Lee Gilmer

I can honestly say that I have been dutifully avoiding these status reports because I was afraid that once I started writing, I would end up wanting to relate so many stories that I would lose track of the real narrative arc of my summer. Despite my best efforts, I’m probably going to do some of that here, so bear with me… If I had tracked my 8 weeks at Taylor Park as well as the rest of you have, I doubt that I would be running into this problem right now.

But something about these reflections has always struck me as potentially self-serving (maybe I’m alone in this opinion)—At times I’ve caught myself wanting to horde insights and play them like trump cards while patting myself on the back for being an agent of racial and social progress, if I’m even partially qualified to claim the title. I spend so much time talking about this stuff…talking and talking and writing and reading and talking. Maybe this summer has been so humbling because I’ve had to keep my mouth shut.

Without getting into too much detail, we’ve essentially been camp counselors/mentors for a group of 10-15 middle school boys and girls, though I often worked with younger groups, too. I was one of 7 interns there along with roughly 10 other staff members, ranging from high school volunteers to paid teachers. The camp is designed to provide some basic/remedial math and reading skills in the morning and loosely organized games in the afternoon. The center offers free breakfast and lunch, provided by the local food bank, to both campers and children from the surrounding area who often come with multiple younger siblings in tow. When they finished eating, it was always tough to send the non-campers from the air conditioned gym and back into the 100+ degree heat, but it soon became one of our jobs as well.

When I arrived for my first day, no one greeted me, so I simply walked into the gym and tried to avoid looking like a kidnapper. I finally found another intern and introduced myself to him and a small group of 6th grade boys, a group that would grow to around 15 kids and become my de facto class for the next 8 weeks. For the first weeks, the lack of structure at the center ground my self-confidence dull and reduced my sense of efficacy to a near stasis. Because of my training schedule for cross country, I opted to live at home and commute instead of living with the other interns, a decision which technically made me an unpaid volunteer, not an “intern” as such. Almost all of these kids came from lower/working class families, with many coming directly from the housing projects located a few hundred meters away from the center. I spent the next weeks doing everything from creating reading lessons from a 1995 world encyclopedia, the only age appropriate “textbook” for our class, to supervising trips to the movies and pitching a kick ball on an overgrown baseball field.

When they brought in two younger teachers to teach typing to the 5th-8th graders, I was told that I could take the hour off or assist the other interns. Instead I decided to see what the kids were up to on the computers. The teachers had 10 of our kids on a SpongeBob typing program while 2 played Wii sports in the middle of the room. The teachers were fully engrossed in playing the Wii and rotating kids on and off of it, never once doing any teaching aside from loading the program for them, failing to realize that the kids were more interested in the typing games than actually learning how to type. This went on for about a week. I did what triage I could, directing the worst index-finger-only typists to the introduction level games while teaching them hand placement and some basic keystroke drills until they were able to advance. They were reluctant at first, some outright hostile to actually being taught how to type, but I did my best to silence the doubters with occasional displays of really fast typing.

Being a teacher is incredibly hard… being a good one, even harder. The issue of administrative apathy hit rock bottom when I walked into the main classroom and discovered both the director and assistant director on the computers playing Tetris and checking a personal email account, respectively. This is not to say that they were always lazy or incompetent but rather to emphasize that there were times when they seemed less interested in doing work than the kids.

It was at that point that I realized that I had no supervision, no real oversight. My directive, however, was clear enough—keep the kids safe and doing productive things in the morning. If I had acted on this realization a fraction of the times that it crept into my mind, I might have really changed things at
the center. But I didn't. I was too intimidated to say much or take too much liberty with any idea. We were the first--and last-- line of defense and the only guidance we received from our leaders was to act on our own initiative. The director informed me that the center had all of the necessary resources to teach middle school boys; I have never looked through more stacks of useless material in my life. Most of the math was appropriate for 3rd graders, not 6th, and but I bit my tongue and agreed with her. I still regret that decision, but bucking an established framework is intimidating, especially when you feel like an outsider. Though outsiders may have some of the best insights into such situations, dealing with a deeply entrenched status quo and leaders who perpetuate it was more than I could handle at times. I'd like to discuss this theme, especially as it relates to effective grassroots leadership, in greater detail at some point.

It's one thing to discuss poverty in the abstract but quite another to deal with it personally. It's one thing to talk about the inner city kids, but quite another to feel totally powerless before a group of 12 year olds, to bury your head in your hands as the reading lessons you arranged for them are literally in pieces on the floor. To talk about children like this, one must, in my mind, risk objectifying them. I hope that I can manage to avoid that here.

I have seen so many things, both good and bad, this summer-- the fights and the warning signs of abuse alongside random acts of childhood kindness and friendship, a functionally illiterate 4th grader and the 6th grader who reads Shakespeare, a fistfight over a pack of skittles and the little girl who always shared her snacks. I've heard heartbreaking and uplifting stories in roughly equal measure. I've seen gross negligence and heroic selflessness. The paid employees who sleep or play cell phone games and the volunteers who spend their own money on books and board games for the kids after spending 7-8 hours with them. The 40 year old assistants who rely on a loud voice and strong hands to keep order through fear, usually selecting a handful of known scapegoats to punish when problems arise, and the 19 year old intern who sits and talks with every child being punished when those administering it are unwilling to do so.

One more tangent on the theme of discipline-- most of the kids are no strangers to law enforcement; never before have I seen so many police patrols in a 10 block radius. They know the police cars by their numbers and have favorites and villains among the officers. When reviewing pictures of dogs in a new library book, some 3rd graders identified a German shepherd simply as "K9," recognizing the K9 units that appear in the weekly drug raids in the area. The police circle the project apartments about as frequently as the young black men driving aimlessly do. Again, this scene borders on resembling longstanding racial caricatures. Talk about cyclical poverty and crime...it's literally spinning around the park.

I overheard one 5th grade girl, Zaria, talking to another girl in relatively hushed tones, though it was clear that she realized I was nearby and would most likely hear what she was saying. She stated quite matter-of-factly that two other interns and I were the only white people that she has ever liked. Her friend reminded her of my presence, which Zaira replied, "I really don't care if he hears." I pretended not to. Maybe that was yet another missed opportunity.

There are just a few snapshots of an 8 1/2 week adventure/ordeal/opportunity. I certainly have much more to say and more stories to tell, but much, much more importantly, I've realized how much more I have to live and learn. And so do these kids.

In the past year, I've become a huge fan of the band The Hold Steady. One of my favorite lines comes from a song dealing in part with the death of the poet John Berryman. It goes something like this:

"She said, 'you're pretty good with words but words won't save your life.' And they didn't so he died."

We may be pretty good with words, but words alone will never pull children out of poverty. It's easy to write about love but much harder to practice it. I can never remind myself of that enough these days.