

How costly the toll of the bells

By Ruth Ostrow

At school we studied a poem that had much resonance with me. In *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, T.S. Eliot laments a life measured out in coffee spoons. It is a poignant image of an entire existence regulated by the trivia and dross of café society.

Years later, I reflect on my school years with similar dismay. Instead of coffee spoons, it was a life measured out in bells. School bells, alarm bells. Bells ringing to signal the start of a lesson, the end of a day. When to eat, rest, talk, go to the toilet. Days measured out in the regulated, meticulous order of those short, sharp rings.

But whose order? Not mine. Not the natural order of a body that could easily have slept in until 10am each day. Not the natural order of a mind that was far more interested in literature and love than mathematics and the subjects necessary to acquire a matriculation.

Not the natural order of a free soul that wanted to run home from school and roll in the grass, make beautiful use of a youth, bask in the remaining sun, but instead was confined to a dim office to complete masses of boring and mostly useless homework.

I am reflecting on this today, my daughter's first day of school, as I stand at the gate, her fragile hand in mine. She is so fresh. So full of freedom.

I have already lost one child to a rigid school system, where academic success was placed above all else. The child was me. Me and those wondrous years of youth, in which children should be free to enjoy being young instead of squirming under the onerous burdens of acquiring A grades to please ambitious teachers and parents.

"It's for your future," we were always told. "Do well and you will have options. Options to go on and become anything you want."

But all I want now is my youth back; the youth I sacrificed for results. I want to go back to those lazy summer days when life was so easy and carefree. I want to go back to the kids on my block who got home from state school at 3pm and played together until well into the night. They splashed in the makeshift swimming pools in our street and kicked footballs around.

I went to a private school, which meant I arrived home exhausted at 5pm, stepping off the school bus and into my bedroom to do huge assignments, paint canvases, do applied mathematics, because one day I'd be glad that I'd kept all my options open.

I want to go back to being 14 and the first flush of love. When other kids from less fortunate schools sat on the phone, dated through the week, played truant, took sickies. At my private school it was unheard of not to be responsible, academically alert and ready for matriculation from the time you knew how to toddle.

Our immigrant parents paid exorbitant fees. And we grew up far too soon. Looking back now in my late 30s, what did it all amount to? I never went to university, going straight into journalism instead. Ironically, my hard-earned grades meant nothing to my editors. They hired me for the passion in my belly.

As for true knowledge, it came from reading books (usually the ones not on the school syllabus), talking to people on my journey through life, travelling, watching and observing. And yes, some special teachers who would sit with me during lunchbreak or after class, satiating my grasping mind. So many of them were kindred spirits.

But they too were stymied and bullied by the bells -- so much to do in such a short time so as to fulfil the curriculum. So much to teach from the required textbooks, so that everyone could get high grades in preparation for matriculation. Private schools have to maintain their top academic records. It was, and is, expected.

Bells. I can still hear them in my head. I have never had an alarm clock since I left school. The sound makes me nauseous. Those inflexible, inhumane bells took my individuality away then. And I fear the same will happen now.

As I stand here with a tiny person in a uniform no bigger than a handbag, I fear that once again I will be a slave to bells, once again lose precious playtime to homework, as my daughter sits sweating at her desk, screwing her eyes up over little numbers and words.

I am her mother. But it's not the natural laws of biology that bells follow. I will have no say in how she spends her days, what she learns, and how much time she has at nights after school and on weekends to roll in the grass, revel in the bliss of her prime, and simply love life.

The school system will ring out its orders and rules to me and to her. It will pound out its expectations: parental, societal, academic.

They tell me all private schools are the same. They are competitive. The onus is on performance, achievement and results.

The soul and individuality of a child comes second to the greater good of education, so that kids can have every opportunity to gain success in their subsequent lives.

But I ponder the meaning of success. For what greater success can there be than learning the art of living well: knowing how to live each moment with a sense of joy, contentment and compassion.

They tell me a good education is a gift. I know this to be true and am grateful for the knowledge my school gave me. But I ponder the meaning of the word "gift".

For what greater gift could I give my child than the joy and beauty of a carefree, long and proper childhood?

I ponder. I fret. And ponder some more. Which is why we are not standing at the gates of a private school. Instead we are standing in front of a small red building, at a state school.

A quiet, country school, hidden behind trees, with huge areas of grassy fields. A school I am told values time out and play, and allows children to be children.

Final year is a long way off. I will have time to wonder again and again about the merits of private-school education. But for now we will be part of a system that does have bells. But bells that ring a little less loudly.

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