

NOAH'S CHILDREN

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Teachers at the Manhattan Country School, which is probably the most racially integrated independent school in the country, describe eighth grader Elvira Castillo as having a lot of "presence." When, in English class, teacher Carol O'Donnell has the kids write their own scenes depicting the origins of the Montague-Capulet feud in "Romeo and Juliet," it is Elvira who, in true Clarence Darrow fashion, cogently defends her classmates' more liberal interpretations (Juliet: "You got a cute butt, Romeo") by arguing, "It's not like our scenes are any more sexual than Shakespeare was, just that the sexuality is more out in the open."

Elvira's parents are from El Salvador and Honduras. She lived with them in Queens until their divorce, and now lives with her mother on 242nd Street in Van Cortland Park in the Bronx. Every morning she rides the subway forty-five minutes to the school, a townhouse on East 96th Street, where she's been a student since the age of five. But soon that will change; when I met her graduation loomed ahead, as did Riverdale Country Day, a well-regarded, mostly-white affluent private high school in the Bronx that has offered her a scholarship.

"I'm going to be sad to leave MCS," she tells me one morning, as we sit in the science room on the school's fifth floor. "It's a jewel. There's no other school that I've heard of that's managed to integrate like here. I mean, it's almost natural. But I'm also ready for a new start, because eight or nine years is a very long time, and I think it's time to get out into the world a little more. This place is a little too sheltered. In this school, you know, I have friends who are white, black, Asian. Outside it's segregated, most of my friends tend to be Hispanic. People are more blunt. I've seen that. I've been called a spic before by people just walking down the street. And that's the way it is. And this school kind of teaches you that -- you know, I had the idea that everybody kind

of loves each other, we all get along, but it's not like that in the real world. And I think it's good to instill that in kids, but you also need to show them how it really is, because it's not fair to let them go out there thinking that everyone's going to be so nice to them. They have to know what it's all about, and I didn't know. I found out the hard way. So, I think it's wonderful that this school's so diverse, but at the same time they need to make it clear that that's Manhattan Country School, it's a special case."

From its inception in 1966, Manhattan Country School has been a special case. There are only 188 students in the school, pre-kindergarten through the eighth grade, and there is no ethnic or gender majority among them. There are no "scholarship" students, either: Everyone pays something along a sliding scale known as the Family Commitment Plan. (Roughly thirty-five percent of families pay the equivalent of full tuition -- currently around \$12,000 for upper school students -- while all other families pay less than that according to each's ability to pay.) And while the school is not without a few truly wealthy white students, class, for the most part, cuts across racial lines, so that lower-to-middle-income families are nearly -- though not quite -- as likely to be white as African-American or Latino. "MCS is a private school with a public mission," says Augustus Trowbridge the school's white, patrician founder and director, echoing its charter, which he wrote.

Spend time with Gus--there are no last names at the school--and you will inevitably hear reference to Justice Blackmun's dissent in the Supreme Court's 1978 Bakke decision, that "in order to get beyond racism we must first take account of race." Come on January 18 and you will hear the entire school "family" -- white, African-American, Latino, Asian-American, singing freedom songs like "We Shall Overcome." That Martin Luther King's birthday is today a national holiday makes little difference; the assembly has been a part of the program at Manhattan Country School since the early days. Clearly, this is a school that was meant to be different.

In 1966, when Gus Trowbridge left the Dalton School, where he taught English for eight years, to start Manhattan Country School, 95 percent of the

25,000 students in private, non-sectarian New York City schools were white. (Today the figure is closer to 90 percent.) With \$15,000 donated by three individuals, he and his wife Marty set about the task of hiring faculty, finding a racially and socioeconomically diverse pool of student applicants, and raising the \$250,000 needed to get the school running. "I started the school basically by just going through my mother's address book," Gus says. Three or four evenings a week the Trowbridges would visit prospective donors at their homes on Fifth and Park Avenues. Meanwhile, they were trying to attract potential minority students at neighborhood gatherings all over the city -- places like the Protestant Parish in Spanish Harlem, where, aided by their own "authentic" Spanish Harlem address (they lived on 108th Street), they were able to ease Black parents' concerns about, in Marty's words, "the seriousness of our intentions."

For the Trowbridges it was a period of cultivated schizophrenia that was, in its way, emblematic of the times and of their own personal histories. They chose to buy the building on 96th Street largely because it sat on the faultline between the wealthy Carnegie Hill neighborhood to the south and Spanish Harlem to the north. The first year there were 66 students in four grades; by 1970, the number of students and faculty had reached its present level.

MCS the school was never meant to be insular and unique; it was meant to be part of a movement -- the Civil Rights Movement -- that eventually proved unable to sustain itself. "Back then, it was largely a sense on my part that we were an experimental school, and that the nation would follow us, and we would no longer be exceptional. Obviously, I was naive," Gus recalls, and there is pride in his voice as he says this -- a Mr. Smith sense of the lone decent man having defied conventional moral negligence -- but also tiredness and a vague questioning. He is sixty-one now, and a few months shy of retirement. Thirty years ago, he was a tireless young educator caught up in a bright Sixties vision of human progress and potential: Put children from different races and classes together, under one roof, and you will change -- and

enrich -- their lives forever. The nation would come to 96th Street, the thinking went, not the other way around. The nation would change.

The nation, of course, has not changed -- at least, not as Gus expected. Year after year, children of all colors and classes have been brought together at Manhattan Country School to hold hands and sing songs of freedom, only to graduate and find that the world outside hasn't been hearing the music. It takes a tough school to withstand such public neglect; it takes, one could say, idealism with a doubt-proof carapace of self-righteousness. The fact is, Manhattan Country School is no longer an experiment. Through creative and tireless fund-raising, Gus has turned his school into an institution, albeit an isolated one, with an endowment of four million dollars and a certificate of accreditation from the New York State Association of Independent Schools. The school's academic curriculum, long considered subpar when compared to the city's "traditional" independent schools, has improved to the point where MCS students now fare "above average" on standardized tests among all New York City private schools.

But how are they really doing? And what is the legacy of a school where race and class are so beautifully nullified if you are African-American or Latino and living in a neighborhood, a city, a country, where race and class may be all that matter?

These are not, for me, academic questions. In 1979 I graduated from Manhattan Country School, where I had gone since I was four. The school had shaped me, I thought, it was the world as I knew it, but then I found myself far away from it, at a prep school in Connecticut. This was anomalous enough -- hardly any MCS graduates went to boarding schools. Most of my classmates, like those who came before and after us, went to competitive public high schools in New York City like Stuyvesant and Bronx Science, or else to a handful of generally liberal, open-minded private schools (schools like Riverdale and Walden) with a history of appreciation of MCS students. The world of prep schools -- a world designed, in essence, to foster and perpetuate a sense of elitism in its inhabitants -- could not have been further from the

moral center of Manhattan Country school. The most obvious difference at my new school was right out in the open: Most of the people were, like me, affluent and white.

Did I feel, then, that Manhattan Country School had somehow let me down? Not prepared me for the world as it was? No. The truth was, I didn't think about it all that much. It had been good to me, and I had enjoyed it, and then I'd left and gone on with my life. Amid all of the usual turmoil of being a teenager, I can't remember ever feeling that I had to choose between one kind of life and another. Or that the world in which I found myself was not real, or all too real. The reason for this, of course, was exactly what MCS taught me to disregard: My race.

Ralph Vacca, one of Elivira's classmates, has never had the luxury of completely forgetting he is Latino. He used to live in "bad" neighborhood in the Bronx until his parents moved to a "good" neighborhood in Queens. In the bad neighborhood, he got roughed up for bringing home his best friend from MCS, Noah Goldfarb, who is white and Jewish. After MCS, Ralph is planning to attend Bronx Science, which is one of the top competitive public schools in the city, and where, says Elivira, whose brother Ricky goes there, "Either you hang out with people of your own color or you're a sell-out, you're an oreo." Ralph says he can't see himself openly challenging racism or segregation in high school. "Maybe I'll just adapt," he says.

Our conversation is taking place in the dining room of the school's white clapboard farmhouse in the Catskill Mountains--the "country" referred to in the MCS name--where each class makes three, week-long trips a year. Later, with the kids supposedly asleep in their wooden bunks on the second floor, their teacher, David Lebson, and I sit downstairs talking. He is 26 years old, with a manner at once spry and sober. This is his fifth year at the school and he is clearly popular with the kids; he listens to them carefully. When I tell him about my conversation with Ralph over dinner he says, "Look, we haven't prepared them for what they conceptualize 'the real world' of high school to be, because

we haven't prepared them for an environment where if you're black and you don't hang out with black kids, then you're ostracized by the black kids; where if you wear a certain kind of clothing, then you have to behave in a certain kind of way. I would stand by that accusation. I would accept that. What many of these kids say is that MCS is an ideal world. We like it, they say, we understand the goals, but it isn't the real world. And my answer to that is that it should be the real world."

Even when it was founded, Manhattan Country School's semi-official philosophy -- a hybrid tapestry woven from the words of Martin Luther King Jr. and the ideals of the progressive education movement (exemplified by the idea of the "open classroom," with its echoes of American free-thinkers from Emerson to John Dewey, with a nod to Erik Erikson's theories on child development) -- did not necessarily have much to say about the real racial and financial inequities that most of its students were going to face. In response, about 25 parents formed the Black Caucus and began holding regular meetings -- initially at the school, but soon in their homes.

In 1971, Gloria Brown enrolled her daughter Patty in the 4-5s at Manhattan Country School. Her daughter Alicia came two years later--joined my class in the 7-8s. In just a short period of time, Gloria found herself as divided as the times: Both a member of the Black Caucus and a regular volunteer behind the reception desk. "Only the black parents were at the meetings" of the Black Caucus, Gloria recalls. "And when I say 'black parents' I'm not talking about inter-racial families now, I'm talking about *all*-black. If you were black and married to a white, you couldn't come."

The Black Caucus doesn't exist anymore. It was re-named, back in the early Seventies, Black Concerned Parents; then it seemed to fade; then it came back: Gus claims that he came close to resigning in 1978 because of the racial anger that threatened to split the school in two. But like the decade, that group was closing out; the Eighties were a kind of death-knell for righteous anger. It's not that parents' questions about the "racial reality" of Manhattan

Country School have disappeared. One evening I sat in on a meeting of the Parents Multicultural Committee, which, with just a few white faces in the room, had the feel of a kinder and gentler Nineties offshoot of the old Black Caucus, and listened as mothers, and a father or two angrily but politely expressed a variety of concerns. How to define the word "multicultural?" Why has there been no evidence in the school of Black History Month? What race has the realmajority in the classrooms? Do the deep socioeconomic disparities in children's homes and families make the program of home visits for the 4-5's too traumatic for the children?

The meeting dragged on. No political correctness backlash here. At least people of all colors were in the same room trying to talk it out. It wasn't separatism. But as I listened to them, I started thinking about the school when I'd been there, and about the people I'd known for ten years and hadn't ever seen again. About what had happened to them. When I first started my research for this article, I was genuinely surprised to discover how few MCS graduates had entered professions that, on the surface at least, stood in opposition to the values of their old elementary school. The vast majority of alumni, I learned, seemed to have held on to the ideals of their youth, sometimes at significant cost to themselves. They had gone on to do "good" things: Many were teachers of one kind or another; many were involved in community service organizations in New York City; a surprisingly large number, given the small size of the school, had turned out to be artists, writers, musicians, actors, filmmakers, journalists. Of those who had become lawyers, most were practicing some form of advocate law on behalf of one minority group or another, one issue or another; hardly any were in corporate law. I could find no investment bankers among my old schoolmates. Generally speaking, almost no MCS graduates seemed to be making what would be thought of in this society as a lot of money.

There was, however, another group of MCS alumni to think about. A small group, certainly, a minority within a minority. But important all the same, I thought. They were kids I'd known well at one time. African-American kids,

Latino kids: None of them was white. They had gotten into trouble after leaving Manhattan Country School. And I started wondering why no one else in the room -- not one member of the Parents' Multicultural Committee -- was wondering about them, too. Kids who'd left this place and at the age of fourteen or fifteen had been forced to choose between one kind of life and another. It seemed to me like a good place to start thinking about the school's purpose, it's mission. Everyone in the room was worried about the future of his or her child. Everyone there wanted a better world. But it was as though they were all so caught up in the insular world of their children's school that they couldn't bring themselves to imagine the necessary world after it. And I thought: History can be instructive, it can point the way.

When Timmy Michael, who is African-American, talks about Manhattan Country School, which he left in 1976, he talks about the need of everyone who went there somehow "to reconcile that past, because it's still a part of you;" because "it's hard to get to the place where people are that open again." While he was at the school, he says, he never had to work to get attention, that perhaps he was "coddled," that a lot of things were taken for granted" there. He is talking about nurturing and self-esteem, yes, but he is especially talking about race. At MCS, he insists, he was never made to feel that being African-American was *the* thing about him. It was not an issue. Then he went to Bronx Science and found that "things were just very different from how they were at MCS."

All this was some time ago. After Bronx Science, Timmy went to Dartmouth College, an institution not especially known for its atmosphere of racial understanding. Being an African-American student there was "just really hard," he says. He dropped out for a year, then finished and went back to New York. He tried to get on with his life. But he couldn't shake the feeling that in the decade since he'd left Manhattan Country School something had happened, his compass had broken. It was hard to know which way to go. The next eight years or so he "kind of bummed around" doing different jobs.

He left New York for Los Angeles, then returned, then left again. Today, he says, things are better. He's a struggling but hopeful actor in L.A. And while it's probably true that he was once capable of Ralph Vacca's innocently ironic take on the racial politics of high school and the general state of the black-white world beyond the walls of Manhattan Country School, it is definitely true that he has long since sacrificed that irony to experience. "You can understand racism and racial differences, or inequality, as a concept, and maybe you can even accept it. But like, you know, when you get into the store and somebody's following you around, what do you do, how do you manage? I didn't know how to stand up for myself."

This could be Elvira talking -- separated by two decades and a chestful of war stories. Timmy tells me about the day he ran into Thomas Baxton, class of '78, panhandling on the street; and the time he saw Jim Richardson '78 begging on the subway; and about prison terms for Thomas and Lenny Jackson '80.

I had heard about Thomas over the years. In and out of Rikers Island. Armed robbery. Heroin, whatever. Another lifetime ago I had, I thought, known him very well; I'd considered him my friend, although I'd never been to visit him at his aunt's house in the South Bronx, where he lived. Then I never saw him again. Now I'm reminded of something my old classmate Musa Jackson (who used to be called Stacey) said to me when we were talking about MCS and what happened to his brother Lenny (who's now called Lennard): "Man, thinking about Manhattan Country School is almost like a haunting."

I couldn't find Thomas. I tried -- not as an old friend but as a reporter -- afraid all the while of what it would be like for both of us if I actually found him. The school had lost all track of him. There was an address for his older brother Leon (an MCS alumnus and, I discovered, a college graduate) in Jacksonville, Florida, but when I called I found that there was no such person in Jacksonville. Nor was Thomas on the roster of the New York State Department of Corrections. He was just -- as Lennard Jackson said about his older brother

Kenneth, who got hooked on crack a couple of years ago and hasn't been seen or heard from since -- "missing."

Jim Richardson was missing, too. Unfindable. But not Lennard. I locate him at his mother's apartment in Harlem. He's a professional boxer now, a middleweight. Right this minute he's busily preparing to leave for a five-week training camp in Miami (he's on the pre-card of the Mike Tyson ticket in Las Vegas the following month), but when I tell him I'm writing an article about Manhattan Country School, he immediately says he'll make time to see me.

Lennard's brother, Musa, agrees to see me, too. I meet him downtown in the Village and somehow we recognize each other after sixteen years. He is tall and strikingly handsome. Smiling, he reminds me that for a while in sixth grade he and I had been inseparable, best friends, and I remind him of a fight we had in seventh grade. It is good to see him. In one sense his is an entirely different kind of story from Lennard's -- a couple of years ago Musa, having already had a successful run as a male model, sold a screenplay to Disney (about "the polarity in black culture"), and he's now trying to make it full-time as a screenwriter -- but in another sense he knows that their stories are inextricably linked. They are brothers. They came from the same place, went to the same school as boys. Had the same chances. What happened? Musa says that Manhattan Country School hadn't prepared either him or Lennard for the rough world that came next -- even if that world was just a bigger, badder version of the Harlem neighborhood they'd grown up in. "After we left MCS a bubble burst. We found out that the wizard was this little short man, and we were these black children in high school. People looked at us like little punks 'cause we weren't prepared to deal with being around black kids. We'd learned about Martin Luther King, but we didn't know about Malcolm X. Black people were like white folks to us. We were like white folks. We went to high school and didn't even know how to talk like everyone else. We got hassled a lot. But my brother's situation was different from mine."

Lennard and I meet uptown at a coffee shop on Amsterdam Avenue. It's been sixteen years. With his shaved head and powerfully muscled body, he looks like a young Marvin Hagler. We sit down together. Then, prompted by me, he begins to talk. To my surprise, I find that his deep voice is without a hint of bravado. He is not eager to tell his story but he's not ashamed of it, either.

From Manhattan Country School Lennard went to Murray Bertraum, a street-tough, almost entirely African-American public high school on the edge of Brooklyn. Musa was already a sophomore at Music and Art High School, which was public too, though not nearly as tough as Bertraum. Lennard says that he went to Bertraum primarily because it had a good basketball team, but at the same time he acknowledges other, less concrete reasons for going there. He says he'd realized that he was totally "culturally unaware" of what was happening in his Harlem neighborhood, that he'd reached an age where he "wanted to experience things and venture out." Going to Bertraum was his first step.

"The kids at Bertraum were tougher," Musa says. "They weren't artists, they were hoods. My brother had to find his own way. And he developed a certain character to fit the situation. That took a couple of years. I saw it happen. Basically, I saw what took a whole lot of money, a whole lot of effort, a whole lot of dedication, go down the drain."

At Bertraum, Lennard says, "I didn't really know what to do or say. There was immediate peer-pressure. For the first time in my life I felt like a sucker." At the beginning, he recalls, he took to asking Musa for advice on how to handle himself. But then he stopped. "You had to do it on your own. And there came a time in my school career when I decided that I was going to be somebody in the school. That no matter what, I was going to be somebody. I was fifteen." He started dealing marijuana. It was just numbers. He'd always been good at math, and now he found that he was good at this. Soon he was clearing \$120 a day. But success got him into trouble. He says he was set-up by a rival dealer in Central Park, fed to the

cops. That was his first arrest. He was sent to Spofford Juvenile Detention Center in the Bronx (Mike Tyson's old haunt) for the summer. What did he do there? Shaved his head, put on muscle, learned a type of prison-fighting called the B-52. "When I came out I was somebody. I was hard. I went back to school and was just wild. School was no longer important to me as far as education was concerned. At that time in my life, Manhattan Country School seemed so far away. It was like, I didn't even want anyone to know that I'd been there."

Musa says he tried talking to his brother at the time but their worlds were fast growing too far apart. He calls Lennard "a natural rabble-rouser," someone who says, "if this is the dominant thing, then I want to be the head of the dominant thing."

"That was our battle, my brother and me -- I'd say, 'No, you're a great person, who cares what this other person is about? You don't have those experiences.' But it's like his own experiences weren't doing the job. That's what it comes down to. They weren't sticking. They didn't mean anything. It was too soon for him. What happened at MCS wasn't what his world was about. He couldn't apply it and not get his face bashed in. And you either learn how to fight or you get your ass kicked. The difference between us was that somehow danger was nullified around me. Maybe it was the fact that I was able to talk my way out of it. Or that I just didn't identify myself with it, where my brother did."

The second arrest came in late 1982, this time for armed robbery. Lennard was caught holding up a subway car with a German Luger (his partner botched it, he says; they'd already done it successfully a few times). They sent him to prison on Rikers Island for three months. He spent Christmas there and it got to him. "They came by the cell and gave us this little bag of candy, some bullshit, and I was like damn, look at the fuck where I'm at. Pardon the curse. And I thought about Manhattan Country School during that time. I was thinking damn, I didn't *come* from this. I didn't go to private school to end up like this."

Lennard pauses and looks up, before adding, "But at the same time, I still had to live the life. I didn't change then. It's a painful memory."

The life meant going right back to Bertraum, where he became indisputably "The Man," a stick-up kid with a gun. "I was hard-core," he says. At the end of 1983 he beat one of his teachers so severely that the man was hospitalized. He did it at school and believed no one would dare report him. He went to his next class, took a test. Then the police came to the school and arrested him. "I was laughing when they put the handcuffs on," he says.

The punishment, this time, was four months on Rikers. This time, though, it was not so bad. Lennard became a member of the roughest gang there. He says, still in the same quiet voice, that when people told their "Riker's horror stories," they were talking about running into guys like him.

He came out in 1984 and didn't have much more use for school. Based almost entirely on what he'd learned at Manhattan Country School, he says, he had managed to earn his General Equivalency Degree back in 1982. Now he dropped out after the 11th grade and started dealing crack big-time in the infamous Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn. "Bed-Stuy do or die" was the battle cry. He was making it. His quickness with numbers and his physical toughness were definite assets, and his business grew to the point where he had grossed, in his estimation, "at least a half a million dollars." He also had achieved that other thing, the priceless thing -- a reputation. "The somebody that I'd wanted to be," he says, "I had become."

Then it went too far. He got hooked on drugs himself. Deals started getting messed up. He was getting increasingly violent, pistol-whipping guys. Until finally it reached the point, he says, "Where in order to reach the next level I had to kill somebody, and I decided that that was something I wasn't going to do. That wasn't a part of me. You know what I'm saying? That was the line. And I knew that that would come back to my family. So I gave it up. I just left."

He fled to Boston and moved in with an old friend of his mother's. Over time, he kicked his old habits and picked up a new one: Working out in the

gym. And then one day a friend suggested boxing. "I walked into the gym and it changed my life. I walked in there and I was a punk again, I was a sucker again. It was a whole new world."

Of his five former crack partners, he says, four are dead, the other in jail. And that, he says, is his story.

We sit for a minute, both of us thinking. A bus roars up Amsterdam. Lennard checks his watch; he's got to go soon, to catch his ride for Miami. This is his big break.

So where are you now? I finally say. How do things feel now?

He nods slowly. His answer, when it comes, surprises me because it goes back to the beginning. "Manhattan Country School didn't train me for my neighborhood," he says. "It was harmonious. I can't remember dealing with prejudice there. We were all kids. Even the teachers, the parents, we didn't talk that way. The only time I experienced prejudice was outside the school. MCS was even different from other private schools. It was like our own little thing, man, it was Manhattan Country School. We suspended time. We created our own world and lived in it. We went to the farm, which was beautiful. We couldn't wait to go to the farm and milk those cows and jump in the hay. I mean, those memories, man, that's what life is all about. My memories are a lot deeper, a lot stronger, than a lot of the guys I came up with in my neighborhood. MCS was a beautiful thing. Now it's helping me a lot in the sense that I always think big. It taught me to think big. There are a lot of kids who grew up in Harlem, born and raised, and they can't think big. The biggest they can think is becoming a drug dealer and owning a BMW. Me, I've learned that I can be anything, that I can do anything. That anything is possible for me. You're taught at Manhattan Country School that you can change the world. Because it's such an unrealistic world but it worked, it was harmonious and it worked. You know, we saw an integrated state, and we saw it work, to the point where when you leave there no one can tell you that it doesn't work, because you've seen it work."

He says, "I never wanted to graduate."

He went back to visit a few years ago, the first time since graduation. Although Musa tells me that when his brother started getting into trouble, "It sent a shock wave through the school, like a little kid drowning," Lennard says that he's been in touch with very few people from Manhattan Country School over the years -- the worlds were just too different. Still, when finally it all seemed behind him he felt compelled to go back. He found his visit there unsettling. I was no longer in touch with that world," he explains. "The kids were, though. I was coming back out of respect."

The play is "Where The Wild Things Are," and it is an original adaptation of the famous Sendak story by the eighth graders, who have spent the morning performing it in each of the lower school classrooms, finally reaching the 4-5s. Marcus Arrington, a tall African-American boy of 14, plays Max; his classmates, their faces transformed by homemade paper masks, are the wild things. Elvira is there. Ralph is sitting this one out -- preparing to star in the following production of "Harold and the Purple Crayon." The 4-5s sit in two rows on foot-high chairs. There are snippets of dialogue, and lots of growling. The wild things start dancing funkily around Max and singing the 1980s song "Wild Thing." The small children sit transfixed on their seats.

Marcus is the only one in the play who's not wearing a mask. Despite his height, he seems young for his age; his Max is a bit of a clown. He is not self-conscious. He's an old hand, working familiar territory -- ten years ago, in this very classroom, Marcus himself was a 4-5. Watching him now, I'm reminded of something he told me earlier: "It's almost like you put on a different face when you walk out of these doors. In here, you can basically do whatever you want and not have to worry about anything. You can express yourself more and not have to worry about being criticized." And I'm reminded also of what Cynthia Rogers, the African-American Lower School Director who first arrived at MCS in 1974, told me when I'd brought up the subject of Lennard: "Look, I know just from having my own experience of living in those two worlds and having to put on a different hat in each place,

that whatever you've done here on 96th Street isn't going to help you survive on 129th Street. And survival is the key word. How do you survive walking from the subway to your house? How do you survive in that high school where all of a sudden to be cool, to be in, is to do something that would be considered totally unacceptable here? I worry about that. I see it a lot with the seventh and eighth graders -- the outside world is already spilling in, coming in the door."

When I ask Marcus where he's going to high school next year, his response is vague, passive. Maybe someplace in New Jersey, he says, where he lives.

And I find suddenly that I want to shake him, tell him that he can't afford to be passive, that he's got to decide *now*, to know *now* what's out there, because the stakes are higher than he imagines. He's going to have to put one of his faces away for a few years. He's going to have to be strong. Hasn't anybody at Manhattan Country School told him that?

"The ship of integration," says Gus, shaking his head, lapsing into his favorite metaphor, which is actually a quote from a then-unknown Pat Buchanan to President Richard Nixon, declaring that "the ship of integration is going down, and we ought not to be aboard." He clearly relishes the phrase, with its near-biblical tone, its intimation of the ark, and its irony. It is a parable masquerading as an anecdote, holding one truth on its surface--the nation's abandonment of the ideals of the sixties--while keeping another--that here, on 96th Street, the ark is still afloat--within. Today we are sitting in a closet-sized conference room, beneath Ben Shahn's portrait of Ghandi. Spread out on a table in the next room is a chart of next year's incoming 4- 5s class, with tags of potential students color-coded according to race.

Gus looks tired. It's not that he feels the school has failed in some way -- he doesn't. The gilded mirror of Sixties idealism that for so many others is

cracked and tarnished, a relic sitting in the attic, is for Gus still intact and shining. He stares at it every day.

Still, the future impedes. There is so much to do. Gus' successor must be found (a search committee is already on the job). There's money to raise -- a lot of it. Nonetheless, last year MCS received more than two hundred student applications for roughly thirty-five openings. For the most part, the prospective students represent fewer extremes of race and class than they did in the Seventies, when it was not uncommon to find a Rockefeller, a Houghton, a Roosevelt singing "Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Set on Freedom" alongside kids from the South Bronx, Harlem, the Lower East Side. When I ask Gus about this change in the socioeconomic composition of the student body over time, he describes it as "a kind of middling."

The word takes me by surprise: "Middling." Of course, one thinks of "middle class." Fewer Thomas Baxtons, fewer Lennards and fewer Musas. Fewer risks, that is, fewer losses. It's already happening. And I'll tell you: It strikes me as ironic, and even makes me a little angry, that this school of mine should be middling while the world outside has never been so divided.

"The world changed around the school," Musa says when we meet. "It became an ultra-violent society. And the school was just giving you a belief system that this is the way the world can be if you all just kind of hold hands and sing some songs, go to school together, go home with each other, that this is how beautiful the world can be. And in a way I just think that's a naive approach, it's a Sixties approach. This school needs to look at the world. To look at the city that it's in and really start dealing with what is going on."

Musa says: "MCS doesn't deliver, because it's not a school for today. It's a school for tomorrow. And it always was."

He is angry when he says this--perhaps he is thinking about Lennard. But Lennard is okay, he's put it behind him. So Musa's anger passes. He sighs. And there it still is, the contradictory reality of the school, staring one in the face.

"You know," he says finally, "We know what it set out to do, we know what it didn't deliver, but the heart of it is so beautiful, and the people who have gone there are so different, and have been so touched, that it's something that just continues to grow. And as we get older it just keeps calling us back, and I don't care how far away you go. And all of us feel the same way."

He is right, of course. Forget "middling." Manhattan Country School is a kind of unearthly vision, at once beautiful and lacking. It is the way the world might look, but doesn't. It gives to its children their true inalienable rights -- the best of themselves, regardless of race or money. But that is not enough for those children who come from the least. They need to be better prepared for what follows, told that what follows is something else entirely. Because it is. Because what follows is often more wrenching and more destructive than mere economics or race -- it can feel like a forced dividing of the self.

It is among Noah's hard lessons in the Book of Genesis that mere integration, however purposeful -- the two-by-two gathering of diverse beings under a single roof -- is just the first step to survival.

Eventually all the races will land, and go their separate ways, and too soon have to choose between the world they remember and the world as they find it.

For Manhattan Country School, the worry is not endless floodwaters but Spanish Harlem to the north and Carnegie Hill to the south. And this simple truth: Children go home.

-- John Burnham Schwartz