

# Letter to Mr. Se-hoon Oh

DONGHEE HONG

**D**ear Mr. Se-hoon Oh,

Recently, I received some terrible news: the Nonhyuan elementary school will be destroyed one month from now. Established in 1917, this school has many years of history and tradition, and I'm shocked and dismayed by your plan.

As one of your citizens, I can understand the reasoning behind such a radical, controversial move. It may be a boon for certain citizens in our community or certain organizations; they will receive funding originally allocated for the school's development. Those citizens will probably agree with your decision. They will probably point out that the school routinely produces children who stray from the path of responsibility and become rebels. Parents of students in other middle schools around the village will shake their heads, say nothing but negative things, and give these children disapproving stares, turning them away. It might be said that the community has already suffered enough from the rebellious and hostile spirit of these kids, and that you, as a leader and a representative of our community's wishes, are hoping to avoid such misfortunes again. Destroying this school as a whole—not only shutting it down but demolishing its structure—will be symbolic, perhaps; maybe it will guarantee the resurrection of our town's reputation, or bring you one step closer to cementing your own reputation as a political force to be reckoned with. By chopping down what you perceive to be one diseased tree in a forest, by rooting out one weed to save the garden, by considering the benefits it would bring to members of your winning coalition, by staying firmly in the present and setting aside children who are widely considered bad seeds instead of "future assets," you've made a decision that seems sound and reasonable.

But I cannot accept your action. It seems to me that by recognizing only what is superficially practical, you have become blind to—or you might be craftily pretending to ignore—these children's right to an education. As both an alumnus of Nonhyuan and a teacher there, I became vividly, achingly

involved in the lives of the children in my school, those living in our town of Gangnam. I can tell you firsthand about the “unavoidable fate” of their “rebellious” future and the hidden consequences of what you’ve done.

I taught these children in the summer of 2009, during their summer vacation, and I saw that many of them were just left at home, without supervision. Their parents had to work constantly to maintain a basic—i.e., impoverished—standard of living. They could barely maintain their basic supplies. The children, overlooked and left at home, were nothing more than pets. But a child isn’t a dog or cat. Dogs and cats, at least, are born with an instinct for survival and self-sufficiency. The most the children of Nonhyuan could do to keep from starving was to cook some basic food, like eggs, eggplant, or rice. And they were still unable to take care of themselves. Here is what they, like most children, couldn’t do on their own: cook more than basic food, obtain clean clothes, do laundry, and keep themselves, their own bodies, clean.

In the face of these glaring problems, the Nonhyuan school devised a summer program to complement the regular school curriculum. This program gathered together the impoverished children of our community. The very act of gathering together can make people, particularly children, feel less lonely, and feel a stronger sense of solidarity and independence. The need to belong to something—to one’s country, town, school, family, friends, self—is perhaps the most basic of human needs. Even with limited resources, seats, rooms, and workers, Nonhyuan was able to teach neglected children not only the basic necessities that their parents couldn’t satisfy, but also a sense of belonging, independence, and pride. For these children, the school was not only an academic institution, but also a teacher, friend, cook, laundry, dining hall, and place for exercise—all that their parents couldn’t give them, all they couldn’t get elsewhere. The school itself was a force for them to rely on; in many ways, it was their *home*.

Every morning I taught Chinese and English to the children of Nonhyuan. But beyond my role, which was to give them grammar and syntax, facts, pieces of knowledge, I really enjoyed being with them. I went there every day around 7:30 a.m. and prepared the breakfast with the other teachers. This was our way of welcoming our precious sons and daughters. In contrast to typical kids, who spend the day waiting to go home, the children of Nonhyuan cried *not* to go home. They wanted to stay in school with us. After class, when the weather allowed, we would go out to the playground and play soccer, tag, and other traditional children’s games. We enjoyed the nicer weather whenever we were lucky enough to have it. When we weren’t so lucky, we made our own good weather: we stayed in the classroom and played

board games, chattering, playing piano, singing, dancing, just relishing the opportunity that we could laugh together without any worries—at least for the time being. I went there to educate them, but I learned a great deal myself. When I say that they became teachers and I became a student, I mean that I got a lot of energy from them. They nourished me, and the other teachers as well. Thinking of all the kids who had to stay at home, thinking of those who were neglected and lonely, I felt uncomfortable and sorry. I saw how loneliness could make a child grow into a rebel, could make her go astray. How tragic it was! Those “left at home” children were completely deprived of love and community; that deprivation, not any innate flaw, propelled them in a tragic direction. It wasn’t their own fault, but the lack of simple love.

In her essay “Clamorous To Learn,” Eudora Welty describes the influence of her first-grade teacher, Miss Duling, on her entire life. Miss Duling doesn’t replace a parent’s love and concern, but she does provide aspects of parental education: she teaches the children about morality, shaping the future men and women they’ll become. By describing Miss Duling’s bold, progressive, decisive stance, a drive for correction and change, Welty shows us a good teacher who is also a good citizen: “When [Miss Duling] wanted something done—some civic oversight corrected, some injustice made right overnight—she telephoned the mayor, or the chief of police . . . calling them by their first names, *told* them” (353). Welty is implying how powerful a teacher’s influence can be, how one small change can lead to bigger ones, given enough sincere and brave motivation. In Miss Duling’s classroom, Welty learned “grammar, arithmetic, spelling, reading, writing, geography, physical training, singing”—all sorts of facts and skills (353). But she also learned salvation. All the teachers at the Davis School paid sincere attention to their students, even if their worries were sometimes distorted by children who heard them as criticisms. Miss Duling, in Welty’s account, was “impervious to lies or foolish excuses or the insufferable plea of not knowing any better” (353). She was always right because she had “this wish”—the wish to learn, teach, care and be cared for, which is what Nonhyuan contained (353).

When their school is destroyed, these children won’t have any opportunity to grumble at over-fastidious rules or authorities, like the children at Welty’s school. It may be argued that Welty, unlike the children of Nonhyuan, received sufficient care and encouragement from her parents to begin with. She describes sometimes being invigorated and cheered on the morning before the examination: “If the majority can pass, think how much better *you* can do,” they tell her (354). But when she really delves into her memories of early school, she becomes more and more aware of the influence

of her good teacher, admitting that Miss Duling had “stridden into a larger part of my work than I’d realized until now” (353). Her right to an education was the real fortune in her life. Although you may never read this essay, Mr. Oh, I’d like you to know that I think Eudora Welty became a well-known writer because of the educational community that urged her forward. Her words are like teachers themselves: they teach us not only facts, but also new ways to see the world.

I’d like you to picture all the kids in the world who are not as fortunate as Welty—those who are craving education, discipline, protection, boundaries, admonitions, care, love. These are not basic privileges, but without them, human beings are nothing more than puppets. It is within your power to make it otherwise for the children under your jurisdiction.

The misfortunes of the children of Nonhyuan are exogenous. They are not driven by free will. And it is wrong of you to assume that all of these children *will* ultimately fall into such bad behavior. Isn’t it a prejudice on *your* part, Mr. Se-hoon Oh, to be so certain about every kid’s future? Isn’t that a vague and hasty preconception? I can understand your practical reasons, but please, our respectful mayor, hold your breath for once and wait a little bit. Don’t judge the book by its cover.

We, the teachers, are still trying to rescue them from this dire—and daily—tragedy. We were, and are, committed fully and most sincerely to these impressionable young minds, following our passions as teachers and guardians. We’ve seen the power of making one small change, how it can create a ripple effect. If you knew the value of these children—and how much they need to be valued—you would see it too.

Otherwise, the children of Nonhyuan will not be children anymore; they’ll be the inhabitants of a darker world, a place empty of parents and nourishment. When that happens, their only recourse will be to turn against themselves, turn against their community, and turn against you.

Sincerely,

Donghee Hong

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#### **WORKS CITED**

Welty, Eudora. “Clamorous To Learn.” *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2008. 352-56. Print.

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