

I Love Fridays! By: Ben Putnam

Monday. The alarm goes off at 5:00 a.m., by 7:00 a.m. I'm at school, hanging up my coat, well rested (hopefully), well caffeinated (definitely), click on my computer, check on the kilns, fill the clay barrels and take a deep breath (maybe two). The halls of a high school can be thick with grumbles for no reason other than it's Monday. I tell my students, "Hey, do you really want to be grumpy for 1/7th of your life just because it's Monday? Mondays are great! You have the whole week ahead of you! So much potential! So much opportunity! -- Let's get on with it." And we do.

Tuesday. A solid day. A dig-into-the-work kind of a day. Fewer grumbles. A productive calm.

Wednesday. Hump-day. A moment of pause. What have we done so far? What do we have left to complete? A day of meetings.

Thursday. A buzz in the air. Lots getting done. Students can smell the weekend like the shift of winter to spring, with the lingering olfactory reminder of the accumulated of assignments and assessment due tomorrow.

Friday! Oh Friday, Joy. It's Friday! Big smiles, a spring in the step. Feelings of accomplishment or at least survival. A day of tying up loose ends for all. Planning for next week and reflecting on the week that's been. Excitement to sleep a little later tomorrow. The bell goes off at 2:20. Most students are making a bee-line for buses and cars. Teachers are taking a collective deep breath and beginning their winding down rituals. Classrooms heave into quiet. Most.... But not all.

Here's a thing that happens; I'm not joking.

Every Friday, without fail, without announcement or reminder or spectacle. My studio gets a little brighter, the walls stretch and wiggle a little. The volume gets turned up. A low deep hum of energy begins to fill the space. (Cue the Samuel L Jackson-esque voice-over saying "Right on baby... Let's do this.") Enter: adolescent effervescence flowing into the studio for art club. Eight to twenty students, every Friday, are here for Art Club! I don't know how they know, but they know. Most of the students I recognize, but some I don't. I've had students tell me, "The first rule of Art Club is you don't talk about Art Club." There's some truth to that. A few somewhat cryptic signs go up the first week of school and then it's up to the kids to find it. And they do. There is no curriculum, no agenda, no roster or plan. There is good music, good company, good conversation and great art being made. Students from all corners of the school land here. There are students I can count on being here week in, week out. Some attend based upon the sports season or work schedules. There are students who come in a pack, and some who come by themselves. I have students who talk incessantly, and others who show up without a word. This is the time and the space that they need, and whatever that need may be, I allow them that. To be a fly on the wall on any given Friday you might see someone drawing a portrait of their brother or sewing up a

new sketchbook, painting a vase full of sunflowers or weaving a basket for their mum, working up a new anime character or making a mug on the pottery wheel. Some students will show up and do homework or just read a book. Some want instruction and some want to be left alone. Occasionally, a colleague will stop by for a visit, shaking their head in disbelief at the number and diversity of students that want to stay at school on a Friday afternoon. It's kind of spectacular to watch - a bit unbelievable. At 4:30 I have to encourage them to find other things to do or they might stay all night. In fact, that's something which happens once or twice a year, Art Club overnight. Making art, playing games, and maybe a 3:00 a.m. dance party.

Also in Art Club, we go on the occasional field trip to a local artist's studio or, by special invitation, to the MacDowell Colony to visit an artist-in-residence who is generously sharing their time and work. Colleagues come in, not just to visit, but to work alongside our students or even teach us all paper – or basket making. We all have things we can learn and all have things we can share.

Art Club is cathartic and affirming. It taps into something deep and ancient about the value in coming together in a group, sharing a space and time and company. Art Club moves in the peripherals, if one tries to look at it square-on the magic becomes lost. It's felt and experienced - quiet and unobtrusive, it's every Friday.

At year's end, we don't have a banquet like the sports teams do. We don't have a final concert or exhibition. The graduating seniors don't get a fancy tassel or medal to wear at graduation. What they do get is a final experience, a final happening: art club's final rite of passage.

A giant barrel of liquid clay (a clay slip) is prepared, and with much laughter and screaming, we plunge our heads and shoulders into the thick yogurt. It's a parting rite of passage, a baptism that represents the time we've shared together and a moment to pause. We recognize our time together, the things and community we've made. We celebrate the power of art for the sake of art and the unexpected strength, value and importance of this small self-made community.

I don't know all the reasons why they come. I'm not sure they know all the reasons they come. I like to think they come because it's a welcoming space, it's comfortable, they can do what they want, and be who they want. While each week's studio climate has its own prevailing energy. Week in and week out, walking to my truck at 5:00pm on Friday afternoon I find myself thinking, "That was a good day." I love Fridays."

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