



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: Back to school

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 08.10.26



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By the time you read this, my children will be back in school, uniformed, lunch-boxed, and building those parts of life that I can't watch firsthand. But at this moment, writing to you from the peculiar hush of my own dining room, I am surrounded by school supplies still swaddled in plastic: spiral notebooks stacked like a paper skyline, a box of pencils sharpened to points they will never see, books arranged with the solemnity of an altar.

There's something bittersweet, always, about this hinge of the year. As a boy I told time by golf majors: the Masters unfurling its azaleas in spring, then the U.S. Open, the Open Championship, and finally the PGA, which in my private liturgy was the funeral bell of summer. I wish they'd give us back that order.

By the time the PGA rolled its leaderboard shut, a small grief had already set in. The weekend before school began, however, something shifted, some electric little thrill that I'd feel in my chest like the first cool front of autumn.

A summer, then, was a lifetime. We had no cell phones or social media, no glowing rectangles keeping tabs on one another, so we returned to the classroom as near strangers: someone taller, someone in a shirt too obviously chosen, everyone performing a new self they'd been rehearsing in the mirror. The first day was a hard reset – a *tabula rasa*, if you'll forgive the Latin.

My children, I imagine, have lived this summer much in the same manner. Years from now they'll remember scattered fragments – the trip to Mount Vernon, the golf, Caleb opening cabinet drawers and dumping Tupperware all over the floor.

But they won't remember what I'll remember. They'll recall fun. I'll recall simply having them home: morning conversations at sunrise, the sound of four different voices drifting through the house, Noah and Gabriela conspiring against their little brother in some game that made perfect sense only to them.

Parents and children inhabit the same calendar, but they don't quite live in the same season. That may be why August grows heavier with each passing year. My kids measure summer by what happened; I measure it by who was there.

This summer my children are 14, 12 and two, and I confess it's been a rare and lovely thing to have them underfoot. The older two, Noah and Gabriela, have crossed into that tender frontier where conversation with your father is possible, even pleasant, so long as no one from school is watching. They will not, under any circumstances, be seen with me at a restaurant. A movie is out of the question. The horror of it: a classmate spotting them beside their own dad, as if I were something shameful tracked in on a dirty shoe!

Yet at home they've been wonderful, particularly with Caleb, the two-year-old, whom they entertain and referee and generally shepherd through his small chaos whenever I need to shower, or take a call, or appear on television looking like a man who has his life together.

I telephoned my parents the other day, admitting that I was taking the approaching start of school harder than my children were. My mother, with the compassion only mothers possess, reminded me of my own first morning of kindergarten – how she and my father stood at the bus stop until I was safely aboard, then trailed the bus in their car like anxious secret agents. She'd rehearsed the walk from bus to classroom with me the day before, only she'd walked me to the front entrance, and the buses, it turned out, stopped 'round the back! I disembarked that big yellow vehicle and marched confidently in the wrong direction until my parents intervened.

I'd left the house that morning in a crisp polo, tucked with real ambition. I came home with it untucked and baptized in ketchup. My neighbor Brett – same name as my brother's, same age as me – descended the bus steps with me. When our mothers asked what he'd learned on his first day, he looked his mother dead in the eye and raised his middle finger. To his defense, that's actually what he had learned. She swiftly informed him that if he ever did that again, she would break his finger clean off. And she would have, too.

There will be a strange quiet in my house now. Noah is nearly my height. Soon he'll have his learner's permit, which means before long he'll be the one behind the wheel, and I'll be the passenger, watching the road unspool as my parents once watched a school bus carry me toward a wrong turn I didn't yet know I was making. Gabby nurtures her little brother with an instinct I never taught her, and he adores her the uncomplicated way only toddlers can.

I suppose that's the whole trick of it: you spend years steering and protecting, and one day you're just a passenger, watching someone you made take the wheel, or her brother's little hand – still yours, forever yours, and yet already gone.

Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Capital Markets Initiative and a Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at AllenMendenhall.com (<http://AllenMendenhall.com>).

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