



Source: Sabrina Tavernise, 'One Iraqi institution gets a passing grade: Schools', *New York Times in International Herald Tribune online*, 27/06/06.

Tags: [workplace](#), [disenchantment](#), [fire](#), [chance](#)

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Ms Soltz was a high school chemistry teacher. She was the only chemistry teacher in a small Catholic girls school in the centre of London, which took its name (though this cannot be revealed for both the school and the teacher are real) from the visions of the great Sir Thomas More. Ms Soltz found inspiration in drawing parallels between her own belief system and those of More's and she considered herself lucky to be at a school that enabled her to combine the two. She was profoundly taken with his vision of Utopia and would quote long tracts of More's writings on Perfection to the girls after lunch, when she felt them dozing off, row by row, in the afternoon sun.

Ms Soltz was an impressively erect five foot, eight inches with strong Saxon features, greyish sort of eyes and long, straight red hair. Perhaps she would have been considered good looking if her face wasn't so off-kilter. She dressed well; not expensively and not with over-reaching flare. Her shoes were well-heeled, her shirts were expertly pressed. Her watch used Russian parts (undesirable) but she did take her time from Paddington Station. In short, Ms Soltz presented herself for business, with the quiet confidence of someone conducting a small, incremental revolution every time she addressed her class. And this was Ms Soltz's primary concern.

Ms Soltz's position as the school's sole chemistry teacher allowed her the freedom to experiment with new teaching methods in light of new research in the field. In all her experiments, be they burning magnesium, or salt crystallisation, she wanted her girls to be engaged with the subject. She wanted them to find for themselves the same perfect, infinitesimal aspects of the universe with which she was so enamoured. She encouraged them to push the boundaries; to add a splash more, to turn up the flame. She called out to them in her laboratory like Socrates in the city square. She believed these poetic teaching methods kept the girls focused, made them strong and determined as they struggled to reason with

life. And the girls responded accordingly, being slightly less stolid than they were in Mme. Khamara's French class. Or so Ms Soltz imagined.

During one passion-infused session with her 2nd form class, as she strode the length of the classroom with a copy of Utopia in hand, Ms Soltz's long hair accidentally swung into the path of the oversized flame of a student's Bunsen burner. It's length was gone in an instant, and in a final attempt to put out the fire before it reached her cranium, Ms Soltz shoved her head into one of the benchtop basins, piercing her eye on a scalpel as she turned on the tap.

No one heard from Ms Soltz in the months succeeding the accident. Speculation amongst the students as to her whereabouts was rife. And when she finally returned to work six months later her hair, once perhaps her greatest feature (in the absence of any else), had grown back blanched of all colour. Her right eye was replaced with a glass ball that never seemed to sit quite right in its socket, making it hard for the girls to look at her directly. The utmost care was taken to integrate Ms Soltz back into the curriculum, but it was clear that her Utopian vision was gone. In its place was a woman seeped in sorrow who, despite her students' efforts to rile her into action, had accepted the fallacy of perfection. Thereafter her lessons were conducted in silence using foundation textbooks and that well-thumbed copy of More was never seen by her students again. Year after year the girls completed their finals with a level of complete adequacy that befitted the expense of their education. With no particular grievance with her, the school board found it too difficult and too awkward to ask her to resign. She eventually retired at age 66, but by then the teachers had changed and the students had left. The memory of Ms Soltz and her grand vision of school-life had been lost.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Dana Bottachella.*