Bring Honor and Meaning to Learning

by Jim Burke

Mark, who earned a D in my college prep English class last semester, patiently waits for me to finish talking with a few students after class. Two other friends of his wait with him. As it happens, these students also earned Ds last semester in my class. They are great kids, though not great students, and each will, when they feel inclined, do exceptional work and raise the level of class discussion dramatically with a comment or question.

Seeing that I am finished with the other students, Mark comes forward and hands me a permission form which says only that he will be gone all next week. I have no authority to deny his petition. Because it does not say why he will be gone, I ask him.

“I’m going away to camp to try to complete my Eagle,” he says.

“I don’t understand,” I admit, and ask, “What’s an eagle?”

Jake, one of the two friends, proudly explains that they are all in the Boy Scouts and they are going for their Eagle Scout award. “John already got his, actually, didn’t you, John?” John nods proudly, smiles. I sign the form and briefly discuss what they are doing for their special Eagle Scout project. I’ve advised other kids in the past on such projects if they required writing. I respect their initiative and realize once again that these young men are, despite their grades, honorable young adults. If they were my sons I would be proud to introduce them to people. However, they are also students in my class in California where we are struggling to create and implement standards to which all students—and teachers—can be held accountable. While they would certainly prefer to get better grades, they lack any commitment to the ideal of academic excellence. When I jokingly suggested to Mark that he go to Scout camp for two weeks and take the second week off to work with the same intensity on his school work, he laughed awkwardly.

While I resist the uniform culture of the Scouts for myself, and don’t ever want to see the halls of my school filled with boys and girls wearing the same neckerchiefs, I respect the idea of the merit badges. As my three Scouts explained to me, some merit badges are required—just as certain school subjects are—while others can be self-selected. All, however, must be earned by performing at a certain level, one recognized as distinguished by the Scouts. To become an Eagle Scout, a genuine accomplishment worthy of everyone’s respect, the Scout must develop a culminating project, a personal right of passage. When they complete these projects and earn twenty-one merit badges they are awarded that final, highest honor—the Eagle Scout standing.

What would it look like if kids had to work toward badges that announced they were a “Writer” or “Scientist,” or “Technology Master” or “Athlete”? How might we invest in the high-school diploma the same sense of honor and challenge that these three disaffected students find in the Boy Scouts? They are dedicated to this process; it has a meaning for them that we must study and create for all students.

If we are to hold all students and teachers accountable to academic standards, let us endeavor to make those standards meaningful not only for students and the schools, but also for parents, colleges, employers, and organizations like the Boy Scouts. How can the Boy Scouts, for example, offer their highest distinction to these young men who have not earned that crucial but non-existent merit badge: Scholar? I’m not looking to punish students; I want their accomplishment to be one that is real, one that instills in them the same sense of pride as their “Eagle.”

California’s Golden State Exams once offered the promise of such merit, but the results come so slow as to be meaningless. Moreover, they amount to no consequence beyond a seal on the diploma. Far better, for the students and teachers and for communities and our state, that all our students should have to demonstrate their skills in actual performance before professional educators trained to judge such performances, at which point the student would learn that they passed or, if they did not, how they might do better next time. Far better that every student in our state should create some culminating project that benefits their community and leaves them with a sense of pride that will last them, be a memory of their capacity for excellence, for change, for commitment.

Such was the feeling my students enjoyed last year when they read to kindergartners every Friday and, at year’s end, wrote a grant that enabled them to buy new hardcover books for every kindergartner and first grader at that school. Surely every parent, every kindergartner, every peer and each of those students recognized the merit and celebrated the accomplishment represented by that grant. The pictures from that day, which they called A Gift of Words, remain on my classroom door. Throughout the day, if my door is open, people, including those same students, will stop and point to those pictures with a pride and envy that I imagine Mark, Jake, and John feeling when they get that “Eagle.”