

“Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros

What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are—underneath the year that makes you eleven.

Like some days you might say something stupid, and that's the part of you that's still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama's lap because you're scared, and that's the part of you that's five. And maybe one day when you're all grown up maybe you will need to cry like if you're three, and that's okay. That's what I tell Mama when she's sad and needs to cry. Maybe she's feeling three.

Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is.

You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is.

Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I'd have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would've known how to tell her it wasn't mine instead of just sitting there with that look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth.

“Whose is this?” Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see. “Whose? It's been sitting in the coatroom for a month.”

“Not mine,” says everybody. “Not me.”

“It has to belong to somebody,” Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody can remember. It's an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope. It's maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn't say so.

Maybe because I'm skinny, maybe because she doesn't like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldivar says, “I think it belongs to Rachel.” An ugly sweater like that all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes the sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out.

“That's not, I don't, you're not...Not mine.” I finally say in a little voice that was maybe me when I was four.

“Of course it's yours,” Mrs. Price says. “I remember you wearing it once.” Because she's older and the teacher, she's right and I'm not.

Not mine, not mine, not mine, but Mrs. Price is already turning to page thirty-two, and math problem number four. I don't know why but all of a sudden I'm feeling sick inside, like the part of me that's three wants to come out of my eyes, only I squeeze them shut tight and bite down on my teeth real hard and try to remember today I am eleven, eleven. Mama is making a cake for me for tonight, and when Papa comes home everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you.

But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater's still sitting there like a big red mountain. I move the red sweater to the corner of my desk with my ruler. I move my pencil and books and eraser as far from it as possible. I even move my chair a little to the right. Not mine, not mine, not mine. In my head I'm thinking how long till lunchtime, how long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the schoolyard fence, or leave it hanging on a parking meter, or bunch it up into a little ball and toss it in the alley. Except when math period ends Mrs. Price says

loud and in front of everybody, “Now, Rachel, that’s enough,” because she sees I’ve shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it’s hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don’t care.

“Rachel,” Mrs. Price says. She says it like she’s getting mad. “You put that sweater on right now and no more nonsense.”

“But it’s not –“

“Now!” Mrs. Price says.

This is when I wish I wasn’t eleven because all the years inside of me—ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one—are pushing at the back of my eyes when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren’t even mine.

That’s when everything I’ve been holding in since this morning, since when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a sudden I’m crying in front of everybody. I wish I was invisible but I’m not. I’m eleven and it’s my birthday today and I’m crying like I’m three in front of everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can’t stop the little animal noises from coming out of me until there aren’t any more tears left in my eyes, and it’s just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups, and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast.

But the worst part is right before the bell rings for lunch. That stupid Phyllis Lopez, who is even dumber than Sylvia Saldivar, says she remembers the red sweater is hers. I take it off right away and give it to her, only Mrs. Price pretends like everything’s okay.

Today I’m eleven. There’s a cake Mama’s making for tonight and when Papa comes home from work we’ll eat it. There’ll be candles and presents and everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, Rachel, only it’s too late.

I’m eleven today. I’m eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. I wish I was anything but eleven. Because I want today to be far away already, far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny o in the sky, so tiny—tiny you have to close your eyes to see it.

Above & Beyond

How can interactions with teachers influence students?

From StudySync

From reading and writing to math and science, your teachers are there to help you learn. Yet, the role of teacher often goes beyond academics. Teachers also impart life lessons that can't be found in a book. They inspire students for years after they leave the classroom.

Jaime Escalante was a math teacher at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles. The school was not known for top-notch academics. Many of the students' parents spoke very little English. Few parents had attended high school. Escalante inspired the students to become excellent learners. He helped them overcome obstacles like drugs, gangs and bad study habits. Many of his students passed the Advanced Placement (AP) Calculus test. This placed them in an elite group. The story became a movie, "Stand and Deliver."

Escalante was teaching more than just math. Teachers also help their students become confident, curious and hardworking individuals. "My assignment ... was not just to teach mathematics. It was to teach discipline and responsibility," Escalante said in an interview with National Public Radio. "You have to love the kids and make them see that they have a chance, opportunity, in this country to become whatever they want to." By teaching his students calculus, he also instilled character. This became key to students' later successes. Several of Escalante's students attended Ivy League universities, and some went on to become teachers themselves.

The impact of good teachers is not limited to the classroom. A Harvard study showed that students with good teachers are less likely than others to become pregnant as teenagers. They are also more likely to attend college and earn more money. Maybe that's why, in a 2004 speech to teachers, former President George W. Bush said, "You lay the foundation for realizing the American Dream." Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton cites her sixth grade teacher, Mrs. King, as an influence. "She was telling me to work hard, be true to myself and stand up for what I believe," Clinton said. Many well-known public figures even spent part of their careers as teachers. Harry Potter author J. K. Rowling and the United States' 36th president, Lyndon Johnson, were both teachers.

Stories of inspiring teachers come from all over the world. In Charleston, South Carolina, a student told elementary school teacher Katie Blomquist that he couldn't afford a bicycle, and Blomquist decided to help. She raised over \$80,000, ensuring that each student at her school could have a bicycle. In Kenya, schoolteacher Lawrence Njoroge spent personal time tutoring his students and helping them apply to college. He gave young girls in Kenya a chance at education that would be near impossible without a great mentor.

American schools celebrate Teacher Appreciation Week the first full week of May. Still, many influential teachers may not even work in a classroom. A variety of people, including coaches, mentors and relatives, can teach us valuable lessons.

What do you think? What are the qualities of a good teacher? Who have been the greatest teachers in your life? How can interactions with teachers influence students?

“Cooler School”

Today, when the next class bell rings, thousands of students across America will hustle into their classrooms. They will squeeze past rows of desks and settle in their assigned metal seats. Through fluorescent lights, they'll look ahead to their teachers, who will lecture at the whiteboard. Does this describe your school?

In Mr. Corrigan's social studies class at San Diego's Health Sciences High and Middle College, things will go a little differently. Middle school students entering the classroom will make their way across the turf. They will find a spot on the bleachers. In a team huddle of sorts, Mr. Corrigan will explain the day's game plan. He will draw students' attention to an electronic marquee on the wall, which displays the class's purpose statement. After this meeting, students will break out into groups or rotations. They will learn history in a classroom designed like a football stadium. “We talk sports,” Corrigan said. “We connect sports to history. That's how I get them all engaged and into the daily lesson.”

Increasingly, research suggests that classroom design can actually impact student learning. A 2012 study from the University of Salford studied 34 different classrooms in seven different schools. Researchers found that different classroom features predicted greater academic progress in students. Natural light, interesting furniture shapes, multiple learning zones and bright colors were related to student improvement. The study found that classroom design was responsible for as much as 25 percent of the variation in student progress.

Schools worldwide are designing more innovative learning spaces. Some have gone as far as changing the architecture of school buildings. For example, at Green School in Bali, Indonesia, buildings are made of bamboo. The school teaches sustainability. At Fuji Kindergarten in Tokyo, Japan, classrooms are open. They face inward toward a giant field where students can play. At Ørestad Gymnasium in Denmark, there are no classrooms at all. Instead, the school is one big open space. It has enormous circular “learning zones,” where teachers walk around to help students.

Architect Catherine Lange points out that most ideas about changing education have to do with teaching style. Instead, she says, we should focus on the way schools look and feel. “The majority of our schools are decades old, and have not undergone a major redesign since they were originally built,” she said. Lange also argues that classes should be personalized to the demands of the class and its students. She said, “We know that people learn differently from one another — so why do classrooms all look the same?”

Others are skeptical. Carol Burris, executive director of the Network for Public Education, did an interview with *The Atlantic*. She does not think classrooms need to change. She says all classrooms really need are basic things like plenty of light and air flow. “I have seen movable walls come and go, and I have witnessed the debates over blackboards and whiteboards, and desks in a circle versus desks in a row,” Burris said. “Yet in the end, we seem to come back to designs that are pretty traditional. I think that happens because those designs serve our students and teachers pretty well.”

What do you think? How much should teachers invest in creative classroom setups? How much say should students have in the process? If you had the chance to build your own school, what would it look and feel like? What ideas can you suggest to improve school design?

Narrowing the Gap:

Why are fewer young men enrolling in AP courses?

From StudySync

AP courses are college-level classes that allow high school students to earn college credit if they score well enough on an exam. Recently, there has been a push for more students, specifically female students, to take these advanced courses. This is especially true in STEM categories. STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics. As information trickles in, it appears that more female students are indeed taking courses related to these fields. This is especially true for Advanced Placement (AP) courses in these subject areas.

In fact, data indicate that American female high school students are taking more AP courses in nearly all areas of study. Yet the same surveys now an opposing trend. Young men are often far outnumbered in AP courses. Why aren't male high school students taking AP courses as well?

AP courses in areas that have traditionally seen higher participation from males—math, computer science, and physics—still show strong enrollment for young men. However, other AP courses have either seen no increase in male participation, or even a decline. Yes, male participation in AP courses does vary by school, city and state. Still, the overall trend is that more young women than men are signing up for these courses. This means more young women will be earning college credits.

Did encouraging female students to take STEM courses inadvertently ignore the men? That's what some are saying. Others suggest that there just aren't as many opportunities after high school and college in non-STEM fields. Encouraging male students to take AP courses outside of the areas of mathematics and science isn't common. Others believe that it's just an issue of time commitment. Male students are more likely to participate in extracurricular activities like sports.

What do you think? Why are more girls taking these classes? Do you think there is any reason behind the gender gap? Why are fewer young men enrolling in AP courses?

'We're Trying to Create the Village Again'

A California nonprofit uses lessons on Latin American heritage to keep at-risk youth on the straight and narrow.

The Atlantic | MAURA EWING MAY 7, 2017

SALINAS, Calif.—On a recent Friday, Israel Villa had a lesson to share with the young adults at his office downtown: the meaning of the word *palabra*. It's a core concept of *la cultura cura*, which is Spanish for “culture cures”—the principle that there's a modern need to teach traditions indigenous to Latin America. *Palabra*, which translates to “word,” stands for integrity and connection.

And for speaking up for yourself, Villa added, looking to the youthful black and brown faces looking back at him. “It's a tool that is needed. We should not be suppressed. In village cultures, where community was concerned, everyone was sacred,” he went on. “Everyone was approached like they had power.”

Villa, age 39, is a program assistant at MILPA, a nonprofit group designed, in part, for at-risk youth that's run by formerly incarcerated staff members. Its four-year-old program is rooted in teachings from the Aztec and the Maya, as well as peoples from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands—before there actually was a border. The participants meet at MILPA's office several times a week to share their achievements, vent about stressors, and learn from *la cultura cura*.

Through these sessions, staff members try to bring a sense of close community to the teens and 20-somethings, and help them steer clear of making choices that could jeopardize their futures. “We introduce cultural heritage and a political education. Some folks might be weary around their identity because they're ashamed of it, or removed from it, or unaware of it for a long time,” said Juan Gomez, a co-founder of MILPA and its resident evangelist of *la cultura cura*. “We're going back to family values, to neighborhood. It takes a village to raise a child. What happens if the village is absent, is wounded, is hurting, is fragmented? We're trying to create the village again.”

By his estimation, few of the 100-plus people who've gone through MILPA have ended up in legal trouble, save for relatively minor, drug-related infractions. That isn't a precise way to measure outcomes from the program—to show how and whether it achieves its goals. And it's difficult to tell, this early in its lifespan, whether its teachings will influence young people in the long term. But the participants themselves seem to believe in MILPA as a personally transformative force.

“When I started coming here, I was not in good shape. I was getting bad grades, I was asking my mom, ‘Can I drop out?’” said one 17-year-old high-school student who is a MILPA regular. “I was so anti-everything.” But “coming here and seeing more about my culture and my heritage, I felt more connected to it.” And she began to change her mind about school.

MILPA, the Uto-Aztecan word for “field,” is an acronym for Motivating Individual Leadership for Public Advancement. Its home of Salinas is about three-quarters Latino, just as most of the young people in the program are. Many of the area's residents are immigrants who migrated from Mexico to work in its vast agricultural fields; the city, about an hour south of Silicon Valley, has been dubbed the “salad bowl of America” because it produces so much of the country's greens.

But Salinas, in Monterey County, is also known for its youth violence. Dubbed the “youth murder capital of California” by *Vice Magazine*, the small, pop. 156,000 city had a 2016 homicide rate that was four times the national average, and higher than that of Los Angeles. According to 2013 government data compiled by a gun-control group, Monterey County had some of the highest homicide rates in California for people ages 10 to 24. Many of the recent

cases appear to be gang-related. “You’re poor, you’re looking for power, you’re looking for belonging,” Gomez said, summing up the outfits’ influence.

“People see this potential in me and I can keep going.”

Gomez, who is 34 years old and grew up a half-hour north of Salinas, wasn’t involved in gang activity growing up. But he did get into serious trouble at a young age: At 15, he was sentenced to seven years for non-fatally stabbing another teen.

It was during his incarceration that MILPA’s roots began to grow. Through reading, he discovered Native American history, which whet his appetite to learn more about his Mesoamerican heritage. (His parents and grandparents moved to California from Mexico before he was born.) Shortly after his release, Gomez started working as a youth advocate for a nonprofit organization focused on “restorative justice,” an approach to criminal restitution that emphasizes mediation and making amends. But the work—speaking at professional conferences, collaborating with social services—wasn’t entirely fulfilling. It felt whitewashed, he said: “I was successful, but it was very challenging because I couldn’t find me.”

That began to change after Gomez was introduced to *la cultura cura* by Jerry Tello, the co-founder of a group called the National Compadres Network that trains people on its methods around the country. “I’m like, ‘Oh shit, I can be successful by being a good man,’” he said, recalling how he took to the teachings. “I can be successful by feeling good about myself.”

Four years ago, he decided to form his own organization with an eye on juvenile justice; he wanted to teach other kids lessons that he thinks his own teenage self should have heard. Most of MILPA’s staff were also incarcerated in their younger years, which was a deliberate hiring decision: Gomez suggested that personal experience informs their work, and that the job has benefits for them, too.

Gomez puts his own spin on *la cultura cura* during lessons. On a given day, he may draw from Mesoamerican traditions, African American history, and contemporary culture. (He recently read work from American writer Rebecca Solnit and was compelled to introduce the concept of “mansplaining,” which she coined, to his mentees).

At the meeting I witnessed—where Villa led a “healing circle,” one of group’s core practices—participants were given a chance to talk about anything weighing on them. In this group of a dozen or so mostly immigrant descendants, the presidency of Donald Trump was a common theme of their venting. Monterey County has the highest rate of undocumented immigrants per capita in the state of California. In East Salinas, where many of MILPA’s members live, an estimated 18 percent of residents are undocumented and up to 40 percent of children have an undocumented parent.

Trump’s campaign promises to deport millions of undocumented immigrants, as well as executive orders broadening enforcement, could have tangible consequences here. One young woman discussed how the president’s rhetoric—particularly his allegations about immigrants’ criminal histories—doesn’t match reality within her own family. Another worried about her undocumented in-laws; she accompanies them on errands because they are scared to go out.

MILPA doesn’t only get political in the context of these discussions. Indeed, it has something of a political arm. The staff members are regulars at rallies and at city and state legislative hearings—advocating for criminal-justice reform and immigrant rights—and Gomez is part of a state advisory committee on juvenile justice. The young people are encouraged to be activists, too: One recently made public comments at a hearing on state laws that would improve the standards at county juvenile lockups, and another told me she marched for Salinas to become a

“sanctuary city,” a jurisdiction that doesn’t cooperate with federal immigration authorities.

Over time, MILPA participants become eligible to go through a right-of-passage ceremony, after which they assume a quasi-leadership role among the young people. The 17-year-old high schooler said MILPA staff offered praise at her own ceremony, describing her as a future community leader. “I felt honored, of course—they were speaking about me in such a high manner,” she said. It affirmed that she was on the right path, and recently, she’s started to ask her teachers about applying to college. At the ceremony, “I felt like, ‘OK, I can actually do this,’” she said. “People see this potential in me and I can keep going.”

College Education or College Degree?

By Troy Henderson

What do students want in exchange for all of the money that they pay for college? Is it a *degree* or an *education*?

Gather any group of college professors in any discipline in any part of the country, and most (if not all) have noticed a mindset affecting many college students in which they seem to value their degree more than their education.

As an example of how this mindset manifests itself, college professors can almost certainly count on the following question being asked most every semester (usually by multiple students):

“What grade do I need to earn on my next assessment in order to have a grade of *X* in the course?”

As a mathematics professor, this is disturbing for several reasons, not the least of which is that college-level students should possess the mathematical skills needed to determine the answer to the question for themselves. Students enrolled in College Algebra, Statistics, Calculus and above should already know how to use the weights provided in a syllabus together with their known grades in the course to answer their own question.

An even more disturbing consequence of such a question is the eagerness to know the minimum performance necessary to achieve the desired grade. This mentality focuses on **how little** the student **must** learn rather than **how much** the student **can** learn.

This certainly seems to be an indication that the end result (degree) is more valuable than the journey (education).

Does it matter if a student knows the grade he needs to earn on the next test in order to make an A in a course, for example? Does knowing the answer to this question *really* affect a student's performance?

- First, if the answer to the question is beyond what the student feels he can achieve, then he will likely not even prepare for the assessment.
- Similarly, if the required performance is less than what the student feels that he can achieve with little to no effort, then he will also likely not prepare for the assessment.
- Finally, if the student feels that he can attain the desired grade with a reasonable amount of preparation, then the student may prepare, but knowing the needed grade **should not** influence the amount of preparation.

[Since full-time students must manage their time and resources between multiple courses, it is logical to conclude that each course may not receive the same level of attention as other courses. Knowing the required performance on a particular assessment may influence the amount of time spent preparing for each course, but determining the minimum preparation time for each course is an extremely complicated problem.

It is difficult to determine the minimum effort needed to please parents with decent grades or to pass courses so as to simply not have to retake them. Therefore, the pertinent question that students should be asking themselves should be:

“Is a grade in a course, which leads to a degree, less or more important than the knowledge acquired from the course, which leads to an education?”

How students answer this question demonstrates whether they place more emphasis on the short-term goal of a college degree or the long-term value of an education.