

## **THE EXHAUSTED SCHOOL: "How Did We Ever Come to Believe that the State Should Tell Our Children What to Think?"**

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Keep in mind as I speak that I spent 26 years in public school classrooms. My perspective is that of an insider, not an outsider. You have been warned.

We live in a time of great school crisis, and that crisis is linked to a greater social crisis in the general community. We seem to have lost our identity. Children and old people are locked away from the business of the world to a degree without precedent - nobody talks to them anymore. Without children and old people mixing in daily life, a community has no future and no past, only a continuous present.

We live in networks, not communities. Everyone I know is lonely because of that. In some strange way school is a major actor in this tragedy, just as it is a major actor in the widening gulf among races and social classes. Using school as a sorting mechanism, we appear to be on the way to creating a caste system, complete with untouchables who wander through subway trains begging, and sleep upon the streets.

I've noticed a fascinating phenomenon in my 27 years of teaching: schools and schooling are increasingly irrelevant to the great enterprises of the planet. No one believes any more that scientists are made in science classes, or politicians in civics classes, or poets in English classes. The truth is that schools don't really teach anything except how to obey orders. This is a great mystery because thousands of humane, caring people work in schools as teachers and aides, and even as administrators. But the abstract logic of the institution overwhelms their individual contributions. Although teachers do care, and do work very hard, the institution is psychopathic - by which I mean it has no conscience.

It rings a bell and the young man in the middle of writing a poem must close his notebook and move to a different cell where he memorizes that man and monkeys derive from a common ancestor, or that a man named Columbus discovered America even though millions of people were already here.

The idea that schooling and education are the same thing was never a convincing one, but in our lifetimes, yours and mine, it has become an exhausted one.

How did we ever come to believe that the State should tell our children what to think?

To escape the trap we are in will require acts of courage and imagination: the first an act of political resolve - to deconstruct the kind of schooling we have and return it to real people and real communities from abstract government hands; the second, to create a vision of what can be done and how to do it. My own job tonight will be to question the legitimacy of the school monopoly. In the hours we are together, you'll hear six separate logics of schooling, as different from each other as they are from the logic of government factory schools where I spend my own working life.

If you had a choice where to send your own kid you might well choose one of these six ideas, yet still be grateful you knew about the other five, even if they were not the right way for you. But the secret strength in this simple program design is that they do not represent all the worthwhile kinds of schooling. Many more exist concealed from view by the government monopoly and its press agents. These are unique, one-of-a-kind places you'll hear from tonight - their existence proving there is no "one right way" to grow up.

How on earth did we ever accept the idea a government had the right to tell us where to go to school? How did we ever come to believe the State should tell our children what to think? Our form of compulsion schooling is an invention of the State of Massachusetts, 140 years ago. It was resisted, sometimes with guns, by an estimated 80 percent of the Massachusetts population. A senator's office contended not too long ago that prior to

compulsory government schooling the literacy rate in Massachusetts was 98 percent, but after it the figure never again reached above 91 percent.

I don't think we'll get rid of schools anytime soon, certainly not in my lifetime, but if we're going to change what has become a disaster we need to recognize that ignorance is inherent in the design of the thing. It is not the fault of bad teachers, or of too little money spent. Structurally, schools fly in the face of how children learn.

Take reading. People learn to read naturally and easily somewhere between the ages of 5 and 12, some earlier, some later. Late readers are indistinguishable from early readers in a very short time. But the natural course of things can be violently altered by rewarding early readers - and by pronouncing later readers "in need of remediation". The lie is then compounded by supplying the deficient with "special" treatment, including assignment to a separate junk category called "special education". You cannot "teach" children to read any more than you can "teach" them to walk and talk. Under the right conditions they teach themselves with great facility.

But you can teach children to hate reading, to do it poorly, and to hate themselves for not measuring up to the false premises of institutional reading practice - premises which provide the foundation for our multi-billion dollar reading industry. The reading racket, in particular, has marked the burgeoning home school movement for legal sanctions because the presence of nearly a million children who've taught themselves to read, soundly and happily, creates a clear and present danger to the "whole world" crowd and to the "phonics" crowd alike. Bad for business.

Schools as we know them haven't been around very long. They don't have deep roots. That's one thing in our favor as we think about uprooting them. Schools as we have them were designed at the time of the American Civil War to be instruments for the scientific management of a mass population, the cheap labor immigration was providing to factory and farm. Schools are intended to produce through the application of formulae, formulaic human beings whose behavior can be predicted and controlled.

To a very great extent schools succeed in doing this. But in a nation increasingly disintegrated and demoralized, in a national order where the only successful people are independent, self-reliant, confident, and individualistic, the products of schooling are irrelevant. Well-schooled people are irrelevant. They can sell film and razor blades, push paper and talk on telephones, make deals or sit mindlessly before a flickering computer terminal, but they hate to be alone with themselves. As human beings they are useless. I spoke in southern Illinois last week. During my talk a young man about 25 years old stood up in the back of the room and said in a tormented voice, "I'm 25 years old and have two college degrees. I don't know how to do anything. I don't know how to do anything at all. If the fan belt of my car broke in a snowstorm out in the country I'd freeze to death reciting the goddam Pythagorean theorem."

Much daily misery around us is caused by the fact our schools force children to grow up absurd. Any reform in schooling must deal with its absurdities: it is absurd and anti-life to be part of a system that compels you to sit in confinement with people exactly the same age and social class. That system effectively cuts you off from information you need to be sane, and cuts you off from your own past and future. It seals you into a continuous present much the same way television does. It is absurd and anti-life to be part of a system compelling you to listen to a stranger read poetry when you ache to learn to construct buildings; it is absurd and anti-life to sit with a stranger discussing the construction of buildings when the rush of language inside you makes you want to write a poem.

It is absurd and anti-life to move from cell to cell at the sound of a buzzer, every day of your natural youth, in an institution that allows you no private time or space. What parent would allow such a horror to be inflicted if their own schooling had left them with the power to understand? "What about 'basics'?" you say. If you are willing to face the truth you would see that only talking is basic to the society we've made. We are a land of talkers now. We pay talkers most and admire talkers most - and so our children talk constantly, following

public models of television, radio, and schoolteachers. It is very difficult to get children to take "basics" seriously these days - especially in the social environment of schools - because they really aren't basic to the world we've forced on the children. None of us stays silent long enough to figure out what the new basics really are.

Two institutions control our children's lives - television and schooling, probably in that order. Both reduce the real world to a never-ending, nonstop abstraction. For most of history until recently, the time of a child would be occupied in real work, real charity, real adventures, real apprenticeships, and the realistic search for mentors who might teach what you really needed to learn. What that is is, of course, different for each of us.

A great deal of time was spent in community pursuits, practicing affection, negotiating, and studying every level of the society around you first-hand. Also in learning how to make a home, a living, and dozens of other tasks necessary to become a whole man or woman. There was a continuity and a comprehensiveness to life. It was not fragmented into subjects and specialties to provide work for professionals, nor was it arranged into sequences that made no sense. The kind of education history reveals was administered most often by people you knew - not by total strangers arranged into a priesthood called "teachers".

In the new world order that was arranged for us after the Civil War the calculus was changed. Scientific positivism, as it used to be called, wanted the calculus changed and Horace Mann and Frederick Taylor were nothing if they were not religiously Positivist. Today the tabulation of hours in a young life reads like this: My children watch television 55 hours a week according to recent reports, and they sleep 56. That leaves them 57 hours in which to grow up strong and competent and whole. But my children attend school 30 hours more, spend 8 hours preparing for school, and in goings and comings, and an additional 7 hours a week in something called "home"-work - although this is really more schoolwork except in "Newspeak". After the 45 school hours are removed a total of 12 hours remain each week from which to fashion a private person - one that can like, trust, and live with itself. Twelve hours. But my kids must eat, too, and that takes some time. Not much, because they've lost the tradition of family dining - how they learn to eat in school is best called "feeding" - but if we allot just 3 hours a week to evening feedings, we arrive at a net total of private time for each child of 9 hours.

It's not enough. It's not enough, is it? The richer the kid the less TV he watches, of course, but the rich kid's time is just as narrowly proscribed by his inevitable assignments to private lessons from more hired strangers, seldom in areas of his own actual choice.

This demented schedule is an efficient way to create dependent human beings, needy people unable to fill their own hours, unable to initiate lines of meaning to give substance and pleasure to their existence. It is a national disease, this dependency and aimlessness, and schooling and television and busy work - the total Chautauqua package - has a lot to do with it.

Think of the things killing us as a nation: narcotic drugs, brainless competition, dishonesty, greed, recreational sex, the pornography of violence, gambling, alcohol, and the worst pornography of all - lives devoted to buying things, accumulation as a philosophy - all of these are addictions of dependent personalities. That is what our brand of schooling must inevitably produce. A large fraction of our total economy has grown up around providing service and counseling to inadequate people - and inadequate people are the main product of government compulsion schools.

I want to tell you what the effect is on children of taking the time they need to grow up and forcing them to spend it on abstractions. No reform that brainlessly defines our national problem as reading, writing, and arithmetic will be anything more than a coward's evasion of the nightmare we've inflicted on our children.

The children I teach are indifferent to the adult world. This defies the experience of thousands of years. Nobody wants to grow up these days because assuming responsibility takes practice, but schooltime precludes practice.

The children I teach have almost no curiosity. What they do have is transitory, they cannot even concentrate long on jobs they assign themselves. Can you see a possible connection between bells ringing again and again to change classes and this phenomenon of evanescent attention? When everything you do is interrupted before it's finished, why should you care about anything?

The children I teach have a poor sense of the future, of how tomorrow is linked to today. The exact moment they are in is the boundary of their consciousness. That was the dream of a 19th century Frenchman named Auguste Comte, and before he died in the insane asylum at Charenton his ideas had a profound impact on Horace Mann and the American schoolroom, and on Frederic Taylor and the American workplace.

The children I teach have no sense of the past and how it predestinated the present, how it limits their choices, how it shapes their lives and values. A long line of Western thinkers, all of them childless men like Comte, have understood that breaking a child's ties with the past cracks him away from his own family. And separating parents and children has been the goal of childless male philosophers since Plato wrote about its value in *The Republic*. Without strong family ties, he said, children are easier subjects for central planning. Augustine knew that, and Erasmus, and Bacon, and Descartes, and Hobbes, and Rousseau - and all the other childless men who helped to architect the government schooling we have today.

The children I teach are cruel to each other; they lack compassion for misfortune, they laugh at weakness, they have contempt for people whose need for help shows too plainly. The children I teach are uneasy with intimacy, solitude, or unguarded speech. They cannot deal with genuine intimacy because of a lifelong habit of preserving a secret inner self beneath their public school personalities, personalities which must remain open at all times, as a prostitute's body is open to the constant inspection and ranking of strangers. Our children's public personalities are kept constantly under surveillance by authorities in an orgy of voyeurism. The outer persona of the children I teach is fabricated from artificial bits and pieces of behavior borrowed from television, or acquired by studying the preferences of schoolteachers. The real self is too small and vulnerable to bear longtime exposure, because it has had no privacy in which to develop strength and integrity. Since exposure is required in intimate relationships, these must be avoided. My children are not who they pretend to be. Most of them aren't anybody at all, thanks to school. It's frightening.

The children I teach are strikingly materialistic, following the lead of schoolteachers who materialistically "grade" everything, and television mentors who offer everything in the world for sale.

The children I teach are dependent, passive, timid in the presence of new challenges. This timidity is often masked by surface bravado, by the exuberance of youth, by anger or aggressiveness, but underneath the bluster is emptiness, mirroring the great vacuum, the black hole of government schooling which draws in vast energies, but emits little.

I could name other conditions school reform must tackle, but by now you will have grasped my thesis. Schools and television cause these pathologies. It's a simple matter of arithmetic. Between schooling and television all the time children have to become adults is eaten up. That is what has destroyed the American family; it is no longer a factor in the education of its own young, it no longer has access to its own children.

Tonight's program is one of choices, choices for parents, choices for young people, choices for communities. Where did we ever get the crazy idea that government had the right to tell us how our own kids should grow up?

Where did we ever get the grotesque idea that the State has a right to educate our kids? Where did we ever get the notion there is only one right way to grow up instead of hundreds? How did we lose our way and come to believe that human value and human quality can be reduced to numbers derived from paper/pencil tests?