

- [Wadleigh The Death School](#)
- [Dr. Caleb Gattegno, Expert](#)
- [Intimidation](#)
- [Hector Of The Feeble-Mind](#)
- [Hector Isn't The Problem](#)
- [One Lawyer Equals 3,000 Reams of Paper](#)
- [The Great Transformation](#)
- [Education As A Helix Sport](#)
- [I'm Outta Here!](#)

*The master's face goes white, then red. His mouth tightens and opens
and spit flies everywhere....*

What will I do, boys?

Flog the boy, sir.

Till?

Till the blood spurts, sir.

– Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*.
Writing of Ireland's schools as
they were in the 1940s.

Wadleigh, The Death School

One day after spending nearly my entire life inside a school building as student and teacher, I quit. But not before I saw some things you ought to know. McCourt is right, spit flies everywhere in the classroom and school, children mock us because of it. The smell of saliva. I had forgotten until I returned as a teacher. Put the cosmic aspect aside and come back again into school with me. See it from the inside with grownup eyes.

On my first day back to school I was hired to substitute in a horrible place, Wadleigh Junior High School, nicknamed "the death school" by regulars at the West End Tavern near Columbia. Jean Stapleton (Archie Bunker's wife, Edith) had gone there as a young girl; so had Anais Nin, celebrated diarist and writer of erotica. Some palace revolution long before I got there had altered the nature of this school from an earnest, respectable Victorian lock-up to something indescribable. During my teaching debut at Wadleigh, I was attacked by a student determined to bash my brains out with a chair.

Wadleigh was located three blocks from that notorious 110th Street corner in Harlem made famous by a bestseller

of the day, *New York Confidential*, which called it "the most dangerous intersection in America." I mention danger as the backdrop of my teaching debut because two kinds of peril were in the air that season: one, phony as my teaching license, was the "Cuban Missile Crisis"; the other, only too genuine, was a predicament without any possible solution, a deadly brew compounded from twelve hundred black teenagers penned inside a gloomy brick pile for six hours a day, with a white guard staff misnamed "faculty" manning the light towers and machine-gun posts. This faculty was charged with dribbling out something called "curriculum" to inmates, a gruel so thin Wadleigh might rather have been a home for the feeble-minded than a place of education.

My own motive in being there was a personal quest. I was playing hooky from my real job as a Madison Avenue ad writer flogging cigarettes and shaving cream, a fraternity boy's dream job. Not a single day without Beefeater Martinis, then the preferred ad man's tippie, not a morning without headache, not a single professional achievement worth the bother. I was hardly a moralist in those days, but I wasn't a moron either. Thoughts of a future composed of writing fifty words or so a week, drunk every day, hunting sensation every night, had begun to make me nervous. Sitting around the West End one weekend I decided to see what schoolteaching was like.

Harlem then was an ineffable place where the hip white in-crowd played in those last few moments before the fires and riots of the 1960s broke out. Black and white still pretended it was the same high-style Harlem of WWII years, but a new awareness was dawning among teenagers. Perhaps Mama had been sold a bill of goods about the brighter tomorrow progressive America was arranging for black folks, but the kids knew better.

"The natives are restless." That expression I heard a half-dozen times in the single day I spent at Wadleigh, the Death School. Candor was the style of the moment among white teachers (who comprised 100 percent of the faculty) and with administrators in particular. On some level, black kids had caught on to the fact that their school was a liar's world, a jobs project for seedy white folk.

The only blacks visible outside Harlem and its outrigger ghettos were maids, laborers, and a token handful stuffed into make-work government occupations, in theater, the arts, or civil service.

The notable exception consisted of a small West Indian business and professional elite which behaved itself remarkably like upper-class whites, exhibiting a healthy dose of racial prejudice, itself built on skin color and gradations, lighter being better. British manners made a difference in Harlem just as they did elsewhere. The great ad campaigns of the day were overwhelmingly British. Men in black eye patches wearing Hathaway shirts whose grandfathers fought at Mafeking, "curiously delicious" Schweppes "Commander Whitehead" ads, ads for Rolls cars where the loudest noise you heard was the ticking of the electric clock. The British hand in American mid-twentieth-century life was noticeably heavy. Twelve hundred Wadleigh black kids had no trouble figuring out what recolonization by the English meant for *them*.

I had no clue of this, of course, the day I walked into a school building for the first time in nine years, a building so dark, sour, and shabby it was impossible to accept that anyone seriously thought kids were better held there than running the streets.

Consider the orders issued me and under which I traveled to meet eighth graders on the second floor:

Good morning, Mr. Gatto. You have typing. Here is your program. Remember, THEY MUST NOT TYPE! Under no circumstances are they allowed to type. I will come around unannounced to see that you comply. DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING THEY TELL YOU about an exception. THERE ARE NO EXCEPTIONS.

Picture the scene: an assistant principal, a man already a living legend throughout the school district, a man with a voice of command like Ozymandias, dispatching young Gatto (who only yesterday wrote the immortal line "Legs are in the limelight this year" for a hosiery ad) into the dark tunnels of the Death School with these words:

Not a letter, not a numeral, not a punctuation mark from those keys or you will never be hired here again. Go now.

When I asked what I should do instead with the class of seventy-five, he replied, "Fall back on your resources. Remember, you have no *typing* license!"

Off I went up the dark stairs, down the dark corridor. Opening the door I discovered my dark class in place, an insane din coming from seventy-five old black Underwoods, Royals, Smith Coronas: CLACKA! CLACKA! CLACKA! CLICK! CLICK! CLACK! DING! SLAM! CLACK! Seven hundred and fifty black fingers dancing *around under the typewriter covers*. One-hundred and fifty hammering hands clacking louder by far than I could bellow: STOP....TYPING! NO TYPING ALLOWED! DON'T TYPE! STOP! STOP! STOP I SAY! PUT THOSE COVERS ON THE MACHINES!

The last words were intended for the most flagrant of the young stenographers who had abandoned any pretense of compliance. By unmasking their instruments they were declaring war. In self-defense, I escalated my shouting into threats and insults, the standard tactical remedy of teachers in the face of impending chaos, kicked a few chairs, banged an aluminum water pitcher out of shape, and was having some success curtailing rogue typers when an ominous chant of OOOOOHHHHHH! OOOOOOOOOHHHHHH! warned me some other game was now afoot.

Sure enough, a skinny little fellow had arisen in the back of the room and was bearing down on me, chair held high over his head. He had heard enough of my deranged screed, just as Middlesex farmers had enough of British lip and raised *their* chairs at Concord and Lexington. I too raised a chair and was backing my smaller opponent down when all of a sudden I caught a vision of both of us as a movie camera might. It caused me to grin and when I did the whole class laughed and tensions subsided.

"Isn't this a typing period?" I said, "WHY DON'T YOU START TYPING?" Day One of my thirty-year teaching career concluded quietly with a few more classes to which I said at once, "No goofing off! Let's TYPE!" And they did. All the machines survived unscathed.

I had never thought much about kids up to that moment, even fancied I didn't like them, but these bouts of substitute teaching raised the possibility I was reacting adversely not to youth but to invisible societal directives ordering young people to act childish whether they want to or not. Such behavior provides the best excuse for mature oversight. Was it possible I *did* like kids, just not the script written for them?

There were other mysteries. What kind of science justified such sharp distinctions among classes when even by the house logic of schooling it was obvious that large numbers of students were misplaced? Why didn't this bother teachers? Why the apparent indifference to important matters like these? And why was the mental ration doled out so sparingly? Whenever I stepped up my own pace and began cracking the mental whip, all manner of kids responded better than when I followed the *prescribed* dopey curriculum. Yet if that were so, why this skimpy diet instead?

The biggest mystery lurked in the difference between the lusty goodwill of first, second, and to some extent third graders—even in Harlem—the bright, quick intelligence and goodwill always so abundant in those grades, and the wild change fourth grade brought in terms of sullenness, dishonesty, and downright mean spirit.

I knew *something* in the school experience was affecting these kids, but what? It had to be hidden in those first-, second- and third-grade years which appear so idyllic even in Harlem. What surfaced by fourth grade was the effect of a lingering disease running rampant in the very utopian interlude when they were laughing, singing, playing, and running round in the earlier grades. And kids who had been to kindergarten seemed worse than the others.

But schoolwork came as a great relief to me in spite of everything, after studying Marlboro cigarette campaigns and Colgate commercials. In those days I was chomping at the bit to have work that involved real responsibility; this imperative made me decide to throw ambition to the winds at least for the moment and teach. Plenty of time to get rich later on, I thought.

In New York City in the 1960s, becoming a teacher was easier than you could imagine or believe (it still is). It was

a time of rich cash harvests for local colleges giving two-week teacher courses for provisional certification; nearly everyone passed and permanent license requirements could be met on the job. At the end of summer I had a license to go to school and get paid for it. Whether I could actually teach was never an issue with anyone. Kids assigned to me had no choice in the matter. That following autumn I found regular work at William J. O'Shea Junior High whose broken concrete playground sat in plain view of the world-famous Museum of Natural History, diagonally across Columbus Avenue to the northeast. It was a playground my kids and I were later to use to make the school rich by designing and arranging for a weekend flea market to be held on this site. But that came long afterwards.

Dr. Caleb Gattegno, Expert

I began to schoolteach as an engineer would, solving problems as they arose. Because of my upbringing and because of certain unresolved contradictions in my own character I had a great private need not just to have a *job* but to have *work* that would allow me to build the unbuilt parts of myself, to give me competence and let me feel my life was one being lived instead of it living me. I brought to those first years an intensity of watchfulness probably uncommon in those who grow up untroubled. My own deficiencies provided enough motivation to want to make something worthwhile happen.

Had I remained a problem-solver I would have drowned in life for sure, but a habit of mind that demands things in context sensitized me to the culture of schooling as a major element in my work and that wariness eventually allowed me to surmount it. The highest school priorities are administrative coherence, student predictability, and institutional stability; children doing well or poorly are incidental to the main administrative mission. Hence teachers are often regarded as instruments which respond best if handled like servants made to account for the silverware. In order to give these vertical relationships strength, the horizontal relationships among teachers— collegiality—must be kept weak.

This divide-and-conquer principle is true of any large system. The way it plays itself out in the culture of schooling is to bestow on some few individuals *favor*, on some few *grief*, and to approach the large middle with a carrot in one hand, a stick in the other with these dismal examples illuminating the discourse. In simple terms, some are bribed into loyalty, but seldom so securely they become complacent; others sent despairing, but seldom without hope since a crumb might eventually fall their way. Those whose loyalties are purchased function as spies to report staff defiance or as cheerleaders for new initiatives.

I used to hear from Granddad that a man's price for surrendering shows you the dirt floor of his soul. A short list of customary teacher payoffs includes: 1) assignment to a room on the shady side of the building; 2) or one away from playground noise; 3) a parking permit; 4) the gift of a closet as a private office; 5) the tacit understanding that one can solicit administrative aid in disciplinary situations without being persecuted afterwards; 6) first choice of textbooks from the available supply in the book room; 7) access to the administrators' private photocopy machine; 8) a set of black shades for your windows so the room can be sufficiently darkened to watch movies comfortably; 9) privileged access to media equipment so *machines* could be counted on to take over the teaching a few days each week; 10) assignment of a student teacher as a private clerk; 11) the right to go home on Friday a period or two early in order to beat the weekend rush; 12) a program with first period (or first and second) free so the giftee can sleep late while a friend or friendly administrator clocks them in.

Many more "deals" than this are available, extra pay for certain cushy specialized jobs or paid after-school duty are major perks. Thus is the ancient game of divide and conquer played in school. How many times I remember hearing, "Wake up, Gatto. Why should I bother? This is all a big joke. Nobody cares. Keep the kids quiet, that's what a good teacher is. I have a life when I get home from this sewer." Deals have a lot to do with that attitude and the best deals of all go to those who establish themselves as experts. As did Dr. Caleb Gattegno.

A now long-forgotten Egyptian intellectual, Caleb Gattegno enjoyed a brief vogue in the 1960s as inventor of a reading system based on the use of nonverbal color cues to aid learning. He was brought to the middle school

where I worked in 1969 to demonstrate how his new system solved seemingly intractable problems. This famous man's *demonstration* made such impact on me that thirty years later I could lead you blindfolded to the basement room on West 77th Street where twenty-five teachers and administrators crammed into the rear lane of a classroom in order to be touched by this magic. Keep in mind it was only the demonstration I recall, I can't remember the idea at all. It had something to do with color.

Even now I applaud Gattegno's courage if nothing else. A stranger facing a new class is odds-on to be eaten alive, the customary example of this situation is the hapless substitute. But in his favor another classroom advantage worked besides his magical color technology, the presence of a crowd of adults virtually guaranteed a peaceful hour. Children are familiar with adult-swarmed through the twice-a-year-visitation days of parents. Everyone knows by some unvoiced universal etiquette to be on best behavior when a concentration of strange adults appears in the back of the room.

On the appointed day, at the appointed hour, we all assembled to watch the great man put children through their paces. An air of excitement filled the room. >From the publicity buildup a permanent revolution in our knowledge of reading was soon to be put on display. Finally, with a full retinue of foundation officers and big bureaucrats, Dr. Caleb Gattegno entered the arena.

I can't precisely say *why* what happened next happened. The simple truth is I wasn't paying much attention. But suddenly a babble of shouting woke me. Looking up, I saw the visiting expert's face covered with blood! He was making a beeline through the mob for the door as if desperate to get there before he bled to death.

As I later pieced together from eyewitness accounts, Dr. Gattegno had selected a student to cooperate with his demonstration, a girl with a mind of her own. She didn't *want* to be the center of attention at that moment. When Gattegno persisted her patience came to an end. What I learned in a Harlem typing class years earlier, the famous Egyptian intellectual now learned in a school in the middle of some of the most expensive real estate on earth.

Almost immediately after she raked her long fingernails down his well-educated cheeks, the doctor was off to the races, exiting the room quickly, dashing up the staircase into Egyptian history. We were left milling about, unable to stifle cynical remarks. What I failed to hear, then or later, was a single word of sympathy for his travail. Word of the incident traveled quickly through the three-story building, the event was postmortemed for days.

I should be ashamed to say it, but I felt traces of amusement at his plight, at the money wasted, at the temporary chagrin of important people. Not a word was ever said again about Gattegno again in my presence. I read a few pages of his slim volume and found them intelligent, but for some unaccountable reason I couldn't muster interest enough to read on. Probably because there isn't any trick to teaching children to read by very old-fashioned methods, which makes it difficult to work up much enthusiasm for novelty. Truth to tell, the reading world doesn't *need* a better mousetrap. If you look up his work in the library, I'd appreciate it if you'd drop me a postcard explaining what his colorful plan was all about.

Intimidation

New teachers and even beleaguered veterans are hardly in any position to stand back far enough to see clearly the bad effect the dramatic setting of the building—its rules, personalities, and hidden dynamics—has on their own outlook and on children's lives. About one kid in five in my experience is in acute torment from the intimidation of peers, maybe more are driven to despair by the indifference of official machinery. What the hounded souls can't possibly see is that from a system standpoint, they are the problem with their infernal whining, not their persecutors.

And for every one broken by intimidation, another breaks himself just to get through the days, months, and years ahead. This huge silent mass levels a moral accusation lowly teachers become conscious of only at their peril because there is neither law nor institutional custom to stop the transgressions. Young, idealistic teachers burn out

in the first three years because they can't solve administrative and collegial indifference, often concluding mistakenly that consciously willed policies of actual human beings—a principal here, a department head or union leader there—are causing the harm, when indifference is a system imperative; it would collapse from its contradictions if too much sensitivity entered the operating formula.

I would have been odds-on to become one of these martyrs to inadequate understanding of the teaching situation but for a fortunate accident. By the late 1960s I had exhausted my imagination inside the conventional classroom when all of a sudden a period of phenomenal turbulence descended upon urban schoolteaching everywhere. I'll tell you more about this in a while, but for the moment, suffice it to say that supervisory personnel were torn loose from their moorings, superintendents, principals and all the rest flung to the wolves by those who actually direct American schooling. In this dark time, local management cowered. During one three-year stretch I can remember, we had four principals and three superintendents. The net effect of this ideological bombardment, which lasted about five years in its most visible manifestation, was to utterly destroy the utility of urban schools. From my own perspective all this was a godsend. Surveillance of teachers and administrative routines lost their bite as school administrators scurried like rats to escape the wrath of their unseen masters, while I suddenly found myself in possession of a blank check to run my classes as I pleased as long as I could secure the support of key parents.

Hector Of The Feeble-Mind

See thirteen-year-old Hector Rodriguez¹ as I first saw him: slightly built, olive-skinned, short, with huge black eyes, his body twisting acrobatically as he tried to slip under the gated defenses of the skating rink on the northern end of Central Park one cold November day. Up to that time I had known Hector for several months but had never really *seen* him, nor would I have seen him then but for the startling puzzle he presented by gatecrashing with a fully paid admission ticket in his pocket. Was he nuts?

This particular skating rink sits in a valley requiring patrons to descend several flights of concrete steps to reach the ice. When I counted bodies at the foot of the stairs, Hector was missing. I went back up the stairs to find Hector wedged in the bars of the revolving security gate. "You little imbecile," I screamed. "Why are you sneaking in? You have a ticket!" No answer, but his expression told me his answer. It said, "Why shout? I know what I'm doing, I have principles to uphold." He actually looked offended by my lack of understanding.

Hector was solving a problem. Could the interlocking bars of the automatic turnstile be defeated? What safer way to probe than with a paid ticket in hand in case he got caught. Later as I searched school records for clues to understand this boy, I discovered in his short transit on earth he had already left a long outlaw trail behind him. And yet, although none of his crimes would have earned more than a good spanking a hundred years earlier, now they helped support a social service empire. By substituting an excessive response for an appropriate (minimal) reaction, behavior we sought to discourage has doubled and redoubled. It is implicit in the structure of institutional logic that this happens. What's bad for real people is the very guarantee of institutional amorality.

At the time of this incident, Hector attended one of the fifty-five public schools with the lowest academic ratings in New York State, part of a select group threatened with takeover by state custodians. Seven of the nine rapists of the Central Park jogger—a case that made national headlines some years back—were graduates of the school. Of the thirteen classes in Hector's grade, a full nine were of higher rank than the one he was in. Hector might be seen at twelve as an exhausted salmon swimming upstream in a raging current trying to sweep away his dignity. We had deliberately unleashed such a flood by assigning about eleven hundred kids in all, to five *strictly* graduated categories:

First Class was called "Gifted and Talented Honors."

Second Class was called "Gifted and Talented."

Third Class was called "Special Progress."

Fourth Class was called "Mainstream."

Fifth Class was called "Special Ed." These last kids had a cash value to the school three times higher than

the others, a genuine incentive to find fatal defects where none existed.

Hector was a specimen from the doomed category called Mainstream, itself further divided into alphabetized subcategories—A, B, C, or D. Worst of the worst above Special Ed would be Mainstream D where he reported. Since Special Ed was a life sentence of ostracism and humiliation at the hands of the balance of the student body, we might even call Hector "lucky" to be Mainstream, though as Mainstream D, he was suspended in that thin layer of mercy just above the truly doomed. Hector's standardized test scores placed him about three years behind the middle of the rat-pack. This, and his status as an absolute cipher (where school activities, sports, volunteer work, and good behavior were concerned) would have made it difficult enough for anyone prone to be his advocate, but in Hector's case, he wasn't just behind an eight-ball, he was six feet under one.

Shortly after I found him breaking and entering (the skating rink), Hector was arrested in a nearby elementary school with a gun. It was a fake gun but it looked pretty real to the school secretaries and principal. I found out about this at my school faculty Christmas party when the principal came bug-eyed over to the potato salad where I camped, crying, GATTO, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME? His exact words. Hector had been dismissed for holiday only that morning; he then hightailed it immediately to his old elementary school, still in session, to turn the younger children loose, to free the pint-sized slaves like a modern Spartacus. Come forward now one year in time: Hector in high school, second report card. He failed every subject, and was absent enough to be cited for truancy. But you could have guessed that before I told you because you read the same sociology books I do.

Can you see the Hector trapped inside these implacable school records? Poor, small for his age, part of a minority, not accounted much by people who matter, dumb, in a super-dumb class, a bizarre gatecrasher, a gunslinger, a total failure in high school? Can you see Hector? Certainly you think you do. How could you not? The system makes it so easy to classify him and predict his future.

What is society to do with its Hectors? This is the boy, multiplied by millions, that school people have been agonizing about in every decade of the twentieth century. This is the boy who destroyed the academic mission of American public schooling, turning it into a warehouse operation, a clinic for behavioral training and attitude adjustment. Hector's principal said to the *Christian Science Monitor* when it made a documentary film about my class and Hector's, "Sure the system stinks, but John [Gatto] has nothing to replace it. And as bad as the system is, it's better than chaos."

But is the only alternative to a stifling system really chaos?

!Not his real name

Hector Isn't The Problem

The country has been sold a bill of goods that the problem of modern schooling is Hector. That's a demon we face, that misperception. Under its many faces and shape-shifting rhetoric, forced schooling itself was conceived as the frontline in a war against chaos. Horace Mann wrote once to Reverend Samuel May, "Schools will be found to be the way God has chosen for the reformation of the world." School is the beginning of the process to keep Hector and his kind in protective custody. Important people believe with the fervor of religious energy that civilization can only survive if the irrational, unpredictable impulses of human nature are continually beaten back, confined until their demonic vitality is sapped.

Read Merle Curti's *Social Ideas of the Great Educators*, a classic which will never be allowed to go out of print as long as we have college courses as gatekeeper for teacher certification. Curti shows that every single one of the greats used this Impending Chaos argument in front of financial tycoons to marshal support for the enlargement of forced schooling.

I don't want to upset you, but I'm not sure. I have evidence Hector isn't what school and society make him out to be, data that will give a startlingly different picture. During the period when the skating incident and school stickup occurred, Senator Bob Kerrey of Nebraska was putting together an education plank in order to run for his party's presidential nomination. To that end, his office called me to inquire whether I could meet with the Senator to discuss an article I wrote which had been printed in the *Congressional Record*. It was agreed we would meet for breakfast at Manhattan's famous Algonquin Hotel, site of the famous literary Roundtable. Hector and his close friend Kareem would join us.

Our conference lasted three hours without any bell breaks. It was cordial but businesslike with the senator asking hard questions and his assistant, a vivacious attractive woman, taking notes. Hector dominated the discussion. Concise, thoughtful, inventive, balanced in his analysis, graceful in his presentation with the full range of sallies, demurs, illustrations, head-cockings, and gestures you might expect from a trained conversationalist. Where had he learned to handle himself that way? Why didn't he act this way in school?

As time passed, Hector gravitated bit by bit to the chair where the woman I thought to be Kerrey's assistant was sitting. Hector perched in a natural posture on its arm, still apparently intent on the verbal give and take, but I noticed he cast a smoldering glance directly down at the lady. By a lucky accident I got a snapshot of him doing it. It turned out she was the movie star Debra Winger! Hector was taking both Washington *and* Hollywood in stride while eating a trencherman's breakfast at a class hotel! He proved to be a valuable colleague in our discussion too, I think the Senator would agree.

In April of the following year, Hector borrowed fifteen dollars from me to buy pizza for a young woman attending Columbia University's School of International Affairs. As far as Hector was concerned, being a graduate student was only her cover—in his world of expertise as a knowledgeable student of the comic book industry (and a talented self-taught graphic artist), she was, in reality, a famous writer for Marvel Comics. The full details of their liaison are unknown to me, but a brilliant piece of documentary film footage exists of this young woman giving a private seminar to Hector and Kareem under an old oak tree on the Columbia campus. What emerged from the meetings between writer and diminutive hold-up man was a one-day-a-week private workshop at her studio just north of Wall Street.

In November of that same year, utterly unknown to his school (where he was considered a dangerous moron), all gleaming in white tie, tails and top hat, Hector acted as master of ceremonies for a program on school reform at Carnegie Hall, complete with a classical pianist and a lineup of distinguished speakers, including the cantankerous genius Mary Leue, founder of the Albany Free School, and several of my former students.

The following spring, just after he produced his unblemished record of failure as a high school freshman, Hector came to me with a job application. An award-winning cable television show was packaging kids into four-person production teams to make segments for a television magazine format hour like *60 Minutes*. Hector wanted to work there.

I sprang the bad news to him right away: "Your goose is cooked," I said. "You'll sit down in that interview and they'll ask you how you're doing in school. You'll say, 'Listen, I'm failing all my subjects and oh, another thing, the only experience I have with TV is watching it until my eyeballs bug out—unless you count the time they filmed me at the police station to scare me. Why would they want to scare me? I think it was because I held up an elementary school and they didn't want me to do it again.'

"So you're dead the minute they run your interview on any conventional lines. But you might have a slim chance if you don't follow the form sheet. Don't do what other kids will. Don't send in an application form. Guidance counselors will pass these out by the thousands. Use a typed résumé and a cover letter the way a real person would. And don't send it to some flunky, call up the station, find out who the producer of the show is, say in a letter that you're not the greatest *sit-down* student in the world because you have your own ideas, but that you've come to understand film through an intense study of comic art and how it produces its effects. All that's true, by the way. Mention casually you have a private apprenticeship with one of the big names in the comic business and that you've

done consultation work for the famous Nuyorican Poet's Café...."

"I have?" asked Hector.

"Sure. Don't you remember all those times you sat around with Roland chewing the fat when he was trying to shoot his film last year? Roland's one of the founders of the Nuyorican. And toss in your emceeing at Carnegie Hall; that ought to set you apart from the chumps. Now let's get on with that résumé and cover letter. As sure as I'm sitting here, they'll only get one cover letter and résumé. That should buy you an interview.

"The only way you can squeak through that interview though is to convince someone *by your behavior* you can do the job better than anyone else. They'll be staring the spots off your every move, your clothing, your gestures, trying to see into your soul. Your goose is cooked if you get caught in a grilling."

"You mean I'll shift around," Hector asked, "and get an attitude in my voice, don't you?"

"Right, just before the shifty look comes into your eyes!" I said.

We both laughed.

"So, what do I do?" Hector asked.

"The only thing you *can* do is quietly take over the interview. By quietly, I mean in a way they won't understand what's happening. You and I will just sit here until we figure out every single question they might ask, and every single *need* they might have which they won't tell you about, and every single *fear* they have that some aspect of your nature will screw up *their* project. Remember they're not hiring a kid to be nice people, they're hiring a kid because that's the gimmick of their show. So what you must do is to show by your commanding presence, impeccable manners, vast range of contacts, and dazzling intelligence that their fears are groundless.

"You're going to show them you love work for its own sake, that you don't watch the time clock, that you *can* take orders when orders make sense, that you are a goldmine of ideas, that you're fun to be around. You'll have to master all this quickly because I have a hunch you'll be called in right after your letter arrives. Can you do it?"

Six weeks later Hector started his new job.

One Lawyer Equals 3,000 Reams Of Paper

Once, a long time ago, I spoke before the District 3 School Board in Manhattan to plead that it not retain a private lawyer when all the legal work a school district is legitimately entitled to is provided free by the city's corporation counsel. In spite of this, the district had allocated \$10,000 to retain a Brooklyn law firm. This is standard technique with boards everywhere which seek legal advice to get rid of their "enemies." They either prefer to conceal this from the corporation counsel or fear such work might be rejected as illegitimate. One school board member had already consulted with these same attorneys on five separate occasions pursuing some private vendetta, then submitting bills for payment against the school funds of the district. Sometimes this is simply a way to toss a tip to friends.

My argument went as follows:

In order to emphasize the magnitude of the loss this waste of money would entail—emblematic of dozens of similar wastes every year—I want to suggest some alternate uses for this money which will become impossible once it's spent on a lawyer none of the kids needs. It would buy:

Three thousand reams of paper, 1,500,000 sheets. In September six of the schools in District 3 opened a school year without any paper at all. Letters from the principals of these schools to the school board, of which my wife has photocopies, will attest to this. It would buy enough chemicals

and lab specimens to run the entire science program at I.S 44 and Joan of Arc, nearly 2,000 copies of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* as discounted by Barnes and Noble in hardcover, enough sewing machines and fabrication supplies to offer six modern dressmaking classes. In light of the fact New York City's fashion industry is a major employer, it would seem a saner use of the funds. How many musical instruments, how much sports equipment, wood, ceramic materials, art supplies does \$10,000 buy? The Urban League's "Children Teach Children" reading project could be put in the district, displacing armies of low-utility, \$23-an-hour consultants. With \$10,000 we could pay our own students \$1-an-hour—receive better value—and see our money in the pockets of kids, not lawyers. Invested in stock or even 30-year treasury notes as a scholarship fund, this money would return in perpetuity enough interest yearly to pay a kid's way through City University. The money in question would buy 50,000 pens. Eight computer installations. Two hundred winter coats for kids who are cold.

I concluded with two suggestions: first, a referendum among parents to find out whether they would prefer one of the options above or a lawyer; second, to buy 10,000 lottery tickets so we all could have a thrill out of this potlatch instead of the solitary thrill a Brooklyn lawyer would have banking our check.

Four years later, I appeared before the same school board, with the following somewhat darker statement:

On September 3, 1986, my teaching license, which I had held for 26 years, was terminated secretly while I was on medical leave of absence for degenerative arthritis. The arthritis was contracted by climbing 80 steps a day to the third floor for more than a year—at the express request of the co-directors—with a badly broken hip held together by three large screws.

Although papers for a medical leave of absence were signed and filed, these documents were destroyed at the district level, removed from central board medical offices. The current management apparently was instructed to deny papers had ever been filed, allowing the strange conclusion I had simply walked away from a quarter century of work and vanished.

The notice terminating my teaching license was sent to an address where I hadn't lived for twenty-two years. It was returned marked "not known at this address." This satisfied the board's contractual obligation to notify me of my imminent dismissal, however nominally.

When I returned to work from what I had no reason to assume wasn't an approved leave, I was informed by personnel that I no longer worked for District 3, and that I could not work anywhere because I no longer had a teaching license. This could only be reinstated if my building principal would testify he knew I had properly filed for leave. Since this would involve the individual in serious legal jeopardy, it isn't surprising my request for such a notice was ignored.

From September 1987 to April of 1988 my family was plunged into misery as I sought to clear my name. Although I had personal copies of my leave forms at the first hearing on this matter, my building principal and the district personnel officer both claimed their signatures on the photocopies were forgeries. My appeal was denied.

Just before the second hearing in March, a courageous payroll secretary swore before a public official that my leave extensions had always been on file at Lincoln, signed by school authorities. She testified that attempts had been made to have her surrender these copies, requests she refused. Production of her affidavit to this at my third hearing caused an eventual return of my license and all lost pay. At the moment of disclosure of that affidavit during a third grievance hearing, the female co-director shouted in an agitated voice, "The District doesn't want him back!"

I am asking for an investigation of this matter because my case is far from the only time this has happened in District 3. Indeed, all over New York this business is conducted so cynically that administrators violate basic canons of decency and actual law with impunity because they know the

system will cover for them no matter how culpable their behavior.

No comment was ever forthcoming from that Board of Education. Two years after my restoration, I was named New York City Teacher of the Year. Two years after that, New York State Teacher of the Year. A year later, after addressing the Engineer's Colloquium at NASA Space Center, invitations poured in to speak from every state in the union and from all over the world. But the damage my family had sustained carried lasting effects.

Yet I proved something important, I think. On looking back at the whole sorry tapestry of the system as it revealed itself layer by layer in my agony, what was most impressive wasn't its horrifying power to treat me and my family without conscience or compassion, but its incredible *weakness* in the face of opposition. Battling without allies for thirty years, far from home and family, without financial resources, with no place to look for help except my native wit, nor for courage except to principles learned as a boy in a working-class town on the Monongahela River, I was able to back the school creature into such a corner it was eventually driven to commit crimes to get free of me.

What that suggests is cause for great hope. A relative handful of people could change the course of schooling significantly by resisting the suffocating advance of centralization and standardization of children, by being imaginative and determined in their resistance, by exploiting manifold weaknesses in the institution's internal coherence: the disloyalty its own employees feel toward it. It took 150 years to build this apparatus; it won't quit breathing overnight. The formula is to take a deep breath, then select five smooth stones and let fly. The homeschoolers have already begun.

The Great Transformation

I lived through the great transformation which turned schools from often useful places (if never the essential ones school publicists claimed) into laboratories of state experimentation. When I began teaching in 1961, the social environment of Manhattan schools was a distant cousin of the western Pennsylvania schools I attended in the 1940s, as Darwin was a distant cousin of Malthus.

Discipline was the daily watchword on school corridors. A network of discipline referrals, graded into an elaborate catalogue of well-calibrated offenses, was etched into the classroom heart. At bottom, hard as it is to believe in today's school climate, there was a common dedication to the intellectual part of the enterprise. I remember screaming (pompously) at an administrator who marked on my plan book that he would like to see evidence I was teaching "the whole child," that I didn't teach *children* at all, I taught the discipline of the English language! Priggish as that sounds, it reflects an *attitude* not uncommon among teachers who grew up in the 1940s and before. Even with much slippage in practice, Monongahela and Manhattan had a family relationship. About schooling at least. Then suddenly in 1965 everything changed.

Whatever the event is that I'm actually referring to—and its full dimensions are still only partially clear to me—it was a nationwide phenomenon simultaneously arriving in all big cities coast to coast, penetrating the hinterlands afterwards. Whatever it was, it arrived all at once, the way we see national testing and other remote-control school matters like School-to-Work legislation appear in every state today at the same time. A plan was being orchestrated, the nature of which is unmasked in the upcoming chapters.

Think of this thing for the moment as a course of discipline dictated by coaches outside the perimeter of the visible school world. It constituted psychological restructuring of the institution's mission, but traveled under the guise of a public emergency which (the public was told) dictated *increasing* the intellectual content of the business! Except for its nightmare aspect, it could have been a scene from farce, a swipe directly from Orwell's *1984* and its fictional telly announcements that the chocolate ration was being raised every time it was being lowered. This reorientation did not arise from any democratic debate, or from any public clamor for such a peculiar initiative; the public was not consulted or informed. Best of all, those engineering the makeover denied it was happening.

I watched fascinated, as over a period of a hundred days, the entire edifice of public schooling was turned upside

down. I know there was no advance warning to low-level administrators like principals, either, because I watched my first principal destroy himself trying to stem the tide. A mysterious new deal was the order of the day.

Suddenly children were to be granted "due process" before any sanction, however mild, could be invoked. A formal schedule of hearings, referees, advocates, and appeals was set up. What might on paper have seemed only a liberal extension of full humanity to children was actually the starting gun for a time of mayhem. To understand this better, reflect a minute on the full array of ad hoc responses to wildness, cruelty, or incipient chaos teachers usually employ to keep the collective classroom a civil place at all. In a building with a hundred teachers, the instituting of an adversarial system of justice meant that within just weeks the building turned into an insane asylum. Bedlam, without a modicum of civility anywhere.

This transformation, ironically enough, made administrative duty easier, because where once supervisory intercession had constituted, a regular link in the ladder of referral as it was called, in the new order, administrators were excused from minute-to-minute discipline and were granted power to assume that incidents were a teacher's fault, to be duly entered on the Cumulative Record File, the pedagogical equivalent of the Chinese Dangan.

There was a humorous aspect to what transpired over the next few years. I had no particular trouble keeping a lid on things, but for teachers who counted upon support from administrative staff it was a different story. Now, if they asked for a hand, often they were pressured to resign, or formally charged with bad classroom management, or worst of all, transferred to an even more hideous school in expectation they would eliminate themselves.

Most, under such tension, took the hint and quit. A few had to be pushed. I remember a magnificent math teacher, an older black woman with honors and accomplishments to her name, much beloved and respected by her classes, singled out for public persecution probably because she acted as an intractable moral force, a strong model teacher with strong principles. Daily investigative teams from the district office watched her classes, busily took notes in the back of her room, challenged her style of presentation openly while children listened. This went on for two weeks. Then the administration began to call her students to the school office to interrogate them, one by one, about the teacher's behavior. They coached some kids to watch her during her classes, coached them to look for any telltale signs she was a racist! Parents were called and offered an option of withdrawing their kids from her classes. Broken by the ordeal, one day she vanished.

When my wife was elected to the district school board, one of her first actions was to gain access to the superintendent's private files without his knowledge. Some of those records concerned details of official cases of harassment. Dozens of employees had been similarly purged, and dozens more were "under investigation" in this gulag on West 95th Street. Contacting these people in private, it became clear to me that, they were far from the worst teachers around. Indeed some were the best. Their relative prowess had emboldened them to speak out on policy matters and so marked them for elimination.

One principal, whose school was the most successful reading environment in the district, received similar treatment, ultimately sentenced to an official Siberia in Harlem, given no duties at all for the two years more he lasted before quitting. His crime: allegedly striking a girl although there were no witnesses to this but the girl, a student who admitted breaking into the light-control panel room in the auditorium where the offense is supposed to have occurred. His real crime was his refusal to abandon phonetic reading methodology and replace it with a politically mandated whole-word substitute.

I escaped the worst effects of the bloodbath. Mostly I minded my business trying to ignore the daily carnage. In truth I had no affection for the old system being savaged, and chaos made it easier for me to try out things that worked. On balance, I probably did my best work during those turbulent years as a direct result of the curious smokescreen they provided.

But accounts are not so simple to balance overall. If I regarded run-of-the-mill school administrators as scared rabbits or system flunkies, the reformers I saw parading daily through the building corridors looked like storm troopers and made my skin crawl.

On several occasions, energetic efforts were made by these people to recruit my assistance as an active ally. All such appeals I politely refused. True belief they had, but for all of it they seemed like savages to me, inordinately proud of their power to cause fear, as willing to trample on the decencies as the people they were harassing as indecent. However, it seemed just possible something good might actually emerge from the shakeup underway. About that, I was dead wrong. As the project advanced, schools became noticeably worse. Bad to begin with, now they mutated into something horrible.

What shape began to emerge was a fascinating echo of the same bureaucratic cancer which dogged the steps of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions. Do-nothing administrators and nonteaching teachers multiplied like locusts. With them came an entirely new class of school-teacher, one aggressively ignorant, cynical, and often tied to local political clubs. New categories of job description sprang up like weeds.

My own school fell victim to a politically correct black gym teacher imported from New England to be its principal. Two schoolwide riots followed his installation, mass marches on city hall transpired in which local politicians instrumental in the man's selection used schoolchildren as unwitting cadres to lobby their favorite schemes in newsworthy, children's crusade fashion.

A small band of old-fashioned teachers fought rearguard actions against this, but time retired them one by one until, with only an occasional exception, the classrooms of Community School District 3, in one of the most prosperous neighborhoods on earth, became lawless compounds, job projects for the otherwise unemployable.

I need to wrap this up so we can get on with things. I have to skip the full story of the Hell's Angel math teacher who parked his Harley Hog outside the door of his classroom, and when the principal objected, told him in front of startled witnesses that if the man didn't shut his mouth, the number-crunching cyclist would come to his home that evening, pour gasoline under his front door, and set his house on fire. I have to skip the hair-raising stories of not one but three junior high teachers I knew quite well who married their students. Each, spotting a likely thirteen-year-old, wooed the respective girl in class and married her a few years later. They took the more honorable course, hardly the outcome of most teacher-student romances I was privy to. I have to skip the drug habits of staff in each of the buildings I worked in and other lurid stuff like that. In the midst of the unending dullness of institutional schooling, human nature cracks through the peeling paint as grass through cement. I have to skip all that. Suffice it to say, my life experience taught me that school isn't a safe place to leave your children.

Education As A Helix Sport

Here's a principle of real education to carry you through the moments of self-doubt. Education is a helix sport, a unique personal project like seatless unicycle riding over trackless wilderness, a sport that avoids rails, rules, and programmed confinement. The familiar versions of this are cross-country skiing, sailing, hang-gliding, skateboarding, surfing, solitary mountain climbing, thousand-mile walks, things like that. I think of education as one, too.

In a helix sport the players search for a new relationship with themselves. They endure pain and risk to achieve this goal. Helix sports are free of expert micromanagement. Experts can't help you much in that moment of truth when a mistake might leave you dead. Helix sports are a revolt against predestination.

Bringing children up properly is a helix sport forcing you to realize that no boy or girl on earth is just like another. If you do understand this you also understand there can exist no reliable map to tell you all you need to do. Process kids like sardines and don't be surprised when they come out oily and dead. In the words of the Albany Free School, if you aren't making it up as you go along, you aren't doing it right.

The managerial and social science people who built forced schooling had no scruples about making your kids fit into their scheme. It's suffocating to the spirit to be treated this way. A young lady from Tucson wrote me, "Now that I'm nearly 25, I can hardly remember why I began to be afraid to go to school." I wrote back that she was

afraid because her instincts warned her the school business had no use for the personal growth she sought. All pedagogical theory is based on stage theories of human development. All stage theories of child rearing talk in averages. The evidence before your own eyes and ears must show you that average men and women don't actually exist. Yet they remain the basis of social theory, even though such artificial constructs are useless to tell you anything valuable about your own implacably nonabstract child.

I'm Outta Here!

One day, after thirty years of this, I took a deep breath and quit.