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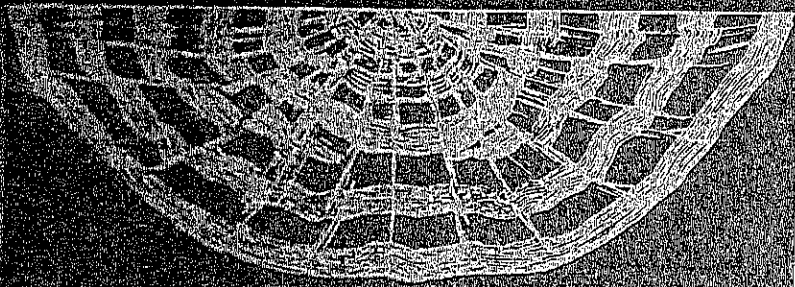
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# THE GOOD HIGH SCHOOL

PORTRAITS OF CHARACTER  
AND CULTURE

1984 WINNER—AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL  
RESEARCH ASSOCIATION AWARD

SARA LAWRENCE LIGHTFOOT

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## Origins: Art and Science

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Several years ago an artist painted my portrait. Twice a week, for several weeks, I posed for the portrait. I would arrive early in the morning, climb the three flights to her garret studio, change into my beautifully embroidered Afghani dress and shimmering golden earrings, and stand motionless for an hour. It was difficult, wearing work trying to hold my pose, with arms hanging long and loose and hands clasped softly. At first the stance would feel natural, then I would lose my ease. My arms would stiffen, my fingers would press each other until the red showed through my brown skin, and my jaw would grow tight. The painter would notice the slow stiffening of my body and she would offer a break, sometimes a cup of tea. But we would soon return to the task and she would encourage me to relax and think good thoughts. Finally, the artist discovered the words that would produce the expression she wanted. "Think of how you would like your children to remember you," she said earnestly. Still not thirty and not yet a mother, I found the request overly sentimental, and almost incomprehensible. I did, however, try to produce a look that conveyed goodness, nurturance, care, and understanding.

The portrait passed through several phases and my image was transformed in front of my eyes. The transformations were all unsettling; even when the emerging image offered a prettier, more likable portrayal. With a sensitive eye, a meticulous brush, and enduring patience the artist painted me "from the inside out"; the skeleton sketched in before the bulky frame; the body contours drawn before the layers of clothing. I did not see the final product until months after its completion when my husband and I quickly bought the piece fearing it would be sold, and I would be hanging in someone else's living room.

When I saw it I was shocked, disappointed, and awed all in the same moment. I had the odd sensation that the portrait did not look like me, and yet it captured my essence. I quibbled about the eyes looking empty, the mouth being tight and severe, the expression being overly serious. I had not thought of myself as high-waisted, nor did I recognize the yellowish cast to my brown skin. The woman in the portrait looked more mature and static than I felt. "She's thirty years my senior," I complained to myself. I was relieved when friends saw the painting and commented on how much younger I looked in person and how the artist had not captured my vitality and spirit. Although many of the details of this representation seemed wrong, the whole was deeply familiar. She was not quite me as I saw myself, but she told me about parts of myself that I never would have noticed or admitted. More important, I had the eerie sensation that she anticipated my future and echoed my past. I could look at her and see my ancestors, and yes, see myself as my children would see me. In these troubling features there was an ageless quality. Time moved backward and forward through this still and silent woman.

When my husband brought the large canvas home he leaned it up against the wall and gave it a sharp and skeptical look. His first comment, "It's not you." His second, "It's a family portrait. . . all of you women are in her." Both his observations seemed right to me. I did not see Sara alone (such a singular vision forced me to complain about the details, to deny my imperfections, to flinch at the signs of aging and vulnerability), but I did see my mother Margaret, my sister Paula, my grandmothers Lettie and Mary Elizabeth—women who have had a profound influence on my life, women who have shaped my vision of myself, women who have known me "from the inside out." And when my mother Margaret saw the portrait for the first time, she stood in the doorway of the dining room where it hung, her arms loosely hanging, her hands lightly clasped, her head slightly tilted, and her gaze maternal. A look of recognition swept over her face and tears shot to the corners of her eyes. "That's a picture of me," she said with wonder. And at that moment her posture and aspect made her look remarkably like the woman in the picture. The artist had caught my attempt to look maternal, a replica of the motherly eyes that had protected me all of my growing up years.

This family portrait was not the first portrait done of me. It was certainly the largest and most elaborate, but I had been sketched, painted, carved, even rendered in glass before this experience—each time learning something new about myself, or about the artistic process; each time watching myself evolve with that strange combination of shock and recognition.

The summer of my eighth birthday, my family was visited by a seventy year-old Black woman, a professor of sociology, an old and dear friend. A woman of warmth and dignity, she always seemed to have secret treasures hidden under her smooth exterior. On this visit, she brought charcoals and a sketch pad. Mid-afternoon, with the sun high in the sky, she asked me to sit for her in the rock garden behind our house. I chose a medium-sized boulder, perched myself upon it in an awkward, presentable pose, and tried to keep absolutely still. This suddenly static image disturbed the artist, who asked me to talk to her and feel comfortable about moving. She could never capture me, she explained, if I became statue-like. Movement was part of my being.

Her well-worn, strong, and knowing hands moved quickly and confidently across the paper. She seemed totally relaxed and unselfconscious; her fingers a smooth extension of the charcoal. Her deep calm soothed me and made me feel relaxed. But what I remember most clearly was the wonderful, glowing sensation I got from being attended to so fully. There were no distractions. I was the only one in her gaze. My image filled her eyes, and the sound of the chalk stroking the paper was palpable. The audible senses translated to tactile ones. After the warmth of this human encounter, the artistic product was almost forgettable. I do not recall whether I liked the portrait or not. I do remember feeling that there were no lines, only fuzzy impressions, and that I was rendered in motion, on the move. This fast-working artist whipped the page out of her sketch pad after less than an hour and gave it to me with one admonition: "Always remember you're beautiful," she said firmly.

The adult and child experiences of being an artist's subject were different in many ways. One quick and impressionistic, the other painstaking and laborious; one sitting on a big rock in the middle of my mother's pansies and impatiens, the other standing on a raised platform in an artist's studio; one with the mid-afternoon sun shining on my face interrupted by shifting tree shadows, the other with the subtle, well-placed track lights poised to offer consistent effects; one with me shifting, talking, and gesturing, and the other with me stationary and posed. But the experiences also taught me some of the same lessons—that portraits capture essence: the spirit, tempo, and movement of the young girl; the history and family of the grown woman. That portraits tell you about parts of yourself about which you are unaware, or to which you haven't attended. That portraits reflect a compelling paradox, of a moment in time and of timelessness. That portraits make the subjects feel "seen" in a way they have never felt seen before, fully attended to, wrapped up in an empathetic gaze. That an essential ingredient of creating a portrait is the

process of human interaction. Artists must not view the subject as object, but as a person of myriad dimensions. Whether the artist sees the body stiffening and offers the woman a cup of tea, or tells the young girl that she does not have to be still like a statue, there is a recognition of the humanity and vulnerability of the subject. The artist's gaze is discerning as it searches for the essence, relentless as it tries to move past the surface images. But in finding the underside, in piercing the cover, in discovering the unseen, the artist offers a critical *and* generous perspective—one that is both tough and giving.

I recognize, of course, that portraits do not always capture these myriad human dimensions, nor do the encounters between artist and subject always have these empathetic, piercing qualities; but my experiences with the medium and the process influenced my work as a social observer and recorder of human encounter and experience. As a social scientist I wanted to develop a form of inquiry that would embrace many of the descriptive, aesthetic, and experiential dimensions that I had known as the artist's subject; that would combine science and art; that would be concerned with composition and design as well as description; that would depict motion and stopped time, history, and anticipated future.

I also wanted to enter into relationships with my "subjects" that had the qualities of empathetic regard, full and critical attention, and a discerning gaze. The encounters, carefully developed, would allow me to reveal the underside, the rough edges, the dimensions that often go unrecognized by the subjects themselves. I hoped to create portraits that would inspire shock and recognition in the subjects, and new understandings and insights in the viewers/readers. I am not an artist. My medium is not visual. My concern became then how I would translate the lines and shapes into written images and representations.

The portraits in this book are not drawn, they are written. They do not present images of a posed person, but descriptions of high schools inhabited by hundreds and thousands of people. In these six portraits, I seek to capture the culture of these schools, their essential features, their generic character, the values that define their curricular goals and institutional structures, and their individual styles and rituals. I also try to trace the connections between individual and institution—how the inhabitants create the school's culture and how they are shaped by it; how individual personality and style influence the collective character of the school. On each canvas, in broad strokes, I sketch the backdrop. The shapes and figures are more carefully and distinctly drawn, and attention is paid to design and composition. Using another artistic metaphor, for each por-

trait the stage is set, the props are arranged, the characters are presented, and the plot develops. Individual faces and voices are rendered in order to tell a broader story about the institutional culture. The details are selected to depict and display general phenomena about people and place. I tell the stories, paint the portrait—"from the inside out."

It is only in retrospect that I recognize the origins of my interest in portraiture derive partly from early experiences as the subject of an artist's brush. The aesthetic, interpersonal experiences of being sketched, painted, and carved had a profound effect on my views of myself, the artists, and the medium; and convinced me of the power of the form for artist, subject, and audience. Then my more recent intellectual experiences brought sharper focus to this work. Three years ago I casually entered a scholars' seminar expecting rare moments of pleasure and insight, as well as the more common experiences of deliberation, even boredom. However, I emerged from the seminar with new designs for research and writing, new thoughts about the forms of inquiry best suited to my style and temperament, and with new understandings of schools as cultural windows.

Stephen Graubard, the inspired editor of *Daedalus: The Journal of the Academy of Arts and Sciences*, was the major protagonist. Wanting to develop an issue on secondary schools, he gathered together leading scholars whose work centered on the history, policies, and practices of schools; the philosophies and goals shaping school curricula; the state of the art in pedagogy; and the developmental phenomena associated with adolescence. The disciplines of history, sociology, psychology, economics, and political science were well represented. As with all of the many groups Graubard deftly assembles, it was an illustrious panel of scholars whose diverse and passionate interests promised a lively exchange.

Although dominated by academics, the seminar also included practitioners in the field—people who primarily saw themselves as activists, whose perspectives were more immediate, subjective, pragmatic, and uncompromising than their academic colleagues. The practitioners were also considered leaders in their field with exemplary records as thoughtful, purposeful, and skilled superintendents, school administrators, teachers, and counselors. They came from broad geographic areas, represented different constituencies, and possessed a variety of styles and approaches that matched their daily work challenges. Even though the seminar offered the rare opportunity for formal and informal conversations between theorists and activists, the tone and substance of the discussions were dominated by the academics, who were more used to the carefully fashioned intellectual discourse.



A secondary imbalance in the seminar group reflected the administrators' dominance over the teachers and counselors. Not only were their numbers greater, but their voices were clearer and louder. They were more practiced in voicing proclamations, defending and rationalizing their positions, and engaging in public forums with other adults. The lost voices, therefore, were from those closest to the educational process, to the daily life of schools. With no students present and the token representation of teachers, one would have predicted a conversation full of abstractions and assumptions, largely shaped by intellectual understandings rather than emotional responses. From the top administrators, one could have anticipated bureaucratic language filled with the rhetoric of efficiency, cost-effectiveness, management style, and organizational behavior.

To some extent the stereotypes held firm and the anticipated differences in language, style, and thought patterns were reinforced. But there were memorable occasions when roles were switched; when the practitioners became the idealists, and the academics spoke like pragmatists; when the practitioners talked in abstractions and the academics referred to "real life." One of the superintendents, for example, had a subtle, smooth, charismatic style that mesmerized listeners. His messages were full of optimism, hope, and courage. They were inspirational lessons designed to move people beyond the constraints of reality, not embedded in management rhetoric or bounded by fiscal resources. If one had entered the room blindfolded it would have been difficult to identify his role or his perspective. Without the benefit of a label he sounded like a combination philosopher, spiritualist, and psychologist. These varied identities and surprisingly hybrid views of seminar members enlivened the discussion, and helped to erode the boundaries between academics and school people.

A third imbalance, less vividly recognizable, was between the "publics" and the "privates." Although the *Daedalus* seminar had been generously sponsored by St. Paul's School, an elite private school in New Hampshire, I recall a definite tilting toward public school issues. Of course, the great proportion of our country's young people attend public schools, and the greatest educational dilemmas and deprivations lie in the public arena. But the common assumption that the private schools were thriving and flourishing was unsettling, and was experienced by some members as a disregard for the great variations in success and resources among them. This asymmetry between academics and practitioners, between administrators and frontline people, and between publics and privates was neither surprising nor dysfunctional to the discus-

sion. After all, *Daedalus* was not seeking a democratic forum of representative voices. It wanted the tough thinking of intellectuals inspired by the realism of activists, and it wanted the focus of conversation primarily on the most widespread, universal problems and prospects facing adolescent school children.

The seminar met several times over a two-year period, beginning with general, far-reaching discussions about the state of American secondary schooling, the pressing dilemmas it faces, the differences between past and present, the developmental issues of contemporary adolescents, and moving to more focused exchanges about what questions should be investigated in depth. After we had met together a few times, we began to hear echoes of earlier conversations and recognize redundancies and blind spots. As with any collection of academics, people brought to the discussion table their pet frameworks for viewing the world. Often attached to disciplinary backgrounds, these frameworks both clarified and distorted our views of life in secondary schools. The multiple lenses that we looked through offered different, often opposing, views of reality, but it was difficult for each of us to shift windows on the scene, to consider contrary perspectives. This is not an unusual phenomenon of intellectual debate. The various theories and observations are often the inspiration for lively exchanges and collective enlightenment. But the rigid declaration of views and perspectives, and the rehearsing of abstractions, can take the discussion further and further away from the reality that is being considered.

As the conversation swirled around me and as I participated in my share of obfuscation I began, along with others, to recognize the paradoxical exchange of elegant abstraction and dissonance with "reality." Or to put it more strongly, the seesaw effect of theorizing and wrong-headedness. As the frustrations increased, it became apparent to many of us that we needed more information about the culture of secondary schools and the daily experiences of the people who inhabit them, that we needed descriptions of life in schools that conveyed pictures of them, and that these portrayals needed to be relatively unencumbered by theoretical frames or rigid perspectives. The vivid descriptions could provide current material from which to work—road maps, texts of cultures that seemed distant from our abstractions.

Interestingly, it was hoped that these reality-based pictures would act as a counterbalance to a second tendency in the discussion, the temptation to speak autobiographically. In searching for "relevant" material we often found ourselves referring to our own experiences in schools or to those of our children. There were great sweeps in the conversation

from highly abstract descriptions of secondary schooling to vivid, charged anecdotal references. Both extremes seemed inadequate—the first guided by distant assumptions, and the second shaped by retrospection and passion.

The third tendency in our discussions was again related to a liability common to social scientists: the tendency to focus on what is wrong rather than search for what is right, to describe pathology rather than health. It seemed easy for us to recite all of the problems teachers and students confront and create in secondary schools—the truancy and dropout rates, the vandalism, the alcohol and drug addiction, the illiteracy of graduates, the teacher “burnout,” the undisciplined curriculum, the rigid tracking, the racial warfare, on and on—but it seemed difficult, even awkward, to find the goodness and talk about the successes. There were some contrapuntal tendencies, scholars who pointed to contemporary achievements—a historian who saw great strides in the success rate of secondary schools as a mechanism of democratization; a sociologist who claimed that many of those issues that academics regard as persistent, irreconcilable dilemmas of education are not perceived as such by practicing teachers, who resolve them in the immediacy of practice. But the strong themes of conversation were distressingly pessimistic.

Certainly, a prominent tradition of social science inquiry has been the uncovering of malignancies and the search for their cures. This has been particularly true for researchers studying schools. The negative regard of schools and the documentation of their failure are shaped by profound feelings of dissatisfaction and disappointment among scholars and lay people. Schools have not fulfilled our great expectations. They have not produced a civilized, literate populace; they have not eliminated deep inequalities; they have not encouraged creativity, innovation, or social change. The list of their inadequacies and failures are endless.<sup>1</sup> The great expectations remain unmet while the origins of the expectations continue to be largely unexamined. Surely some of the complaints reflect minimal requirements and are clearly warranted, and others serve as important goals towards which school people can strive. But still other expectations hang on, impossible in their idealism, and distort efforts to improve schools.<sup>2</sup> In recent years scholars who study schools have become increasingly aware of this tendency towards negativism, the pessimistic thrust of a large body of research, and have begun to ask a different series of questions. The inquiry begins by examining what works, identifying good schools, asking what is right, here, and whether it is replicable, transportable, to other environs.<sup>3</sup>

Stephen Graubard sought to respond to the three persistent tempta-

tions that plagued our conversations: the tendency toward theoretical abstraction, toward autobiography, and toward negativism. Not seeking to rectify these common academic vulnerabilities, but searching for a way to counterbalance the tendencies, he asked three members of the seminar to do life drawings of real schools in action. Robert Coles of Harvard University, Philip Jackson of the University of Chicago, and I became the seminar's representatives in “the field.” Each of us had had extensive experience in social observation, an intense and long interest in the lives of schools, and a burning curiosity about the contemporary scene of adolescents and high schools. We also had enormous admiration for one another's work, respected the great differences in our orientations and styles, and were eager to collaborate on a project together.

Three schools were chosen by Graubard with the help of colleagues and school people throughout the country who were knowledgeable about the educational landscape. First, we searched for goodness—exemplary schools that might tell us something about the myriad definitions of educational success and how it is achieved. Second, we wanted diversity among the secondary schools—diversity of philosophies, resources, populations, and type. And third, we were eager to have geographic representation. Our selection was not scientific. No random sample was taken, no large-scale opinion surveys were sent out in order to identify good schools. They were chosen because of their reputation among school people, the high opinion of them shared by their inhabitants and surrounding communities, and because they offered easy and generous entry.

St. Paul's School, the major sponsor of the *Daedalus* project, was an obvious and immediate choice for representing elite, private schools. Celebrating its 125th anniversary, this seemed a ripe, ceremonial occasion for ritual and scrutiny. Believing that St. Paul's should do more than focus inward, William Oates, the Rector, had suggested to Graubard that this was a fine opportunity to look more broadly at secondary education in general. Despite the fact that St. Paul's provided the resources for the *Daedalus* project, Oates was convincing in his wish that his school be regarded with an honest and critical eye. He was not seeking a puff piece or a public relations story when he agreed that we should visit, but an unencumbered, rich description by practiced observers—an outsider's perspective.

George Washington Carver High School in Atlanta, Georgia, is a public school with a lower-class Black population. Long known as the dumping ground of Atlanta schools, it has recently made a dramatic turnaround under the charismatic leadership of a new Black principal. The school's recovery has been watched closely and firmly supported by

Alonzo Crim, Atlanta's smooth and forceful superintendent of schools. The connections to Carver High were almost as immediate as the St. Paul's entree. Crim was a contributing member of the *Daedalus* seminar and kindly offered Carver as an example of inspired, inner-city education. At the other end of the spectrum from the privileged, confident culture of St. Paul's, Carver seemed an interesting and provocative contrast.

Highland Park High School, the third chosen, is in a suburban, upper middle-class community northwest of Chicago. With a large Jewish population, it has a reputation as an exclusive enclave dominated by aggressive, bright, and ambitious students. The school's homogeneous image of achievement and success does not match the diverse and complicated reality inside. With the prevailing themes of ambition, success, and stress, Highland Park represented a third cultural window—one that was neither comfortable in its abundance, like St. Paul's, nor struggling with problems of inequality and low status, like Carver. St. Paul's, the elite academy; Carver, the dynamic inner city school; and Highland Park, the prestigious upper middle-class suburban school, do not represent the great variety of schools in this country. But seminar members thought that they reflected the extremes of the broad range of educational options available in this society, diverse geographic regions, and striking differences in student and teacher populations, and were, therefore, useful settings for our inquiry.

Just as the choice of the three schools was not accomplished scientifically, so too were the form and methods of inquiry used by each of us not classically designed. In order to take full advantage of the diverse perspectives of the three observers, we decided not to define rigid a priori research agendas or consult with one another about our plan of action. We were to produce three distinctly individual documents, not collaborative pieces. It was decided that each of us would separately visit each school for three or four days, observe, and write without conversation or interaction. After collecting descriptive data on the schools we were to create pieces that captured their lives, rhythms, and rituals. No other methodological boundaries or strategies were stipulated in advance of our visits.

The observers agreed that such fast and intuitive work could never be characterized as classical, systematic research; that we would inevitably be taking great risks of interpretation; and that our written pieces would reveal at least as much about the authors as they did about the school settings. We were not doing the carefully documented, longitudinal work of ethnographers, although we were interested in many of the

same qualitative and interpretive phenomena. We were not creating holistic case studies that would capture multi-dimensional contexts and intersecting processes, although we wanted to describe schools as cultural organizations and uncover the implicit values that guided their structures and decision making. As a matter of fact, before embarking on this adventure, it was easier to know what we would *not* be able to accomplish in a few days (even with our practiced eyes, years of experience in schools, and great curiosity) than it was to know what we might be able to produce.

I suggested we call our pieces "portraits" because I thought it would allow us a measure of freedom from the traditions and constraints of disciplined research methods, and because I hoped that our work would be defined by aesthetic, as well as empirical and analytic, dimensions.<sup>4</sup> I doubt that my two observer colleagues necessarily shared these goals of scientific and artistic integration. Perhaps they did not even feel inhibited by their long years of research training and the usual commitments of tough skepticism, standards of reliability, the dogged pursuit of evidence, and very-close-to-the-vest interpretations. After all, part of the adventure of this exercise was the unshared assumptions and individual goals each of us took to the field.

Ironically, I discovered that rather than being a burden, my research training supported and enhanced the development of this emerging form of inquiry. The rapid-fire work of portraiture used many of the same strategies and techniques that I had used in the longitudinal ethnographic research of my earlier studies. The systematic, detailed observational work that had been part of my prior long-term research helped me document the subtle exchanges and behavioral details that were so important to the larger picture. And the thematic in-depth interviews that have been central to data gathering in my previous work guided the quality of my interactions with respondents, and helped me know the scope and boundaries of a useful conversation.<sup>5</sup>

Not only were the techniques of observation, interviewing, and ethnographic description similar to my earlier research experiences, but the values and assumptions that have shaped my work also held firm with the creation of portraits. For example, I visited the schools with a commitment to holistic, complex, contextual descriptions of reality; with a belief that environments and processes should be examined from the outsider's more distant perspective and the insider's immediate, subjective view; that the truth lies in the integration of various perspectives rather than in the choice of one as dominant and "objective"; that I must always listen for the deviant voice as an important version of the truth (and as a useful

indicator of what the culture or social group defines as normal), not disregard it as outside of the central pattern. I also believe, as did those artists who painted me, that portraits—and research—should be critical and generous, allowing subjects to reveal their many dimensions and strengths, but also attempting to pierce through the smooth and correct veneers. Given these empirical tendencies and value positions, it is not surprising that the portraits I have written move from the inside out, search out unspoken (often unrecognized) institutional and interpersonal conflicts, listen for minority voices and deviant views, and seek to capture the essences, rather than the visible symbols, of school life.

It is in this conscious expression of *personal* intellectual and value positions that one sees some of the differences between “pure” research and portraiture.<sup>6</sup> In the former, the investigator behaves in a counter-intuitive manner, always the consummate skeptic. He or she tries not to let personal inclinations shape the inquiry. Portraiture, on the other hand, permits these same inclinations to flourish, admits the shaping hand of the artist, and is less concerned with anticipated problems of replication.<sup>7</sup> Working quickly and at great risk, the social scientist who writes the portrait is more of a “creator” than the “pure” research colleague. The portraitist rapidly selects themes that emerge as central to the landscape and vigorously pursues those themes in an attempt to establish their prevalence and centrality.<sup>8</sup> The pace is accelerated, choices are quickly made about the avenues to pursue, and much is left out—either unnoticed and unrecorded, or consciously excluded.

Even though the observer is more conscious of defining the canvas and shaping the connections among central themes, portraits seek to capture the insiders’ views of what is important. Paradoxically, the observer is aware of offering shape to the portrait, and at the same time is aware of being shaped by the context. In my visits to schools, I did not enter with preconceived notions of key themes or a specific list of predetermined questions but tried to learn early what the inhabitants regarded as central issues.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes teachers’, administrators’, and students’ concerns were easily identifiable because they were spoken of by large numbers of people or pointed to by respondents who were the best informed by virtue of their roles or positions. In St. Paul’s, for instance, everyone made reference to the shaping and determining influences of history, the power and certainty of tradition, and the comforts they provide. The Rector spoke of it as he bid farewell to the Seniors and their parents on graduation day. Many of the students enjoyed the rituals, ceremony, and clarity attached to the historical traditions of daily chapel. Dressed in the modern casual garb of L. L. Bean and Calvin Klein, they crowded into

assigned seats at morning chapel and experienced feelings of community and enlightenment in the Gothic structure. Certainty, abundance, and history permitted creativity and risk-taking, dramatically expressed in the pedagogy, classroom processes and curricula developed by teachers. It is not that there was no one who resisted the historical imperative or struggled against the classical, unquestioned institutional forms. Certainly there were voices who offered criticism and resistance. Yet even their hushed rage and muted frustration confirmed the strength of the phenomenon of rootedness and tradition.

At George Washington Carver in Atlanta, there was an equally strong and identifiable contrary theme. The principal, with his passion, force, and energy, was fighting against historical imperatives and trying to forge a new image. Everything he did was calculated to undo old perceptions, reverse entrenched habits, and inculcate new behavioral and attitudinal forms. The new image and the proud rhetoric preceded the resistant institutional changes which lagged behind. Immediately, an observer could recognize these themes. They were shouted out by inspirational signs prominently displayed in the hall; they were part of a slick slide show on Carver the principal wanted me to watch *before* I visited the real place; they were part of the harangue a loving and angry teacher gave to the graduating seniors when he feared they would not live up to the image of correctness, civility, and poise at the graduation ceremony.

Sometimes the repetitive refrains, the persistent themes, were not voiced as forcefully and clearly as they were at Carver and St. Paul’s, but I found that they emerged at all of the schools I visited and became the central dimensions of the portraits. It is in finding the connections between these themes that the observer begins to give shape to the portrait. In Highland Park, for example, teachers, students, administrators, and counselors spoke about the tough competition, rigid hierarchies, and enormous stress experienced by students. There were obviously different perspectives concerning these phenomena. The more successful and rewarded students were less critical of the brutal competition, but they always feared losing their lofty status and worried about slipping down the steep pyramid. The low status, non-achieving students were more likely to be critical of the competition, seek rewards outside of school, and find ways of punishing the achievers. The broad range of students in the middle often felt lost and without identity or voice. The creative and analytic task of portraiture lies in exploring and describing these competing and dissonant perspectives, searching for their connections to other phenomena, and selecting the primary pieces of the story line for display.

One searches for coherence, for bringing order to phenomena that



people may experience as chaotic or unrelated. The search has the qualities of an investigation. It is determined, uncompromising, and increasingly focused. All of one's senses are used to try to decipher what is important and the quality of things. Decisions are made about what must be left out in order to pursue what one thinks are central and critical properties. The piecing together of the portrait has elements of puzzle building and quilt making. How does one fit the jagged, uneven pieces together? When the pieces are in place, what designs appear? A tapestry emerges, a textured piece with shapes and colors that create moments of interest and emphasis. Detailed stories are told in order to illuminate more general phenomena; a subtle nuance of voice or posture reveals a critical attitude. What evolves is a piece of writing that conveys the tone, style and tempo of the school environment as well as its more static structures and behavioral processes. Words are chosen that try to create sensations and evoke visions for the reader. It is a palpable form, highly textured—what Jerome Bruner has referred to as "life writing."

In my visits to schools, I was continually overwhelmed by people's openness and generosity. Most seemed to welcome the opportunity to talk about themselves, the school, and the quality of their work. I was always very explicit about my purposes and role, and my honesty seemed to enhance people's willingness to speak candidly. Because of the accelerated pace of my work, there was less time for the elaborate rituals of entry used by most ethnographers. Conversations and interactions tended to be very intense and focused. Almost everyone I interviewed and many whom I observed thanked me for the opportunity to explore their thoughts, voice their ideas, and "learn what I think." Some were embarrassed by unleashed feelings that seemed to explode from them during our conversations. Said one tearful man quietly, "I trust that you will be careful with what I said . . . guard my hurt." A thoughtful young woman echoed the feelings I had had when I was the subject of an artist's work—the palpable sensation of complete and focused attention. "When you look at me so directly and listen to me so intensely I feel what I used to feel when my mother brushed my hair in the evenings," she said with surprise and poignancy.

Even though many expressed feelings of trust and personal connection to me, these exchanges were not designed to be friendly conversations or therapeutic interactions. Occasionally, there were moments of playfulness or catharsis. But for the most part, the exchanges were information gathering sessions with parameters and depth defined by the respondent and by my insistent, often tough, probes. During almost every interview I took long and detailed notes, usually trying to record

the exact wording of the respondents. Observations of classes, sports events, play rehearsals, and teacher meetings were written in great detail as I documented verbal exchanges, tempo and mood shifts, as well as my impressionistic responses to what I was seeing. When spontaneous interactions occurred that did not permit an immediate record, or on the rare occasions when a person seemed uncomfortable with my note taking, I would find a place to write my recollections as soon as time would permit. After full days, and often evenings of observation, I would leave the field with pages and pages of detailed narratives. Once home, I would plow through the notes, filling in the blanks and clarifying confusions while my memory was still fresh. This initial perusal helped me identify the emerging themes and decide on a plan of action for the next day. My verbatim notes became the text for the interpretive, summary pieces I would compose as the day's final effort.

The observational records and interview material were supported by a thorough analysis of the school's written documents. During and after data collection I would review the published and unpublished written material in order to get a sense of how the school wanted to be perceived; how it sought to characterize activities and events; and who seemed to be the leading public figures, the most popular symbolic images. I analyzed, therefore, current and past school newspapers, yearbooks, and student literary and poetry collections. The school catalogues were closely reviewed in order to document curricular structure and substance, and to be able to contrast the advertised content with the processes I had observed. Finally, I was given access to unpublished reports on racial and ethnic distributions; on attendance, truancy, and disciplinary records; on college attendance rates and post-graduate vocational choices; and on departmental evaluations and faculty committee decisions. All of these written records served as important sources of information, perspective, and contrast with the descriptive data I collected.

The portraits emerged more slowly and deliberately than the gathering of data. In preparation for writing I would read my daily records and summaries several times over, often taking notes on my notes and offering tentative hypotheses and interpretations. When there were apparent contradictions, I would search for the roots of the dissonance. When I began to find persistent repetitions and elaborations of similar ideas, I would underscore them and find traces of the central themes in other contexts. Slowly the skeleton of the story would begin to emerge, filled in over time by detailed evidence, subtle description, and multiple perspectives. At this point the task would shift from one of searching for evidence and distilling themes to one of composition and aesthetic form,

from finding the plot to telling the story. During this transition from empiricism to aesthetics I took great care not to distort the material, not to get seduced by the story's momentum or let a character take on fictional proportions. In my effort to remain faithful to the descriptive data, I would frequently return to my original notes, offer several examples of a single phenomenon, and make extravagant use of direct quotations.

The three initial pieces on St. Paul's, Carver, and Highland Park were followed by three more expansive and complicated portraits on Milton Academy, John F. Kennedy High School, and Brookline High School. Inspired by my early experiences, I was eager to explore further the methods of social science portraiture and learn more about the culture of high schools. The second wave of schools were chosen to parallel the resources, populations, and structures of the original three. That is, I selected an elite academy, an inner city school, and a suburban school, all recognized as exemplary, all receptive to my observations and scrutiny. In order to make data collection easier and more efficient, the second round of schools were all located in the Northeast, in relative proximity to one another. I relinquished geographic variety in an effort to spend more time in each place. For instance, Brookline High, a school of extraordinary reputation and enormous variety, is located in a suburb of Boston. Less than ten miles away from home and work, I was able to spend more than three times as many days in the field than I had at St. Paul's, Carver, or Highland Park. My observations at Milton Academy and Kennedy High, though not as extensive, also exceeded my first round of visits by several days. The expanded time frame allowed me to explore methodological questions of pace, tempo, and validity as well as compose portraits of greater complexity and depth. In this second round of portraits I was still intent upon conveying the life and immediacy of the school cultures, but I also wanted to probe issues in greater depth, have more time to follow intriguing leads, and find a clearer balance between the coherent story and the jagged inconsistencies.

Not only did I spend more days in the field when I visited Brookline, Kennedy, and Milton Academy; I also found that my growing experience in the strategies of portraiture made my visits more productive and efficient. I learned more comfortable and articulate ways of expressing the purposes and goals of my work; I grew more easy with adolescents and their styles and modes of expression; and I became more adept and detailed in my note taking. As my techniques became increasingly systematic and my style more adaptive, I also found it easier to take the interpersonal and interpretive risks that are often necessary in such highly personal work. It was not unusual, for example, for me to express ranges

of emotion and affect in order to gain a better sense of a respondent's perspectives or feelings. Some exchanges were purposefully confrontational, others were supportive and receptive. But rarely did I proceed through the course of a day with a flat consistency and evenness in my approaches to various people or situations. With increased experience in the genre of portraiture, therefore, I became more disciplined and systematic on the one hand, and more eclectic and risk-taking on the other.<sup>10</sup> The longer portraits reflect somewhat longer stays in the field, greater experience in the method, and more confidence in using myself as interpreter.

In some sense, the second wave of portraits resemble the more painstaking, deliberate approach of the painter who carefully fashioned my adult image "from the inside out." The first wave of portraits, more like sketches in their length and contours, are reminiscent of the charcoal drawing done of me at eight in my mother's rock garden. Ironically, the quick, intuitive, earlier pieces render a more coherent, distilled portrayal. With greater penetration in the school settings, the later portraits evolved as more complicated pieces which tend to present contrasting perspectives and several angles on events and people. These pieces move closer to the often fragmented, complex quality of life in these settings, and they inevitably lose the coherence and certainty of the earlier portraits. In his essay on "Thick Description," in the *Interpretation of Culture*, Clifford Geertz writes about this intriguing phenomenon of the inverse relations between coherence and in-depth knowledge. As we get closer and closer to understanding the culture of a social group, the anatomy of an institution, we recognize the inevitable inconsistencies and dissonant themes. Smooth coherence fades into jagged incoherence as we grow less certain of a single story and discover the myriad tales to be told.<sup>11</sup>

The data for these portraits were collected over a period of three years. My first visit, to St. Paul's School, was in the winter of 1979, and my final visit, to Kennedy High School, took place in the fall of 1982. Although I made every effort to treat each school separately and not let my experiences at one influence my perceptions of another, I am certain that the order of my visits must have had some impact on my work in each setting. For example, the abundance and splendor of St. Paul's must have, to some extent, shaped my perception of deprivation and poverty during my next visit at Carver; just as the subtlety and understated expression of authority at the first school probably exaggerated my views of the charismatic, dramatic display of power at the second. My third visit, in the late fall of 1980, was to Highland Park. The second wave of observations at Brookline, Milton Academy, and Kennedy took place in fall,

1981; spring, 1982; and fall, 1982, respectively. In every case I collected the data in uninterrupted, consecutive days, believing that I would gain a much richer picture from total immersion in the schools than I would from intermittent visits. In fact, I found that the opportunity to live in these settings for several days, the chance to return immediately to unfinished business or unsolved puzzles the following day, and to enter into the field without distraction or interruption was a great benefit to my work. Description, interpretation, and analysis could proceed in tandem as I worked daily on the retrieval and review of my field notes. And each portrait was completely crafted before I moved on to data collection in the next school.

Although there were two distinct phases of data collection that produced three "sketches" followed by three "portraits" of high schools, this volume is not organized to conform to the chronology of visits, but to school types. It begins with urban school portraits, first looking at George Washington Carver High in Atlanta, then at John F. Kennedy High School. Located in Riverdale, one of the most scenic and affluent neighborhoods in New York, Kennedy draws its population from as far away as West Harlem and the Inwood section of upper Manhattan. Each morning two thousand Black and Hispanic students travel for more than an hour on the Broadway subway to get to Kennedy. They are joined by an upper middle-class, largely Jewish group from affluent sections of Riverdale; working-class Irish; and newly middle-class Blacks and Browns from Riverdale's flatlands and valley. Built ten years ago, Kennedy offers the compelling story of urban school pioneering—the brave and determined attempts to build a stable, pluralistic community; the balancing of forces between school-based autonomy and connection to the wider city and state bureaucracies; the negotiating of tensions between the school and the nearby community.

The suburban high schools, Highland Park and Brookline, are presented next. With a rich and proud history as an excellent school, for the past fifteen years Brookline has been experiencing the shock waves of change. Once a relatively elite, upper middle-class enclave, it has now become a school with a diverse racial, ethnic, and social class mix. Once a school that focused primarily on preparing students for prestigious colleges and universities, it now has a more diversified, eclectic curriculum designed to appeal to a broader range of students. Once referred to exclusively as an example of the best in "suburban" education, now many administrators and faculty consciously call Brookline an "urban" school. Not only has there been a significant transformation in the student popu-

lation at Brookline; there are also bold attempts to rearrange and restructure power and decision making in the school. The new headmaster brought a different ideological stance towards responsibility and power at all levels of the school structure. With shifts in authority networks, decision-making bodies, and patterns of interaction among student groups, Brookline High is a wonderful example of an institution evolving a balance between a sturdy and abundant history and deliberate efforts at change.

The third section, on elite schools, includes the portraits of St. Paul's School and Milton Academy. Although steeped in history and prestige, life at Milton does not have the smooth certainty and preciousness of St. Paul's. Less than an hour's drive from Boston, the city backdrop is a much-used metaphor for Milton's attempts to combine the asylum and safety of an elite private school with the dynamic cosmopolitanism of city life. A portion of the day students arrive on the subway from Boston and "they bring the city with them." Their presence is an expression of the school's "intercourse with the wider world." Milton is proud of its windows that look out on the wider, more diversified scene; but it also practices a highly committed brand of education that to some extent underscores the boundaries between school and society. Some call it "tender loving care," others refer to it as "holistic medicine." Whatever its name, Milton has had a historic commitment to "humanistic" education that survives today. This educational philosophy values the individual, attends to the social and psychological as well as the intellectual dimensions of students, and views education as a great, uncertain adventure. The humanism of the pedagogical process at Milton combines with a purposefully decentralized authority structure to produce a highly fragile, dynamic and questioning school culture.

Throughout the text, I use the real names of the high schools I studied and the real names of their headmasters and principals. The rest of the cast of characters are given pseudonyms. The use of real names marks a significant departure from the classic traditions of social science. Usually pseudonyms are given to people and places in order to disguise their identities and assure some measure of anonymity. The practice of identifying the schools and their leaders by name was the form originally used in the *Daedalus* pieces. The journal's editor and school administrators decided that the identities of schools were a compelling part of the narratives, but that the less public figures (who had not entered into the original publication agreements) deserved some protection from public display. My decision to use the actual names of these high schools, there-

fore, was partly based on my wish to keep the forms consistent throughout the volume. But more important, I wanted to use this opportunity to honor the schools and make their work more widely visible.

Admittedly, the high schools portrayed in this book had an unusual degree of self-confidence, saw themselves as healthy and resilient institutions, and were relatively unthreatened by public scrutiny. Some school leaders believed that teachers, administrators, and parents in other schools might learn something from their stories. Others saw the study as an excellent opportunity for self-scrutiny and institutional diagnosis. It is easy, of course, to agree to disclosure when you anticipate that the praise will be consistently laudatory. However, these portraits are far from eulogistic proclamations. They are admiring and highly critical, and it was in the schools' tolerance for tough scrutiny that I saw the first evidence of their organizational strength and goodness.

Not only did I want to honor these schools, applaud their efforts and acclaim their successes; I also recognized that it was important for readers to be able to place these high schools in context—visualize the terrain, the community, the neighborhood streets, and the people. As a form that is partly shaped by aesthetic considerations, portraiture is to some extent a visual medium, full of powerful imagery. If I were to mask details of context or provide misleading descriptors, for example, I would begin to compromise the portrait. If I merely chose to change the institutions' names, without making any other contextual transformations, the schools would be immediately identifiable to all those who were either knowledgeable or curious. The decision to use the high schools' and leaders' real names, therefore, reflected the school people's generosity and confidence, my wish to publicly applaud their efforts, and my decision to portray the settings in vivid, exacting detail.

This book offers a rare view of human experience in each of these high schools. It is an important angle for social scientists who have tended to use methods of analysis that have precluded the perspectives and voices of the schools' inhabitants.<sup>12</sup> It is a critical lens for teachers and administrators who rarely have the opportunity to see their schools "whole" because in the immediacy of practice they must inevitably take on the narrow view connected to their roles. In these portraits they can see themselves (or people with similar habits, inclinations, and values with whom they can identify) in relation to a broader frame; as individuals within a complex network of personalities, social groups, structures, and cultures. It is also an intriguing view for parents of adolescents, or prospective adolescents, who are often excluded from high school life because of unwelcoming bureaucratic procedures, or their own attempts

to keep the clear boundaries between home and school, or because their offspring are typically silent on the subject of school life.

Not only does this book offer a penetrating look inside high schools, it also explores the goodness of these schools. Purposefully, I chose to study good schools—schools that were described as good by faculty, students, parents, and communities; that had distinct reputations as fine institutions with clearly articulated goals and identities.<sup>13</sup> My descriptions of good high schools were, of course, shaped by my views on institutional goodness—a broader, more generous perspective than the one commonly used in the literature on "effective" schools. My first assumption about goodness was that it is not a static or absolute quality that can be quickly measured by a single indicator of success or effectiveness.<sup>14</sup> I do not see goodness as a reducible quality that is simply reflected in achievement scores, numbers of graduates attending college, literacy rates, or attendance records. I view each of these outcomes as significant indicators of some level of success in schools. And I view these as potent, shorthand signs of workable schools, but each taken separately, or even added together, does not equal goodness in schools. "Goodness" is a much more complicated notion that refers to what some social scientists describe as the school's "ethos," not discrete additive elements.<sup>15</sup> It refers to the mixture of parts that produce a whole. The whole includes people, structures, relationships, ideology, goals, intellectual substance, motivation, and will. It includes measurable indices such as attendance records, truancy rates, vandalism to property, percentages going on to college. But it also encompasses less tangible, more elusive qualities that can only be discerned through close, vivid description, through subtle nuances, through detailed narratives that reveal the sustaining values of an institution. It is important to know, for example, *how* the attendance officer seduces truant adolescents back to school—his strategies of persuasion, cajoling, and rewarding—not just the attendance records. Likewise, it is important to know whether students experience the caring, individualized attention of "humanistic" education, not merely be aware of the ideological rhetoric voiced by faculty and administrators.<sup>16</sup>

In recognizing goodness as a quality that refers to the complex whole, we also see it as situationally determined, not abstracted from context. In the search for goodness, it is essential to look within the particular setting that offers unique constraints, inhibitions, and opportunities for its expression. We have little understanding of how to interpret a behavior, an attitude, a value unless we see it embedded in a context and have some idea of the history and evolution of the ideals and norms of that setting.<sup>17</sup> From the more explicit physical dimensions of the

school's ecology to the more interpretive dimensions of individual styles, group norms, and the organization's collective assumptions, it is important to regard goodness as a quality of institutional life expressed in context. This is not to say that some elements of goodness are not transportable or reproducible in other settings. But I do mean to say that the interpretation of goodness is only possible in context, and that the attempt to transpose "the goods" to other settings requires an awareness of the ecology and dynamics of the original context.

In these portraits, then, goodness is seen as a holistic dimension whose interpretation requires an embeddedness in the context. Through these portraits, one also recognizes that goodness is imperfect and changing. One of the persistent problems with social scientists' pursuit of effective schools, or their critiques of poor schools, is that they often view them as static and judge them against standards of perfection. Typically, their methods of inquiry are ahistorical and do not allow for an evolutionary view. A snapshot is taken at a moment in time and judgments are made about the success or worth of the school. But schools are changing institutions (despite the anachronistic caste that often plagues their public image) and recognitions of their goodness should reflect these transformations. For instance, we would think very differently about one school that got stuck in habits of mediocrity and a second school that exhibited similar habits but had travelled from chaotic, terrible beginnings, emerged into mediocrity, and was working towards improvement and change. Our perspective on the second school would recognize the changes over time, consciousness about weaknesses, the motivation to act, and the vision of future goals. Here goodness not only reflects the current workings of the institution but also how far it has come and where it is headed. The concern with evidence of institutional transformation is also linked with a definition of goodness that permits imperfection. The assumption is that no school will ever achieve perfection. It is inconceivable that any institution would ever establish an equilibrium that satisfied all of its inhabitants, where values closely matched behaviors, where there was no tension between tradition and change. Even the most impressive schools show striking moments of vulnerability, inconsistency, and awkwardness. It is not the absence of weakness that marks a good school, but how a school attends to the weakness. As a matter of fact, we will discover through these portraits that one of the qualities of good schools is their recognition and articulation of imperfection. Weakness, made visible, can be confronted directly and worked with over time. Goodness in schools, therefore, anticipates change and

imperfection, and the former usually ushers in the disorientation and imbalance of the latter.

In offering this more generous, less absolutist vision of goodness I am in no way trying to compromise standards of excellence in education. Rather I am seeking to formulate a view that recognizes the myriad ways in which goodness gets expressed in various settings; that admits imperfection as an inevitable ingredient of goodness and refers instead to the inhabitants' handling of perceived weaknesses; that looks backward and forward to institutional change and the staged quality of goodness; that reveals goodness as a holistic concept, a complex mixture of variables whose expression can only be recognized through a detailed narrative of institutional and interpersonal processes.<sup>18</sup>

The final chapter of this book is an examination of the ways goodness was expressed in these six high schools. Despite their unique stories, there are themes that emerge in all of the settings, often in different forms and with different levels of success and purposiveness. One could not possibly generalize to the broad universe of high schools from these six cases. But the interpretive, in-depth analyses in this volume uncover compelling organizational themes worthy of further disciplined study.

In each of these schools we find intriguing and important lessons about educational goodness. We discover that good high schools reveal a sustained and visible ideological stance that guards them against powerful and shifting societal intrusions; that what is often perceived as solitary leadership in schools is fueled by partnerships and alliances with intimate, trusted associates. We discover that the qualities traditionally identified as female—nurturance, receptivity, responsiveness to relationships and context—are critical to the expression of a non-caricatured masculine leadership. Good leaders redefine the classic male domain of high school principals. We also discover that good high schools offer teachers the opportunity for autonomous expression, a wide angle on organizational participation and responsibility, and a degree of protection from the distorted social stereotypes that plague their profession.

In good high schools students are treated with fearless and empathetic attention by adults. Teachers know individual students well and are knowledgeable about adolescence as a developmental period. Their comfort with adolescents is expressed in the subtleties of humor and in the teachers' interpretation of and response to acts of deviance. Good schools exhibit coherent and sturdy authority structures which give support and legitimacy to the individual disciplinary gestures of teachers. Although adults and adolescents in high schools tend to focus a great



*deal of their attention on the social and psychological dimensions of the environment, good schools are also preoccupied with the rationale, coherence, and integrity of their academic curriculum. These intellectual considerations are often focused on resolving the perceived tensions between equity among student groups and the quality of academic pursuits.*

Finally, the students in good high schools feel visible and accountable. They balance the pulls of peer group association against the constraints of adult requirements. And they embrace the tensions between the utilitarian promises of schooling and the playful adventures of learning. Each of these good schools portrayed in this book imperfectly display these themes. The final chapter is rich with vivid and textured examples of how these themes get expressed through personality, structures, interactions, ideology, habits, rituals, and symbols.

# PART ONE

## URBAN PORTRAITS