I work in the theater, which is a morally dubious occupation. But there is nothing morally dubious about educating a child.

Unfortunately, we treat our public schools as if there were. In New York City, where I live, there are schools that don’t have libraries, schools that don’t have desks. We need to give more money to schools, and we need to increase teacher salaries. If we don’t give our schools the attention they deserve, we’re in danger of depriving a whole generation of a decent education.

Still, I am not one of those people who believes that all is lost. I persist in believing that change can happen and that the heart of each student can be touched. I went to public school in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Schools were generally not very good there, but I got lucky. In a rather unremarkable school system, I had some remarkable teachers. In sixth grade I had an English teacher who desperately wanted us to learn to write and speak correctly. She drilled English syntax and structure into us relentlessly. She was, to me at that time, incredibly scary and mean. All the students hated her, but the rules of language and clear expression—pretty key ingredients in being a writer—got pounded into my head.

This teacher is quite old now, and a little while back, she came up to New York to see a performance of my play Caroline, or Change. I met her afterward and tried to tell her how important her lessons had been to me. “Thank you,” I said. “You really changed my life. I can’t tell you how much I owe you.”

She looked at me for a second, then said, “That’s really nice, honey, but most of my students just think I’m an old bitch.”

Each student, every day, is on a journey of discovery, and I believe that every single teacher can make a difference in that voyage. We can teach kids that they are special, that there are certain things in the world that don’t have easy answers, that there are moments in your life that will open up your heart, that they are not just one of 50 goldfish in a small pond with a limited food supply.

When we deprive our children of an education, we’ve committed a crime because we’ve taken away their right to pursue happiness. There is no guarantee that any of us is ever going to catch up with happiness, but we need legs to pursue it. Often, those legs are supplied by a teacher.

One of the great paradoxes of life is that people are enormously resilient but also incredibly fragile. That is especially true in kids. It’s hard work to be a kid, but kids have a wonderful generosity of spirit. It takes so little to make them want to try. They need loving parents and a loving home, of course, but they also need teachers who care and who don’t give up. Every student needs someone who says, simply, “You mean something. You count.”

That kind of support doesn’t guarantee that the kid won’t grow up to be a neurotic mess (although some of the most interesting people I know are neurotic messes), but it does offer them a chance to grow up to be coherent and have an internal organization that allows them to make sense of the world. Perhaps, if they are lucky, they will live a good life.

I believe that human society is essentially composed of our relationships with others. And those relationships start very early in school. As teachers, make sure you do everything you can do—more than you’ve ever done. Even just a little bit more will make a big difference.

Tony Kushner is a playwright whose works include A Bright Room Called Day and Hydrotaphia. He is perhaps best known for Angels in America, which received a Pulitzer Prize, 2 Tony Awards, 11 Emmys, and 2 Drama Desk Awards, and was selected by London’s National Theatre as one of the 10 best plays of the 20th century. This piece is based on two interviews with him in San Francisco. Write to edutopia.org.