the Alpha faculty perceive the training of the intellect mandated in the College’s mission statement as the cultivation of three habits of intellect that Jesuit scholastics have always cherished—the habits of reading, writing, and good conversation. Nurtured in the early years and further honed in the narrow and focused framework of a discipline, the habits prepare young scholars to walk with foresight and farsightedness into the wide world of lifelong learning that awaits.

**The Examen.** Vocal and written reaction and reflection are often built into freshman seminar courses. But in this first experimental year, in perhaps our most exciting



undertaking, Alpha faculty are introducing the concept of the examined life through the Jesuit device of the *examen*. The possibility of adapting the *examen* to the Alpha classroom was first suggested by Father Hank Hilton, S.J., in the course of our summer workshop. He and Father Tim Brown, S.J., director of Loyola's Center for Values and Service, have designed a series of sample exercises for faculty who wish to encourage their students' spiritual development. Alpha's adaptation of the *examen* invites students to see their lives as seamless and self-consciously fashioned in relation to the divine. In sharing the *examen* with students, faculty invite them to live their lives deliberately and to take time to measure the worth of hours in terms of days, of days in terms of years, of years against the full length of a lifetime.

What has been accomplished by turning the liberal arts coat of many colors inside out to examine the Jesuit lining? Are these first four initiatives for Jesuit identity in the Alpha program random and superficial—or do they suggest a deeper, unifying principle?

The fact is that any core curriculum is only silent ciphers on the pages of a college catalogue until faculty and students read the large text that is their particular core structure into the work of each semester they spend together.

At a Jesuit school like Loyola, while it has never been hard to declare the faculty the college's greatest resource—and, as part of the *Magis* plan, to set aside an extraordinary one million dollars to spend on initiatives in the freshman year to encourage all faculty to realize the promise of an education grounded in the core—the College has never before had so widespread and explicit a commitment to integrating the core through an appeal to its Jesuit foundation.

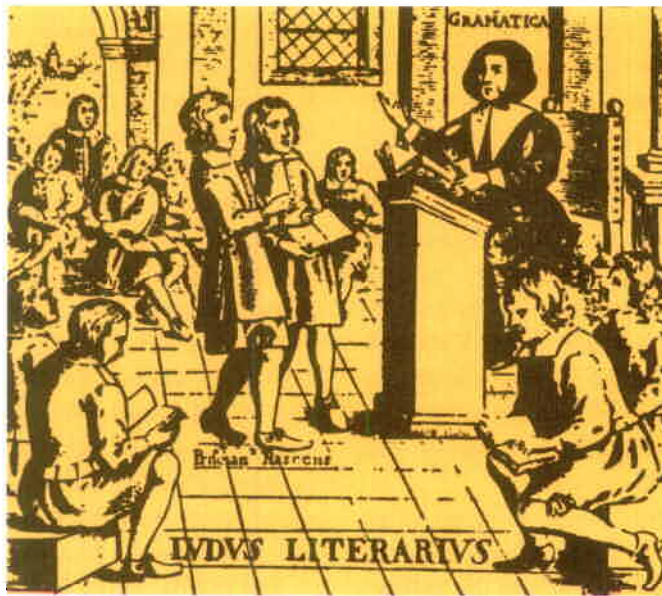
What is an education grounded in the core? Why is a Jesuit education best grounded in the core? And why is it the perception at Loyola that although our Jesuit-based core curriculum has been in place for almost 150 years, *we do not realize its rich promise* in this last decade of the century? At Loyola, as at many other schools, everyone talks wistfully about the core curriculum, imagining what it once did, speculating what it could do. But that con-

versation is countered by a discussion of the curriculum as the place to ready students for the job market ahead.

Father McInnes writes, "Today Jesuit education has reached only one of its possible mutations. Further changes are inevitable—and desirable. Serious reflection on the source of our heritage and courageous experimentation to adapt to shifting needs are both needed in order to keep abreast of the reality of the system and to ensure that the vision of the past will be ready to serve the needs of tomorrow" (45).

As I sit at the table, filling my sheet of paper with the alpha symbol, I wonder if in the iconography of the letter there isn't some connection to the tangible world after all, if the letter, literally charting the process of its making, isn't a very real outline of promise and pronouncement

both? I put my pencil on the page yet again. I swoop backward, then soar forward, descending and ascending, yet never advancing my pencil beyond the spot where I began. In the silence of the night, I hear whispers of three decades of campus discussion, suggesting that the core, if it is to be relevant, must strike out into the present and future. Still, when I think of the core curriculum, I think of a journey to the past, a long meander, a



stretch of silent contemplation as one walks first through meadows and streambeds and forest and brush and then ascends a promontory from which to look, for a very long time, down upon the whole of creation already occurred before plunging off the path into the future.

The Alpha Program, as it has evolved, has become a structure in which to foreground the importance of the past. To think of the study of history, the contemplation of mystery, the three habits of reading, writing, conversation, the *examen* as ways to build skills through repetition is to miss the point. These are ways to revivify the past, which is, after all, what sacraments do: they lift the transitory to a larger eternal realm.

They do this through the art of creation. Professors profess, above all, a love of texts, of the written text, of the printed page, of the illuminated page, of the laser-printed

page. In the pages of books, says Carlyle in *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, we find “all that mankind has done, thought, gained or been . . . lying as in magic preservation.” Going to the past is what professors know how to do. I remember one wintry night at a college in Minnesota knocking on the office door of an English professor, who murmured, “Come in.” For a long moment, I stood in the doorway, watching him read a volume of Coleridge until, with a rueful smile, he looked up from the book, its leaves edged in gilt. “Kubla Khan,” he said. “Xanadu.”

*Where Alph, the sacred river ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.*

As I walked home, snow mounding on the street, I could see the glow of his window. I knew he would read far into the night, and not in search of a past that once was. To think the past has gone is to be misguided. The past is—and it is ever more vast. The past is there to be plumbed by us at will. “Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story,” wrote Homer in *The Odyssey*. I think of yet another professor I once had who argued that, while the present tense might be fashionable in contemporary literature, lives were far better told in the past tense. The present, if momentous, is momentary—even when gilded, only the outermost edge.

Faculty appreciate that it is the pages of the past that keep growing. When freshmen arrive, preoccupied by present and future and with little sense or knowledge of the past, faculty have the courage to turn them around to look backward and to believe that it is right to spend four years looking backward—because we can. Because we can, we can safely conclude we must, for why would we have been endowed with a capability to go backwards that we would never use? And we are meant to move in reverse.

Not physically! Physically, we find it hard to do anything backward. The body doesn't want to go backward. It doesn't want to run backward, waltz backward, skate backward, hit a tennis ball backward. It is hard to gain any momentum going backward. Though I have gained some flourish drawing my alpha symbols backward, in fact, I would find it difficult to continue to extend that first swoop any farther, to make my right hand lurch along, in pursuit of a pencil moving backward, right to left, across the page.

But we are a complex of mind and spirit and body. Our academic exercises are like the spiritual exercises Ignatius Loyola devised in that they are the antithesis, really, of our physical exercises. Our minds are meant to go backward. The brain, researchers tell us, is hardwired to remember, and our academic life is founded upon remembrance,

upon recollection. We recollect. We read to recollect. We write in order to record what we wish to remember. In conversations, we reminisce. Our academic habits are shaped not by instinct, but by a mind and a will that together can access the past.

But to advocate four years of remembering, recollecting, of mastering the past flies in the face of current educational practice. When freshmen and their parents arrive on our campuses, their eyes are on the present and future. The dorms are structured for social interaction, not silent study. Orientation is filled with sessions on student life, food, facilities, entertainment and on career training, internships, fellowships, graduate school. The Jesuit commitment to service leads to community service clubs and to service learning so students can see how they might eventually work for good in the community. At the same time, initiatives for diversity and multiculturalism force our attention to the present, the past no longer what we study but what we rewrite to serve the present and future. Many courses, even science, mathematics, or computer science courses in the core, do not address the long history of their disciplines. Against strong tides, it is hard to argue that four years of forty courses devoted to a study of the past using classic tools of inquiry and the vast array of academic theory evolved from it are suitable preparation for the future. It is no wonder that when faculty, in our role as advisors, talk about the core, we cave in to students' view that the core is an obstacle course that looms on the horizon, a set of required courses to “take” or “get done” or “get through.”

We need to reconceive the core.

I sit here, in the dead of night, the rain gone and the moon shining once again, drawing the alpha symbol over and over. Soon the sun will rise, and I will drive up the Northern Parkway hill toward Loyola College, tall church steeples dark against the rosy dawn. *Glory be to God for dappled things* runs in streams of silver through my mind. Even when overcast, the morning sky is glorious!

I see myself later, in the afternoon, reading in my office. Coleridge? Emily Dickinson? More Hopkins?

*And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

Engrossed, I will look up to see a student, hesitant to intrude, but eager to share his dreams for the future, to lay out his plans for four years here. I see myself wanting to change the rhetoric of our conversation from advice about specific courses in the curriculum to advocacy of the core. I see myself handing that young man a pencil and laying before him a blank sheet of paper.

First, I have him reproduce the “a,” a letter that replicates for me the modern approach to education. High and mighty, one leaps headlong into an idea, crashes down precipitously, then circles back hastily to take a bite out of the past before moving again into the future. Perhaps a

byte? I am skeptical of my students’ use of Vax and Internet as a quick, contained way to do research. “a” as an emblem of modern scholarship? The initial thrust is into the fray of contemporary discourse; the trip to the past is token; the finish is a stubborn stroke into the future.

Next, we will draw the miniscule “a,” the rounded Attic “a” that comes from Latin cursive.

Though it looks almost like the *alpha*, the order of its production is the reverse. Put the pencil down and move backward—but upward first and downward with the deliberate intention of neatly closing a circle. In this educational effort, there is no promise of sweep, of distance, of overview, only an earnest sort of scooping up of fact and information and then, as a last gesture, a dip of the pencil into the future.

Last of all, we will try the *alpha*, the oldest and the hardest of the three letters to make. The joy of that long sweep backward. The euphoria of that long pause on the higher plane. A descent as the present crosses the past and stops at its edge. An emblem for my vision of education in the core. A way to say to my student, “Here is where you are now: at the beginning of your adult life. And, at the end of four years, of a curriculum dominated by an eighteen-course core curriculum, here is where you will be: at the beginning of your adult life.” And I will tell him that even in courses that are not official core courses, he and his Loyola professors will, at the end of four years, only have inscribed a journey backward, always backward,

even in courses that work with contemporary novels, live footage, current events, real businesses, off-campus internships out there in the real world.

And I will think about how education is, after all, a matter of making a mark, surely what the Alpha Program that keeps me awake nights hopes to do in the field of Jesuit education. And I will remember, at this endless hour of the night when I could be four years old or four thousand, sitting at a round table with my first-grade teacher in an elementary school classroom, an array of alphabets on the blackboard. We would draw them all, for the educational bet then was the same as the Alpha bet now. In the years ahead, in that small midwestern public school, we would study a traditional curriculum in which, in all courses, even modern math, we were studying the past. I remember the silence of that first cozy classroom, lined with books and blackboards. I recall the touch of a teacher’s hand taking mine, the feel of that teacher’s hand helping me trace the first letter of the Greek alphabet. Holding a yellow pencil in my thumb and fingers, my hand swoops back and forth, forward and back. For a long time, working together, we are making a mark, and it is an ancient mark that speaks of sound habits, of reverence, of a moral life. I feel the weight of history as I work away on the page.

And then my teacher’s hand is gone. I watch my hand move to the very edge of the page. I am all alone, on my own. In a pool of light, I am making my mark.

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