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Objects of Significance

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LAST WEEK, THE FIFTH graders took their civics quiz. I spent a few days with one of my beginners, my sweet student C., trying to review the material, which included the concept of checks and balances in the three branches of the U.S. government. We work with cognates and words he already knows. He is an unusual child with an encyclopedic knowledge of and passion for world history, maps, extreme weather, and trains. He shows what he knows with intricate and accurate diagrams, jumping up to illustrate on the whiteboard. He can trace the subway routes of every line in Boston, place each station correctly on the map and write its name. They were among the first words he learned in English; he recites them like an incantation. When we are in my small classroom, he asks if we can play one of his favorite videos; they feature MBTA lines with background music playing as station names are called off one by one. He and I hum along together. I smile when we come to the stops I know best, those that once carried me to my great-aunt's apartment. Fairbanks. Brandon Hall. Summit Avenue.

Checks and balances. How can we check our desires to bring our lives

back into balance? How do we balance what we feel with what we know, responsibilities against longings? Time for taking a hike in the woods against time for cleaning the house and doing laundry. Maybe the Buddhists and Hasidim got it right: hallow everything and then nothing is wasted time. Polish what we work on and what we work on polishes us.

Along with the civics quiz, our fifth graders have to choose a book from a specific genre each month and complete a theme-based project. This month is fantasy/adventure; the task is to identify six to eight objects of significance in the story and find or create items to represent these objects. They also must explain the symbolism and significance of said objects.

"They're just things," my principal told me when I expressed concern over the current practice of allowing certain students to destroy objects in classrooms and hallways. The explanation given to me is that "stopping the student would escalate them further." I have a hard time with this. To my mind, the message being conveyed to children is, basically, do whatever you want and no one is going to stop you. You have all the power.

And yes, I fully acknowledge that

power is one of my trigger points. A friend from graduate school theorized that all teachers are control freaks. I am living proof. I have long had three rules in my classroom: Respect Yourself, Respect Others, Respect the Room. What that third rule looks like, I tell any student who ventures into my queendom, is that before touching ANYTHING, ask my permission. I always say yes (almost), but they have to ask first. I remember my mother teaching me and my siblings this practice; when we went into another person's house—including those of family and friends—we wouldn't dream of touching anyone's things without asking. Our great-aunt had a set of Russian nesting dolls that I loved to play with; I always asked first. She always said yes.

So I was hard pressed not to talk back when my principal said, "They're just things." And yes, I do have a (bit of) history of talking back to authority. They're not, was what I wanted to say, just things. They carry emotional weight. Teachers bring objects of significance into classrooms to share with students. One of the objects recently destroyed was a rainstick that my colleague had had for years. It wasn't just a "thing" to her or to her other students. The objects in our classrooms are more than things. They are invested with love, with history, with meaning.

And yes, I do know that the most

important things in life are not, in the end, things. But particular things add a bit of magic and beauty to our lives, while we have them.

Last Saturday I met up with my writing group for our monthly session. We usually meet in the Cambridge Public Library because one of our members who doesn't drive lives within walking distance of the library. As I was setting out, I received a text from her informing us that the library was closed due to the Veterans' Day holiday and would we be willing to meet in her apartment? That turned out to be a lovely alternative; it was peaceful and warm, homey and relaxed. At one point, one of the women indicated three ceramic eggs in a wooden bowl and asked if she could hold one. Our host said she could. We each cradled an egg in our palms, admiring the abstract designs, and when our host told us the eggs had been glazed by a ceramicist who'd worked with Picasso, we each, in unspoken accord, carefully replaced the eggs in the bowl and backed away, which made us all laugh. It was amusing, yes, but to me our response indicated a deep respect for someone else's things.

This past week, I broke one of my sandglasses. I'd had four of them, gifted to me by a lovely parent of a former student. She'd bought them for her son as a means of helping him focus, but they hadn't worked so she offered them to me. They'd been tucked within one of my desk drawers until I rediscovered them a few weeks ago and

brought them out, charmed by their whimsicality. They each contained a different color of sand: ten minutes is violet, five minutes is a bright yellow-

so we settled on pouring out the green sand, which was a lovely distraction. We were fascinated by the feel of the sand, so much softer and finer than

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green, three minutes a deep royal blue, and one minute is salt-white. The students love them and all quickly figured out why the one-minute glass lets the grains through faster than the others. On Thursday afternoon, I had them standing on the window sill and when I went to unlatch the window, I accidentally knocked it against the five-minute glass and over it went to the floor, immediately cracking across at its most vulnerable point, where the two halves join. I'd actually thought they might be hard plastic and not glass, but they'd cracked in a convincingly glasslike manner, enough so that I knew there was no way back, and I sadly placed the two pieces in the trash.

During last period, when C. was in my room again, he immediately asked where the five-minute sandglass was. I 'fessed up, and guided him over to the trash can where I fished the two halves out. He wanted to try to repair them but I was afraid he might cut himself,

anything we'd ever felt on a beach. "You're holding time in your hands," I whispered, and he smiled and nodded. He gets it. I love every scrap of time I get to spend with such a sweet-natured, wonder-filled individual.

Pablo Neruda devoted an entire [collection of odes to things](#). "I have a crazy, crazy love of things," he begins. That makes such beautiful, perfect sense to me. I love that he would write an ode to a dictionary, to a bar of soap, to a pair of socks. To live in the world in love with things, both alive and inanimate, is to infuse everything with spirit, with love. It makes us walk more gently on the earth, to acknowledge the divine in everyone. Not an easy thing to do in these polarizing times. Not an easy thing to do at any time in history, but especially now.

But if we don't, as one of my writing women friends reminded me, we're lost. We can't hold any hope of living together. ❄️