

What Really Matters

by John Taylor Gatto

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Going to the moon didn't really matter, it turned out.

I say that from the vantage point of my six decades living on Planet Earth, but also because of something I saw not so long ago. It was at Booker T. Washington High School where I watched an official astronaut – a handsome, well-built man in his prime, dressed in a silver space suit with an air of authentic command – try to get the attention of an auditorium full of Harlem teenagers. It was the Board of Education's perfect template for dramatic success – a distinguished black man leading ignorant black kids to wisdom. He came with every tricky device and visual aid NASA could muster, yet the young audience ignored him completely. I heard some teachers say, “What do you expect from ghetto kids?”, but I don't think that explained his failure at all. The kids instinctively perceived this astronaut had less control over his rocket vehicle than a bus driver has over his bus. I think they had also wordlessly deduced that any experiments he performed were someone else's idea. The space agency's hype was lost on them.

This man for all his excellence was only some other man's agent. The kids sensed that his talk, too, had been written by someone else – that he was part of what the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called the non-thought of received ideas. It was irrelevant whether this astronaut understood the significance of his experiments or not. He was only an agent, not a principal – in the same way many school teachers are only agents retailing someone else's orders. This astronaut wasn't walking his own talk but someone else's. A machine can do that.

It seems likely that my Harlem kids considered going to the moon a dumb game; obviously I didn't verify their feelings scientifically but I knew a lot of them didn't have fathers or much dignity in their lives, and about half had never eaten off a tablecloth. What was going to the moon supposed to mean to them? If you asked me that question I couldn't answer it with confidence, and I had a father once upon a time...and a tablecloth, too.

If the truth were told, in my 30 years teaching in New York City, sometimes teaching prosperous white kids instead of Harlem kids, sometimes a mixed bag of middle class kids, I never hear a single student – white or black – speak spontaneously of the U.S. space program. When the Challenger space shuttle blew up there was a momentary flicker of curiosity, but even that passed in an instant. Going to the moon didn't matter, it turned out, though the government threw 100 billion dollars into the effort.

A lot of things don't matter that are supposed to; one of them is well-funded government schools. Saying that may be considered irresponsible by people who don't know the difference between schooling and education, but over 100 academic studies have tried to show any compelling connection between money and learning and not one has succeeded. Right from the beginning schoolmen told us that money would buy results and we all believed it. So, between 1960 and 1992 the U.S. tripled the number of constant dollars given to schools. Yet after 12,000 hours of government schooling one out of five Americans can't read the directions on a medicine bottle.

After 12,000 hours of compulsory training at the hands of nearly 100 government-certified men and women, many high school graduates have no skills to trade for an income or even any skills with which to talk to each other. They can't change a flat, read a book, repair a faucet, install a light, follow directions for the use of a word processor, build a wall, make change reliably, be alone with themselves or keep their marriages together. The situation is considerably worse than journalists have discerned. I know, because I lived in it for 30 years as a teacher.

Last year at Southern Illinois University I gave a workshop in what the basic skills of a good life are as I understand them. Toward the end of it a young man rose in back and shouted at me: "I'm 25 years old, I've lived a quarter of a century, and I don't know how to do anything except pass tests. If the fan belt on my car broke on a lonely road in a snowstorm I'd freeze to death. Why have you done this to me?"

He was right. I was the one who did it just as much as any other teacher who takes up the time young people need to find out what really matters. I did it innocently and desperately, trying to make a living and keep my dignity, but nevertheless I did it by being an agent of a system whose purpose has little to do with what kids need to grow up right. My critic had two college degrees it turned out, and his two degrees were shrieking at me that going to school doesn't matter very much even if it gets you a good job.

People who do very well in schools as we've conceived them have much more than their share of suicides, bad marriages, family problems, unstable friendships, feelings of meaninglessness, addictions, failures, heart by-passes that don't work and general bad health. These things are very well documented but most of us can intuit them without any need for verification. If school is something that hurts you, what on earth are we allowing it for?

Does going to school matter if it uses up all the time you need to learn to build a house? If a 15-year-old kid was allowed to go to the Shelter Institute in Bath, Maine, he would be taught to build a beautiful post-and-beam Cape Cod home in three weeks, with all the math and calculations that entails; and if he stayed another three weeks he'd learn how to install a sewer system, water, heat and electric. If any American dream is universal, owning a home is it – but few government schools bother teaching you how to build one. Why is that? Everyone thinks a home matters.

Does going to school matter if it uses up the time you need to start a business, to learn to grow vegetables, to explore the world or make a dress? Or if it takes away time to love your family? What matters in a good life?

The things that matter in a bad life, we know, are: gaining power over others, accumulating as much stuff as you can, getting revenge on your enemies (who are everywhere), and drugging yourself one way or another to forget the pain of not quite being human. School teaches most kids how to strive for a bad life and succeeds at this so well that most of our government machinery eventually falls into the hands of people who themselves are living bad lives. We're all in deep trouble because of that. It's the best reason I know to keep the machinery of government just as weak and as primitive as possible as soon as we figure out how.

It surprises me how many graduates leave college assuming they know what matters because they got straight "A"s. If we can believe advertisements, what matters to these people most is the personal ownership of machinery: blending machines, cooking machines, driving machines, picture machines, sound machines, tooth-brushing machines, computing machines, machines to kill insects, deliver intimacy, send messages through wires or the naked air, entertainment machines, shooting machines, and many more mechanical extensions of our physical self. Indirect control over even more ambitious machine seems to matter a lot, too: flying machines, bombing machines, heart and lung machines, voting machines, and a great variety of other mechanical creations.

All these devices are meant to defeat what otherwise would occur naturally if they didn't exist. They are all machines to beat human destiny and confer on human beings magical powers and the reach and longevity of gods.

Do they deliver what they promise? Is human life in a net sense better since their advent? I can't answer that for you, of course, but you can look into your heart and answer the question for yourself. Someone has apparently convinced us that what occurs naturally cannot be the way to a good life, hence these battalions of machinery. What percentage of your life is spent talking to machines? Buying them, mastering them, ministering to their needs, then betraying them with ever newer and newer machine loves?

It takes a lot of time, but what does it take a lot of time away from? Television has cost the average 21-year-old about 18,000 hours of time. What would that time have gone toward otherwise? learning to build a house? Going to government-run school takes another 15,000 hours from the young life, 21,000 if you count going and coming and homework. What might this time have gone toward otherwise? From the very small amount of time remaining, machinery other than television gobbles a great deal. What does it give back in return? Hearts-ease? Love? Courage? Self-reliance? Friends? Dreams?

Here we are, at the end of the 20th century, well-machined yet lost in a tunnel of loneliness, cut off from each other, disliking ourselves, envying those with superior machines, looking for self-respect and significance. We have fewer and worse human ties than seems possible if machines justified all the time and money spent on them.

I include, of course, the social machinery of school in this critique. From age five to age 21 there are exactly 140,160 hours. We spend 46,720 of them in sleep and of the remaining 93,000 odd hours, 42 percent are spent watching TV from a chair or sitting in a school seat. Something is wrong here. What is going on? How much do these seemingly essential machines matter? What are they essential for? Each one taken separately can easily be justified, but taken altogether: what are they doing to us?

By mid-century we had reached a point in this machine civilization where we could so little bear intimate contact with the messy reality of living things – as compared to the clean simplicity of machines – that we became willing to lock up our mothers and fathers wholesale. To create a new investment opportunity in warehousing the old. What a strange thing to do with our unprecedented wealth, using it, that is, to divest ourselves of our closest human ties, getting rid of our history. In doing so a complex circle begun a century earlier when we first locked our young people away in school warehouses is completed.

Warehousing the young; warehousing the aged – good business, I know, but good for what?

Does it really matter or not that our parents die among strangers and our children live penned up by strangers? Does that possibly have an effect on the quality of the lives neither old nor young who are left theoretically free of entanglements? Entanglements are, after all, the core of complete human lives; good lives are all about being entangled with each other. The assertion that isolation chambers for the young and old are an advance in human society doesn't square with any observable reality; it, too, is part of the great non-thought of received ideas - like pretending a positive significance to the idiotic space program.

After you fall into a habit of accepting what other people tell you to think you lose the power to think for yourself. I suspect that's why so few of us challenge the premises of old-age homes, television, day-care centers and schools.

Talking to machines as we have come to prefer to do does make us intimate with the way machines think; it also conceals from us the degree to which our own lives are mechanical and our own thoughts well-controlled like the thoughts of machinery. Have you noticed that machines don't ever surprise you after you know their habits? The purpose of market research is to remove surprise from human behavior, too. When we lose the power to surprise each other, we lose a chunk of what it means to be human. Would that matter?

I want to argue that talking to machines when you should be talking to people and the natural world is what has clear-cut the Pacific forests, poisoned the fish in Puget Sound, weakened the soil up and down America, turned Cape Code Bay into a dead sea, and burned holes in the stratosphere. Not a single one of those events would matter at all to machinery, and since machinery is what we have been most intimate with since early childhood (including social mechanisms like government schools), they don't matter to us, either, regardless of what we say. If they mattered we would stop it.

At best we're ambivalent. Who in his right mind would live without an automobile, a computer, a fax machine, a telephone, a toaster, lifelong schooling, or a gun? Everyone who winds life around a core of machinery like schools and institutions and global corporations, is affected profoundly, and comes inexorably, I believe, to be a servo-mechanism of the machinery he or she excessively associates with.

So far I've asked you to consider three aspects of modern American life we all have been accustomed to think really matter: the space program, our well-funded government schooling, and state-of-the-art technology. On close inspection all seem to me the obsessions of madmen more than essential parts of a good life or a good society. How did they come to matter when many things that really matter (like getting hugged a lot) are overlooked?

In recent years I've often heard that what really matters most is competing successfully in something called the global economy. Try to pass over the fact that all economies on earth, every single one of them, including Japan's are overwhelmingly national economies, or that the economies that seem to make people happiest and proudest are substantially local ones, and look at what you are being asked to believe. In effect, it is claimed that America's total self-sufficiency in food doesn't matter, that our embarrassing abundance of many fuels, fibers, metals, building materials, roads, technologies, libraries, colleges, talented labor – no longer matters decisively because in some mysterious way we stand in grave danger of losing these things by becoming globally non-competitive.

I will pass over the fact that with a standing army, navy, and air force of over two and a half million men and women, a vast bombing fleet, an enormous arsenal of nuclear missiles and a worldwide network of spies and saboteurs, it is really impossible to be non-competitive; and I will pass over our vast ability to manipulate money markets and currencies which makes being non-competitive quite unlikely for all the foreseeable future.

But I am puzzled by the rhetoric of global competition because we already possess abundantly all the essentials of a good material life, in-house as it were. What will this global economy exist for if not to produce and distribute more material, develop more skill, more jobs and more satisfaction – things out of which good lives are made? But these things are already here. I'm curious about the kind of human being who thinks this global economy matters because it's clear to me they are caught up in a religious vision,

a rather peculiar one in which human nature is disregarded along with the human needs which really matter – all of which needs are overwhelmingly small scale.

It's easy to see how a global economy would matter to the spirit of mass-production machinery or to international banking, with all the urgencies of those twin mechanisms, but not clear what the point of it is for flesh and blood.

What if you forgot all about the globe and concentrated instead on finding a place where you could feel at home for the rest of your life? What if you shaped your own work so that it served your spirit and the spirits of your loved ones, friends and neighbors? In 1776 a full 90 percent of Americans not in slavery shaped their own work, they had independent livelihoods, and in 1840, despite the rise of industrialization the figure was still 80 percent. It was hard then for any man to get rich on the labors of others because there wasn't much free-floating labor to be had; people worked for themselves. That – liberty and independence, not wealth or comfort – was the American miracle.

You know, machines can be stored anywhere, can function anywhere, and are indifferent to other machines they must associate with. But men and women have to build the meanings of their lives around a few, a very few people to touch and love and care for. If you're always getting rid of people, trading them off the way you've been taught to trade-off things, you can't have much of a life. And you fail in this vital endeavor of linking up with the right people for you it doesn't matter at all how healthy the space program is or how many machines you own. You'll still be lonely in the middle of crowds.

If what I've said is even partly true, you'll have to join me in sabotaging the global economy and sabotaging the government schools, because schools and government and machinery-makers lie to you about what matters every time. They just can't help themselves.

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