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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Surround children with beauty and goodness

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Christmas Day was yesterday, but we linger in the season of peace on Earth and good will toward one another. It is a season of divine life brought into our mortal world. That is why it is also about children, who, if they are lucky, still look at the world in innocence.

If you want to feel the spirit of the season, I have an odd recommendation. Go see the movie made of Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Road," and read the book.

You may know it is about a man and a boy after a universal cataclysm. The world is dead, covered with ash. Buildings, houses, tools and machines lie decaying and useless. There is nothing green or growing. The daytime sky is almost lightless. The ocean, from which life is said to have come, is gray and lifeless. There are no birds, no insects, no living creatures, just a small unknown number of human survivors.

McCarthy's worst-case scenario strips away distractions. It makes us see what mothers and fathers should see in their sons and daughters every hour of every day: life and hope and the capacity for pure goodness. Also what it costs to choose to be the good guys.

After I saw the film, our almost-15-year-old son asked me, "How was it, Dad?" I said, "Here's how it was" and gave him the biggest hug I have given him in a long time.

The father in "The Road" gazes at his boy asleep and begins sobbing. He tries to figure out why. McCarthy writes, "He wasn't sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness." I know that was where my hug came from. It made me feel grateful for all the caregivers and teachers who have made our son what he is right now.

I was blessed a few days ago to be invited over to the University of Texas Elementary School by its Principal/CEO Ramona Trevino, a UT colleague. The school is, as Trevino says, "a truly urban school where for generations college has not been a consideration." It has won many well-deserved awards and been profiled in the *American-Statesman* and other publications. It has drawn the support of concerned philanthropists like Michael L. Klein, who visits the school to "read to the kids or take them through their reading exercises or do whatever the teachers tell me to do." Mainly the involvement of distinguished volunteers like Klein reinforces for the students that people care about them and know that they "carry the fire," as McCarthy's boy puts it, of what it means to be human.

What impressed me most during my three hours there was the joy and love the children exuded in simple ways. The school incorporates "social emotional learning" in all its instruction. There

are "peace areas" in classrooms, where students can figure out why they were acting in ways that used to be met with harsh forms of punishment.

First-grader Billy showed me his writing book and read me his story "Angry Animals." He had an awareness of emotional states and forces that I may not have had until I was 30. He knew that there were feelings beyond sad, happy and angry. And he talked about Thomas Jefferson and the "Declurayshun of Indipendens" with a preternatural wisdom.

The school's philosophy was symbolized for me in the watercolor self-portraits displayed in the entrance hall. They were drawn by Ms. Watkins' third-graders. The kids studied masterpieces, like Eduard Munch's "The Scream," for how facial features change with changes in moods and feelings. And they applied their new grasp of facial forms to themselves.

There are 20 faces of children who know someone cares. That is clear even in the one self-image that is shedding tears. They are displayed around the happy Little Longhorns logo of the school.

Happy holidays to all the teachers, service workers, professional educators, benefactors, university administrators, political leaders and mothers and fathers everywhere who know what Cormac McCarthy impresses upon us: Even in the worst settings, every child "glows like a tabernacle."

Every child deserves what UT Elementary School is giving its fortunate students.

As a New Year's resolution, let's all ask, "How can I help make that dream come true?"

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