A half dozen seventh graders clamber out of a rusty yellow van, each student squirming to pull on sneakers and gather together field study notebooks. Two of them grab the grimy plastic milk crate crammed with testing equipment and fraying books written on stream wildlife. The motley crew hurries down to the stream, clad in clothes long outgrown, laughing and singing as they splash among the algae-covered rocks and fallen trees. For a few hours, the “seventh grade” label is wiped away. These kids are transformed. This was how I spent my seventh grade year—in a class called Watershed.

Watershed was unlike any educational experience I had ever had. It was a team-taught class of thirty-six students given the opportunity to learn in an integrated program focused on the natural history of our local Darby Creek watershed. We learned from experience—each week embarking on field trips to local streams where we analyzed the waterways’ overall biodiversity. We tested phosphate, nitrogen, and dissolved oxygen levels of the water, while also keeping tabs on larvae and water dwellers that hid under rocks and logs. We had no boundaries to our creativity. We worked in groups, and presented our projects in extravagant ways. I recall acting out the digestive system in one absurd skit, and composing “rock” concerts that displayed our knowledge of geology. The most stunning part of Watershed was that there were no grades. Our learning was entirely self-motivated, structured around the concept of self-evaluation. As a result, we learned that education is about more than numbers or letters; education is furthering knowledge of the world, and preparing you for the future.

A watershed is defined as an area of high land with water on either side that drains to two different river systems. It marks a change in direction and a new course of flow. For me, seventh grade was itself a watershed. It was the pivotal point of my adolescence, a year that molded that way I look at school and the world. Watershed gave me a passion for learning and taught me to approach education with an intensity and drive that I had never known before. Several years later, in tenth grade, I enrolled in another integrated honors class titled Global Issues. It was in Global Issues that I took this love for learning to the next level. I discovered a deep and genuine passion for the study of world politics and cultures. That year I ingested masses of information, learning about everything from Hamas to Hinduism. I became addicted to the news and editorial comment, reading The New York Times every morning and watching BBC World Service every night. My interest for these topics deepened not because my teachers required it to, but because I was hungry for knowledge.

In nature, every watershed is but a small splinter of a larger system. Every system combines with neighboring systems to form a larger watershed, until the aggregate forms the largest watershed of all—the ocean. My watershed year was similarly a small part of a greater watershed—the path to realizing that a spark of inspiration can kindle a great fire. For me that fire is a love of learning and an appetite to know more about our world.