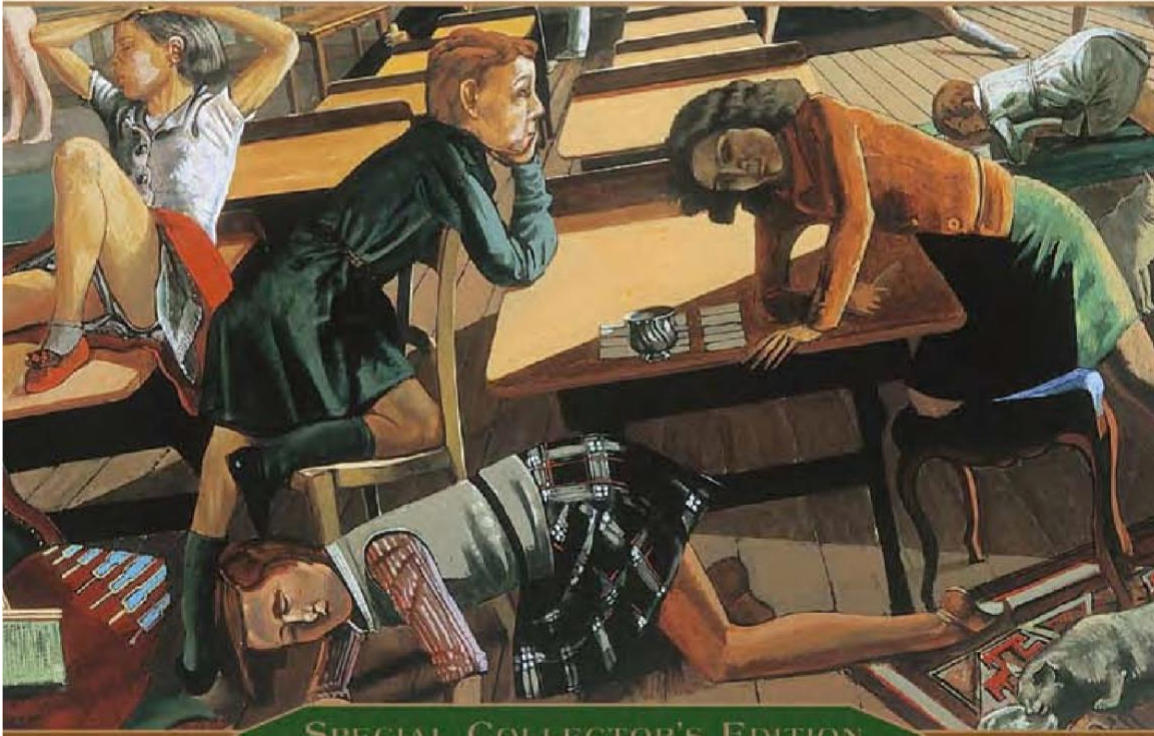


Dumbing Us Down

The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling



SPECIAL COLLECTOR'S EDITION

JOHN TAYLOR GATTO

Foreword by Thomas Moore

Praise for Dumbing Us Down

You've articulated in a most profound way the problems we are all observing in our students and children. My own 18-year-old commented that you clearly know what's going on.

— Cynthia Brown, Editor, *The International Educator*, West Bridgewater MA

I'm still baffled by how someone so forthright would have been named Teacher of the Year.

— Jeanne Allen, Editor, *Education Update*, Washington DC

... a masterful presentation of the "hidden curriculum."

I can't think of anyone presently taking the public discussion of education so skillfully beyond where it usually gets stuck.

— Eugene J. Burkart, Attorney at Law, Waltham MA

One of the world's most controversial education reformists.

— *The Western Australian*

...inspirational and chillingly on the money.

— Bruce Bebb, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Hollywood CA

You've got guts.

— D'Arcy Rickard, British Columbia School Trustees Association, Canada

...everywhere we look these days your words are printed and reprinted and analyzed and criticized and applauded.

Thanks for your common sense approach to it all.

— Mark and Helen Hegener, *Home Education Magazine*,
Tonasket WA

Easily the most brilliant and arresting salvo on
education that I've seen.

— Graham Betts, Madison WI

I read what you had to say with the greatest of delight and
shared it with friends, one of whom said it brought tears to
her eyes. We both thank you for writing.

— Edward M. Jones, Editor, *A Voice for Children*, Santa Fe
NM

Your words hit the nail on the head. Our schools leave no
time for kids to be with parents and the community.

— Bonni McKeown, Capon Springs VA

Professor Kenneth E. Boulding saw your writing and
got it to me. I so fully agreed with everything you
said that you have re-excited me about the similar
mission I am on.

— Ed Lyell, Colorado State Board of Education, Denver CO

Everyone is listening to you. Thank goodness!

— Debbie Caldwell, Boston, MA

We found your views so resonant with the work we are
doing that we reprinted excerpts from your speech.
We have had many comments from our readers about the
quality and truth of your words.

— Betsy Koenig, Executive Director,
The Renaissance Educator, Loveland CO

Your book is excellent. You are an amazing writer,
somehow able to be concise, sweeping and passionate all

at the same time. Paulo Freire should have had to take one of your English classes. Unlike after reading Freire or Illich, I only wanted more when I got to the end of *Dumbing Us Down*.

— Chris Mercogliano, Director, The Albany Free School, Albany NY

A very important and passionate book — a reawakening of the penetrating critique of schooling made in the 1960s by John Holt, Jonathan Kozol, and James Herndon ... it deserves to be in every bookstore in the country. Yours is a voice of humanity, community and love. Bravo!

— Ron Miller, Editor, *Holistic Education Review*

My daughter, a smart, dedicated 14-year-old who just dropped out of high school and is successfully pursuing independent studies reports that your findings about the nature of institutional schooling are precisely right. Drove her nuts.

— Ken Richards, Richmond IN

I count this speech one of the best articles on education I ever read. I believe you have put your finger on the central problems and have illustrated what you are saying with wonderful data and personal experiences.

— Gene W. Marshall, Dallas TX

Brilliant. I've never seen so many true statements about education, children and families in one place. ...Your insights and integrity are wonderful.

— Norah Dooley, Cambridge MA

Seldom have I read such a penetrating and passionate diagnosis of our current educational and cultural crisis. And I have read all the current weighty expostulations.

— Robert Inchausti, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo CA

I can visualize the Department of Education putting out a contract on your life. Please continue to speak out in the direction you are going.

— W. Evans, Woodbury/St.George UT

Your articles are wonderful and so desperately needed. I've copied them for a dozen families and everyone was enthusiastic. One mother said, "We should elect this man President!"

— Elaine Majors, Chapel Hill NC

Any student would be lucky to have a teacher like Gatto.

— Editorial in *Commonweal*

Thank you for challenging public education – in your *Wall Street Journal* editorial, your evening program at Carnegie Hall, your book, and all the rest.

— Sandra Booth, Spring Valley NY

It is as refreshing to read and hear your words as it is to study Zen... Good show!

— John Warfield, Huntingdon VA

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The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling

JOHN TAYLOR GATTO

Foreword by Thomas Moore



NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my granddaughter,

Gudrun Moss Gunnarsdottir, whose name in Icelandic means “the handwriting of God,” and to her mother, Briseis.

Sparkle and shine in the face of darkness, you two light up the shadows.

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Foreword

Thomas Moore

MY FATHER IS A BORN TEACHER. He's the kind of man who can spot a potential learner from a distance and go into action. When I was in my forties, he taught me how to bowl at his local bowling alley. In his typical fashion, he said, "Pick up the ball and roll it fast toward the center of those pins." That's all. He knew I could learn this relatively simple skill on my own. He believed in what John Gatto calls "self-teaching."

With my father's blood in me, I've been a teacher for forty years and have always loved the role. I learned it through apprenticeship with him. At eighty-eight, having retired from teaching plumbing in a trade school, he taught courses in a local school to adults who wanted to learn how to use computers. I hope I still have that kind of passion in my eighties.

But my father has also run up against the hardheaded bureaucracy John Gatto criticizes so explosively. Once, he approached a local school to tell them that, as a former plumbing instructor, he could give a talk to a class of children on where their drinking water comes from, how it's cleaned up, and where it goes after it's used. The school thanked him for the offer but told him there was no room on their schedule.

I thought the school missed the boat on many levels. My father knows how to talk to kids, and children need some practical learning. Who knows what rich rewards would have come to those children just from being in the presence of a real teacher who loved his material and loves children? And him teaching that class would also have been an act of community. John Gatto makes the important point that a community needs old people and children mixing together.

As a teacher I've done some things I consider relatively outrageous but nothing as profoundly educational as the efforts of

John Gatto. Teaching piano, I've encouraged children to start by composing their own music, thumping the sides of the instrument for percussive effect if they are so inclined. I used to counsel a college student as she stood on the window well in my office, easing her shyness by remaining behind a curtain. A colleague once came in and saw a pair of shoes sticking out from the drapery and naturally wondered what was going on. The most enjoyable teaching I ever did took place in a classroom that had thick carpeting but no chairs. My thirty students had no textbooks, no syllabus, and no purpose. I picked up on whatever appeared in the room on any particular day and followed it through. I've never seen so much learning take place, for me and my students, anywhere else.

A physician once said to me that healing always takes place when her back is turned. For me, learning happens when the teacher has other things in mind. I believe this kind of learning can be shaped and even taught, not in schools as we know them, but, as John

Gatto says, when a mother and daughter take a trip to talk to a police chief or when some children learn how to put out a newsletter by apprenticing to a publisher. Learning can't take place in pieces of time cut out for the convenience of an institution or in lessons set apart from the world in which students live. We don't learn when life is divided up into sections that have little connection with each other.

I met John Gatto about ten years ago at a small gathering of educators. During the course of a day's activities, we were asked to present an object that meant something to us. I remember John grabbing an old briefcase that I think he said had belonged to his father. It had a beautiful patina and evidence everywhere of years of loving use. When I saw John lift that briefcase, my heart skipped. It was so much like my father to value such a thing and to

feel the passing of a sensibility from father to son to grandson. A gesture like this reveals that a person is full of soul. My father could never teach English, as John Gatto does, but the two of them share a way of seeing things, a way that is precious beyond measure and always in danger of being lost.

What I love about John's writing is the lively combination of outrageous irreverence and an omnipresent cool intelligence: the ease with which he refers to school as a jail, as confinement, as a cell; school as a vampire network that should have a stake driven through its heart; school bells as inoculating each child with indifference. As a reader you have no doubt where John stands.

John's right — it won't do to tinker with schools and try to make them better. We have to start from the ground up and reconsider what education is. In my language, I'd like to see us educate the soul, and not just the mind. The result would be a person who could be in this world creatively, make good friendships, live in a place he loved, do work that is rewarding, and make a contribution to the community. People say that the word "educate" means to "draw out" a person's potential. But I like the "duc"-part in the middle of it. To be educated is to become a duke, a leader, a person of stature and color, a presence and a character.

I'm happy to see this passionate book coming to light once again. I celebrate it. I think it should be read aloud to educators and parents everywhere. I know it asks us to reconsider what we may think of as natural and obvious, but we need original ideas. Crumbling school buildings are telling us how tired they are. Violence in schools is screaming at us to stop doing this thing we call "teaching." The sorry level of discourse in America should tell us that the imaginations of our citizens are being cheated by the desperate ineffectiveness of schools. I'm grateful to John Gatto for having the

gutsy imagination to tell us what's wrong and for giving us some good ideas on how to make it right.

October 2001

(Thomas Moore is the author of *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*, *Soul Mates: Honoring the Mysteries of Love and Relationship*, and *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*.)

Introduction

David Albert

AS ITS EDITOR AND FORMER PUBLISHER, I would have liked to flatter myself into believing that John Taylor Gatto's *Dumbing Us Down* was both his first book and his most popular. Unfortunately, and by a long stretch, neither is true. That will come as a surprise to many, who are most familiar with this book in its earlier green-and-black cover incarnation, or with John's two more recent books *The Underground History of American Education* (that's the big, fat one) and *A Different Kind of Teacher* (a blue hardcover).

John's first work was a set of Monarch Notes. Some of you may remember these from high school, a way to get by in English class without doing the required reading! At any rate, Gatto's first book was originally published in 1975, a Monarch Notes guide to Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

John related to me once — after affixing his signature on my copy, with handwriting only a hair more legible than my own (we must both have had Mr. Lewis in the 6th grade and still not recovered from the experience), and scribbling “Light up the darkness, keep the faith, and give the bastards the business!” into it — that the Monarch Notes guide, still in print after 26 years,

has actually sold over two million copies, making it by far his most widely read work. But all he ever got out of it was a Burmese cat. If you ever get the opportunity to attend one of his talks, make sure to ask him about it.

Anyway, this Monarch Notes guide — the only book of Gatto's likely to be read by students undergoing their slow death in what passes for "educational institutions" these days — is an incendiary work. And not only because of its black-and-red cover.

Kesey's magnificent novel, as well as the excellent movie featuring a young Jack Nicholson (not recommended until you've read the book!), is the story of a rebel — one Randall Patrick McMurphy — who finds himself (or rather finds a way to get himself) inside a state psychiatric institution in the 1960s. Once within, he discovers himself bound by a web of rules, procedures, and protocols — really, kid gloves — behind which stands an iron fist of violence and repression, all designed of course for "the patient's own good." In scene after scene, McMurphy probes the boundaries of the forces that stand behind the institution — "the Combine" — which comes to be symbolized by "The Big Nurse" who controls the ward and ultimately holds the fate of each of the patients in her hands. Let me not ruin the book for you. I suggest you go out and read it, alongside your teenager if you have one, or, if you've read it once before, read it again, with new eyes.

Kesey's novel takes place against a backdrop of relentless institutional conditioning. While meetings on the ward may seem to be democratically organized and inmates — no, here they are called "patients" — are

urged toward accountability, one quickly realizes that there is no democracy at work in the asylum and that accountability is a sham. Inmates are tracked, without their consent, into well-demarcated groups as acutes and chronics, and then further subdivided into walkers, wheelers, and vegetables. The highest value to the Combine is neither democracy nor accountability, but *compliance*, pure and simple, and its favorite strategem is to divide and conquer. And if that doesn't work, there are always drugs. Hmm.

I doubt that a set of Monarch Notes has ever been heaped with literary praise before, but Gatto's is much deserving. His description of the Keseyan institutional world contained in this incendiary set of crib notes (he even quotes Che Guevara: "Educate your enemy, don't kill him, for he is worth more to you alive than dead") is as compelling as the novel itself. He describes the Combine that controls this little world as "an all-powerful, earth-girdling, brain-destroying association of technocrats ... intent on building a world of precision, efficiency, and tidiness ... a place where the schedule is unbreakable." "In such a world," he writes, "there is neither grief nor happiness; nobody dies – they only burn out and are recycled; actually, it is a rather safe place, everything is planned – there are neither risks nor surprises." Gatto argues that within this world, "[w]ords and meaningless routines insulate people from life itself, blind them to what is happening around them, and deaden the moral faculties." The defense to this charge — ironic, of course, as he notes — is that the Big Nurse delivers charity baskets to the poor. Pivotal to Kesey's

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novel, according to Gatto, “is the cataclysmic revelation that the inmates of the asylum are not committed but are there of their own free will.” And the way they are controlled, ultimately, is through guilt, shame, fear, and belittlement. Double hmmm.

And now, telescoping the next 25 years of his career, Gatto tells us the way out. “The way out of the asylum,” he writes, “is literally to throw out the control panel, on a physical level smashing the reinforced windows, on a symbolic spiritual level becoming independent of rules, orders, and other people’s urgencies.” “Self-reliance,” he concludes, “is the antidote to institutional stupidity.”

We should all express our gratitude that John Gatto took his own advice and, beginning with *Dumbing Us Down*, has undertaken to tell us what life is really about “on the inside,” as if, in our heart of hearts, we didn’t already know. Like Chief Bromden — the supposedly deaf-and-dumb Indian in Kesey’s novel who finally finds his own voice — he managed to steal away. Well, perhaps that’s not the best possible description, for John has made rather a big splash! And I have been privileged to have helped the resultant wave along.

When I first read what was to become *Dumbing Us Down* in manuscript back in late 1989, it provided an almost unique answer to a conundrum I had not been able to figure out for myself. My older daughter was two at the time — long before my own book *And the Skylark Sings with Me* was even a glint in my eye. I was beginning to read up on education writers, both those who occupied the deep left end of the pond and those who swam in a “less sinister” direction.

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What was most striking to me at the time — and remains so to this day — was how much they occupy the same pond.

Their descriptions of the world of public education closely parallel each other, even if they view underlying causes differently. They all emphasize what seem to them to be the obvious deficiencies of public education. More often than not, though with different points of emphasis, they note the boredom, the mindless competition, the enforced social and economic stratification, the lack of any real engagement — academic or otherwise — the brutality and violence, the “soul-lessness” that characterizes what passes for education these days. From Alfie Kohn (liberal) to Thomas Sowell (conservative), they wax poetic about the shortcomings of modern schooling, though their antidotes are often worlds apart. And all my friends had stories of themselves as inmates (oh, sorry, I meant “students”), being shamed, embarrassed, harassed, brutalized, drugged, inflicted with boredom, or just plain ignored — and they remembered these experiences far more vividly than anything they were ever ostensibly taught.

And yet the idea that schools are failing didn’t make any sense to me. After all, the schools are run by highly paid and educated public servants, hired by local elected school boards — my neighbors — staffed by people prepared in our graduate schools of education where they were, in turn, taught by faculty trained at our elite private universities such as Yale or the University of Chicago. Teachers are honored, school administrators with salaries well in excess of \$100,000 receive merit raises, the school boards continue to get

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elected, the electorate continues to vote to give the schools more money, the graduate schools of education get bigger. If these are failing institutions, they sure have a funny way of showing it!

Gatto provided, and continues to provide the key to comprehending this conundrum. Central to this understanding is the fact that *schools are not failing*. On the contrary, they are spectacularly successful in doing precisely what they are intended to do, and what they have been intended to do since their inception. The system, perfected at places like the University of Chicago, Columbia Teachers College, Carnegie-Mellon, and Harvard, and funded by the captains of industry, was explicitly set up to ensure a docile, malleable workforce to meet the growing, changing demands of corporate capitalism — “to meet the new demands of the 20th century,” they would have said back then. The Combine (whoops, slipped again!) ensures a workforce that will not rebel — the greatest fear at the turn of the 20th century — that will be physically, intellectually, and emotionally dependent upon corporate institutions for their incomes, self-esteem, and stimulation, and that will learn to find social meaning in their lives solely in the production and consumption of material goods. We all grew up in these institutions and we know they work. They haven’t changed much since the 1890s because they don’t need to — they perform precisely as they are intended.

In a recent lecture at which I introduced him, John cited U.S. Department of Labor statistics regarding the occupations most widely held by Americans today. The job that is held by the largest number of individuals, as

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well as the occupation that has shown the greatest growth in the past 30 years, is that of Wal-Mart clerk.* Second is McDonald’s burger flipper. Third is Burger King flipper. And close behind? Elementary school teacher. The main difference between these jobs and those held in the days of

Henry Ford in the early part of the 20th century is that Henry Ford wanted to be able to pay his workers enough so that they would be able to afford new automobiles (and food and houses and medical care) themselves and thus provide the consumption engine guaranteeing the profitability of the corporation. Now, with globalization of the marketplace, it is undeniably clear that the captains of industry no longer care.

What do they really care about? That public education be public. In other words, that we — and not they — pay for it. Corporate institutions have unloaded their basic training needs on to us, and we voluntarily pay to forge the chains of our own servitude.

So far, so good. But the obvious question that follows from this is this: If educational institutions are so demonstrably successful, why are we always hearing about their failures? And here Gatto might have provided the answer, for in his aborted career before becoming a New York City schoolteacher, one decade before *Monarch Notes* and almost four before this edition of *Dumbing Us Down*, he was an advertising copywriter, “a young fellow,” as he writes in *The Green Monongahela*, “with a knack for writing thirty-second television commercials.” The copywriter knows that to sell a product or

*In fact the number of people employed by Wal-Mart and their families is greater than the population of each of the following states: Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

service, one must create the perception of need and the palpable feeling that this need can only be filled exclusively

through the purchase of the product or service being sold. The simplistic notion that “our schools are failing” easily translates into a limitless demand for more resources for the institution and its supports: for books, for teachers, for computers, for real estate (and hence for book publishers, graduate schools of education, computer manufacturers, and real estate developers) — and for more time: for more pre-school, more homework, longer school years, the end of recess, and semi- (and soon fully) compulsory summer schools. And to the copywriter’s delight, it’s a zero-sum game. Not only is there an endless stream of consumers with little or no institutional memory and an absolutely insatiable demand, but the truth is that no matter how much is expended in the educational marketplace, 50% of the schools will remain “below average”, with those branded as poor performers changing from year to year and those above the mid-point fearing, above all, that they will fall into the abyss. And the copywriter has done his job for, it is universally believed, the only response to a fall into sub-mediocrity is to buy one’s way out.

This strategem is extraordinarily elegant but so transparent that it always ran the risk of being seen for the confidence game that, at bottom, it is, except that it gets translated down to individual children. In other words, the Combine preys upon our maternal and paternal instincts. And so the latest iteration of “education reform” (the fifth such set of reforms in my brief lifespan) comes with new (actually old) testing strategies

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where it can be ensured that large majorities of children will regularly “fail”, either in comparison with each other, with those in another school, or with children living in the much more productive economies of Tunisia or Slovenia. The

“answer” to those deficits and the perpetual dissatisfaction they engender is simply more of the same, rather like “the hair of the dog that bit you”.

The reforms are therefore never completed. To do so would require admitting failure, or worse, admitting that the failure is not failure at all, only a continuing round in the socialized enforcement of intellectual and emotional dependency, of which Gatto writes so eloquently. In the meantime, what we’re doing is like requiring our children to live in buildings that are never finished, and never will be, and forcing them to breathe in the noxious fumes and dirt and dust from the neverending construction.

But our children deserve the opportunity to come up for a breath of fresh air.



Fresh air, however, is going to be difficult to find.

Dan Greenberg, founder of the Sudbury Valley School — a successful 30-year-old learning community based on the principles of self-initiated learning and democratic self-government — has written that between leading educators, business leaders, and government officials there is a virtually unanimous agreement regarding the essential features of an education that would meet the needs of society in the 21st century. He sees consensus on six points:

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- As society rapidly changes, individuals will have to be able to function comfortably in a world that is always in flux. Knowledge will continue to increase at a dizzying rate. This means that a content-based curriculum, with a set body of information to be imparted to students, is entirely inappropriate as a means of preparing children for their adult roles.

- People will be faced with greater individual responsibility to direct their own lives. Children must grow up in an environment that stresses self-motivation and self-assessment. Schools that focus on external motivating factors, such as rewards and punishments for meeting goals set by others, are denying children the tools they need most to survive.
- The ability to communicate with others, to share experiences, to collaborate, and to exchange information is critical. Conversation, the ultimate means of communication, must be a central part of a sound education.
- As the world moves toward universal recognition of individual rights within a democratic society, people must be empowered to participate as equal partners in whatever enterprise they are engaged in. Students (and teachers) require full participation in running educational institutions, including the right to radically change them when needed.
- Technology now makes it possible for individuals to learn whatever they wish, whenever they wish, and in the manner they wish. Students should be empowered with both the technology and the responsibility for their own learning and educational timetable.

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- Children have an immense capacity for concentration and hard work when they are passionate about what they are doing, and the skills they acquire in any area of interest are readily transferable to other fields. Schools must thus become far more tolerant of individual variation and far more reliant on self-initiated activities.

Gatto shares Greenberg's vision of what education should be like (and is supportive of all ventures that would bring it to fruition, even for just a few), but having spent the better part of three decades in the trenches, he has a far more realistic, if darker, view of the purposes to which education is put. He views school, as he writes in *The Underground History of American Education*, "as a conflict pitting the needs of social machinery against those of the human spirit, a war of mechanisms against flesh and blood that only require a human architect to get launched."

Let's put it plainly: in Gatto's view, the Combine needs dumb adults, and so it ensures the supply by making the kids dumb. From this perspective it is clear that Dan Greenberg is wrong. While there is always a need for a highly circumscribed number of technocrats to replace themselves, the Combine has only limited use for hundreds of millions of self-reliant, critically thinking individuals who engage in conversation and who determine their own needs as individuals and communities free of the Combine's enticements and commands. In fact, when such individuals exist, the Combine fears them. It may occasionally pay lip-service to their value,

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but it ultimately has no real use for artists, dancers, poets, self-sufficient farmers, tree lovers, devoted followers of what it views as non-materialist cults — Christian or otherwise — handicraft workers, makers of their own beer, or, for that matter, stay-at-home moms and dads, all of whom, when they endure at all, do so at the margins and on the periphery of the social economy. What the Combine needs, most of all, is Wal-Mart clerks and burger flippers and dedicated but low-paid, government-employed "foreign service officers" proud of their titles as teachers, who

prevent the restless natives from rebelling while the extraction of resources and capital, human and otherwise, continues unabated. And, in the final analysis, while it employs the most extraordinary of spin-doctors and apologists, the Combine makes no compromises and takes no prisoners, not until it has colonized every nerve ending — every minute part and every habit of mind — as much as it has passed over every square inch of this good earth.

But the strategy doesn't work entirely. For every McMurphy who has had his brain fried, there is the possibility of a Chief Bromden who escapes. There are weeds growing in the cracks in the highway that will not be stamped out. We — the weeds — are here: you and I and Dan Greenberg and the author of our incendiary book. There are now a million homeschoolers, and there will soon be another million homeschool alumni. And with us, maybe, just maybe, and unlike what happened with any of the abortive alternative school movements of the past century, will come the power — with enough weeds grown up into tall trees — to block

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the highway as the Combine with engines blazing moves down our path.

Gatto implies through his writing, his life, and his witness that he does not believe individual solutions are likely to be the answer to larger societal problems — they may not by themselves destroy the Combine. But he has also demonstrated — and this Tenth Anniversary Edition of *Dumbing Us Down* celebrates this insight — that we can only stand to gain by protecting and enlarging those meager zones of freedom we inhabit, that is by widening the cracks in the pavement and by beginning to recapture that common

energy, creativity, and imagination with which we are endowed by Great Nature as children, and which holds out the promise of better times to come.

Olympia, Washington
September 5, 2001

(David Albert is the author of *And the Skylark Sings With Me: Adventures in Homeschooling and Community-Based Education*, New Society Publishers, 1999.)

Publisher's Note

from the First Edition

THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHER Hannah Arendt once wrote that, "The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill conviction but to destroy the capacity to form any."*

If one were to poll our nation's leading educators about what the goal of our educational systems should be, I suspect one would come up with as many goals as educators. But I also imagine that the capacity to form one's own convictions independent of what was being taught in the classroom, the ability to think critically based upon one's own experience, would not rank high on many lists. In fact, the idea that the goal of education might have little to do with what goes on in the classroom would likely strike most educators, of whatever political stripe, as heresy.

In the context of our culture, it is easy to see that critical thinking is a threat. As parents, we all want what is "best" for our children. Yet, by our own actions and lifestyles, and through the demands that we place on our educational institutions, it is clear that by "best" we all too often mean "most." This shift from the qualitative to the quantitative, from thinking about what is best or the holistic development of the individual human being

*Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p. 168.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

to thinking about what resources should be available to semi-monopoly governmental educational institutions certainly does not bear close scrutiny.

Shouldn't we also ask ourselves what the consequences are of scrambling to provide the "most" of everything to our

children in a world of fast-dwindling resources? What does the mad and often brutally competitive scramble for resources – for more pay for teachers, for more equipment, for more money for schools – teach our children about us? More crucially, what message does this mad scramble send to those children who, through no fault of their own, lose out in the competition? And what would be the cost to the social fabric if our children’s convictions were based on their experience? (Perhaps we are already paying the cost of the development of such convictions, however poorly articulated, in the forms of violence, chemical dependency, teenage pregnancy, and a host of other social ills affecting today’s young people?)

Eclectic, engaging, and not readily pigeon-holed, John Taylor Gatto’s thinking forces us to re-examine some of our most cherished assumptions in the light of his and his students’ day-to-day experience. He provides few ready-made solutions or optimistic answers for the future of our schools. What he does provide through the example of his thirty years of teaching is, first, a commitment to providing *quality* options to the poor and disadvantaged, who are most in need of them, and, second, conscientization so that at least his students come to some critical understanding of what is being done to them in the name of “schooling.”

Gatto’s vision of our social order may be bleak, but it also provides at least a ray of hope in the example and idea that free-thinking and critically aware individuals, freely united in newly reconstructed communities, can correct social ills and lead us toward a future truly worth living in. Because we share the conviction that this is both desirable and possible, we at New Society Publishers are proud to publish *Dumbing Us Down*.

David H. Albert for New
Society Publishers

June 13, 1991

About the Author

I'M HERE TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT IDEAS, but I think a purpose might be served in telling a little bit about myself so I become a person like you rather than just another talking head from the television set. I know that sometimes when I hear a news report from TV I wonder, Who are *you*? and, Why are you telling me these things? So let me offer you some of the ground out of which these ideas grew.

I've worked as a New York City schoolteacher for the past thirty years, teaching for some of that time elite children from Manhattan's Upper West Side between Lincoln Center, where the opera is, and Columbia University, where the defense contracts are; and teaching, in most recent years, children from Harlem and Spanish Harlem whose lives are shaped by the dangerous undercurrents of the industrial city in decay. I've taught at six different schools in that time. My present school is in the shadow of St. John the

Divine Cathedral, the largest Gothic structure in the United States, and not a long walk from the famous Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. About three blocks from my school is the spot where the "Central Park jogger" (as media mythology refers to her) was raped and brutally beaten

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a few years ago — seven of the nine attackers went to school in my district.

My own perspective on things, however, was shaped a long way from New York City, in the river town of Monongahela, Pennsylvania, forty miles southeast of Pittsburgh. In those days, Monongahela was a place of steel mills and coal mines, of paddle-wheel river steamers churning the emerald green water chemical orange, of respect for hard work and family life. Monongahela was a place with muted class distinctions since everyone was more or

less poor, although very few, I suspect, knew they were poor. It was a place where independence, toughness, and self-reliance were honored, a place where pride in ethnic and local culture was very intense. It was an altogether wonderful place to grow up, even to grow up poor. People talked to each other, minding each other's business instead of the abstract business of "the world." Indeed, the larger world hardly extended beyond Pittsburgh, a wonderful dark steel city worth a trip to see once or twice a year. Nobody in my memory felt confined by Monongahela or dwelled, within my earshot, on the possibility they were missing something important by not being elsewhere.

My grandfather was the town printer and had been for a time the publisher of the town newspaper, *The Daily Republican* — a name that attracted some attention because the town was a stronghold of the Democratic Party. From my grandfather and his independent German ways I learned a great deal that I might have missed if I had grown up in a time, like today, when old people are put away in a home or kept out of sight.

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Living in Manhattan has been for me in many ways like living on the moon. Even though I've been here for thirty-five years, my heart and habit are still in Monongahela. Nevertheless, the shock of Manhattan's very different society and values sharpened my sense of difference and made me an anthropologist as well as a schoolteacher. Over the past thirty years, I've used my classes as a laboratory where I could learn a broader range of what human possibility is — the whole catalogue of hopes and fears — and also as a place where I could study what releases and what inhibits human power.

During that time, I've come to believe that genius is an exceedingly common human quality, probably natural to most of us. I didn't want to accept that notion — far from it: my own training in two elite universities taught me that

intelligence and talent distributed themselves economically over a bell curve and that human destiny, because of those mathematical, seemingly irrefutable scientific facts, was as rigorously determined as John Calvin contended.

The trouble was that the unlikeliest kids kept demonstrating to me at random moments so many of the hallmarks of human excellence — insight, wisdom, justice, resourcefulness, courage, originality — that I became confused. They didn't do this often enough to make my teaching easy, but they did it often enough that I began to wonder, reluctantly, whether it was possible that being in school itself was what was dumbing them down. Was it possible I had been hired not to enlarge children's power, but to diminish it? That seemed crazy on the face of it, but slowly I began to realize that the bells and the confinement, the crazy sequences, the agesegregation, the lack of privacy, the constant surveillance, and all the rest of the national curriculum of schooling were designed exactly as if someone had set out to *prevent* children from learning how to think and act, to coax them into addiction and dependent behavior.

Bit by bit I began to devise guerrilla exercises to allow as many of the kids I taught as possible the raw material people have always used to educate themselves: privacy, choice, freedom from surveillance, and as broad a range of situations and human associations as my limited power and resources could manage. In simpler terms, I tried to maneuver them into positions where they would have a chance to be their own teachers and to make themselves the major text of their own education.

In theoretical, metaphorical terms, the idea I began to explore was this one: that teaching is nothing like the art of painting, where, by the *addition* of material to a surface, an image is synthetically produced, but more like the art of sculpture, where, by the *subtraction* of material, an image already locked in the stone is enabled to emerge. It is a crucial distinction.

In other words, I dropped the idea that I was an expert whose job it was to fill the little heads with my expertise, and began to explore how I could remove those obstacles that prevented the inherent genius of children from gathering itself. I no longer felt comfortable defining my work as bestowing wisdom on a struggling classroom audience. Although I continue to this day in those futile assays because of the nature of institutional teaching, wherever possible I have broken

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with teaching tradition and sent kids down their separate paths to their own private truths.

The sociology of government monopoly schools has evolved in such a way that a premise like mine jeopardizes the total institution if it spreads. Kept contained, the occasional teacher who makes a discovery like mine is at worst an annoyance to the chain of command (which has evolved automatic defenses to isolate such bacilli and then to neutralize or destroy them). But once loose, the idea could imperil the central assumptions which allow the institutional school to sustain itself, such as the false assumption that it is difficult to learn to read, or that kids resist learning, and many more. Indeed, the very stability of our economy is threatened by any form of education that might change the nature of the human product schools now turn out: the economy schoolchildren currently expect to live under and serve would not survive a generation of young people trained, for example, to think critically.

Success in my practice involves a large component of automatic trust, categorical trust, not the kind conditional on performance. People have to be allowed to make their own mistakes and to try again, or they will never *master* themselves, although they may well *seem* to be competent when they have in fact only memorized or imitated someone else's performance. Success in my practice also

involves challenging many comfortable assumptions about what is worth learning and out of what material a good life is fashioned.

Over the years of wrestling with the obstacles that stand between child and education I have come to believe that government monopoly schools are structurally unreformable. They cannot function if their central myths are exposed and abandoned. Over the years I have come to see that whatever I thought I was doing as a teacher, most of what I actually was doing was teaching an invisible curriculum that reinforced the myths of the school institution and those of an economy based on caste. When I was trying to decide what to say to you that might make my experience as a schoolteacher useful, it occurred to me that I could best serve by telling you what I do that is wrong, rather than what I do that is right. What I do that is right is simple to understand: I get out of kids' way, I give them space and time and respect. What I do that is wrong, however, is strange, complex, and frightening. Let me begin to show you what that is.

Chapter 1

THE SEVEN-LESSON SCHOOLTEACHER

This speech was given on the occasion of the author being named "New York State Teacher of the Year" for 1991.

II

CALL ME MR. GATTO, PLEASE. Thirty years ago, having nothing better to do with myself at the time, I tried my hand at schoolteaching. The license I have certifies that I am an instructor of English language and English literature, but that isn't

what I do at all. I don't teach English; I teach school — and I win awards doing it.

Teaching means different things in different places, but seven lessons are universally taught from Harlem to Hollywood Hills. They constitute a national curriculum you pay for in more ways than you can imagine, so you might as well know what it is. You are at liberty, of course, to regard these lessons any way you like, but believe me when I say I intend no irony in this presentation. These are the things I teach; these are the things you pay me to teach. Make of them what you will.

1. CONFUSION

A lady named Kathy wrote this to me from Dubois, Indiana, the other day:

What big ideas are important to little kids? Well, the biggest idea I think they need is that what they are learning isn't idiosyncratic — that there is some system to it all and it's not just raining down on them as they helplessly absorb. That's the task, to understand, to make coherent.

Kathy has it wrong. *The first lesson I teach is confusion. Everything I teach is out of context. I teach the un-relating of everything. I teach disconnections. I teach too much: the orbiting of planets, the law of large numbers, slavery, adjectives, architectural drawing, dance, gymnasium, choral singing, assemblies, surprise guests, fire drills, computer languages, parents' nights, staffdevelopment days, pull-out programs, guidance with strangers my students may never see again, standardized tests, age-segregation unlike anything seen in the outside world ... What do any of these things have to do with each other?*

Even in the best schools a close examination of curriculum and its sequences turns up a lack of coherence, a host of internal contradictions. Fortunately the children have no words to define the panic and anger they feel at *constant violations of natural order and sequence* fobbed off on them as quality in education. The logic of the school-mind is that it is better to leave school with a tool kit of superficial jargon derived from economics, sociology, natural science, and so on than with one genuine enthusiasm. But quality in education entails learning about

something in depth. Confusion is thrust upon kids by too many strange adults, each working alone with only the thinnest relationship with each other, pretending, for the most part, to an expertise they do not possess.

Meaning, not disconnected facts, is what sane human beings seek, and education is a set of codes for processing raw data into meaning. Behind the patchwork quilt of school sequences and the school obsession with facts and theories, the age-old human search for meaning lies well concealed. This is harder to see in elementary school where the hierarchy of school experience seems to make better sense because the good-natured simple relationship between “let’s do this” and “let’s do that” is just assumed to mean something and the clientele has not yet consciously discerned how little substance is behind the play and pretense.

Think of the great natural sequences — like learning to walk and learning to talk; the progression of light from sunrise to sunset; the ancient procedures of a farmer, a smithy, or a shoemaker; or the preparation of a Thanksgiving feast. All of the parts are in perfect harmony with each other, each action justifying itself and illuminating the past and the future. School sequences aren’t like that, not inside a single class and not among the total menu of daily classes. School sequences are crazy. There is no particular reason for any of them, nothing that bears close scrutiny. Few teachers would dare to teach the tools whereby dogmas of a school or a teacher could be criticized, since everything must be accepted. School subjects are learned, if they *can* be learned, like children learn the

catechism or memorize the Thirty-nine Articles of Anglicanism.

I teach the un-relating of everything, an infinite fragmentation the opposite of cohesion; what I do is more related to television programming than to making a scheme of order. In a world where home is only a ghost because both parents work, or because of too many moves or too many job changes or too much ambition, or because something else has left everybody too confused to maintain a family relation, I teach students how to accept confusion as their destiny. That's the first lesson I teach.

2. CLASS POSITION

The second lesson I teach is class position. I teach that students must stay in the class where they belong. I don't know who decides my kids belong there but that's not my business. The children are numbered so that if any get away they can be returned to the right class. Over the years the variety of ways children are numbered by schools has increased dramatically, until it is hard to see the human beings plainly under the weight of numbers they carry. Numbering children is a big and very profitable undertaking, though what the strategy is designed to accomplish is elusive. I don't even know why parents would, without a fight, allow it to be done to their kids. In any case, that's not my business. My job is to make them like being locked together with children who bear numbers like their own. Or at least to endure it like good sports. If I do my job well, the kids can't even *imagine* themselves somewhere else because I've shown them how to envy and fear the better

classes and how to have contempt for the dumb classes. Under this efficient discipline the class mostly polices itself into good marching order. That's the real lesson of any rigged competition like school. You come to know your place.

In spite of the overall class blueprint that assumes that ninety-nine percent of the kids are in their class to stay, I nevertheless make a public effort to exhort children to higher levels of test success, hinting at eventual transfer from the lower class as a reward. I frequently insinuate the day will come when an employer will hire them on the basis of test scores and grades, even though my own experience is that employers are rightly indifferent to such things. I never lie outright, but I've come to see that truth and schoolteaching are, at bottom, incompatible, just as Socrates said thousands of years ago. The lesson of numbered classes is that everyone has a proper place in the pyramid and that there is no way out of your class except by number magic. Failing that, you must stay where you are put.

3. INDIFFERENCE

The third lesson I teach is indifference. I teach children not to care too much about anything, even though they want to make it appear that they do. How I do this is very subtle. I do it by demanding that they become totally involved in my lessons, jumping up and down in their seats with anticipation, competing vigorously with each other for my favor. It's heartwarming when they do that; it impresses everyone, even me. When I'm at my best I plan lessons very

carefully in order to produce this show of enthusiasm. But when the bell rings I insist they drop whatever it is we have been doing and proceed quickly to the next work station. They must turn on and off like a light switch. Nothing important is ever finished in my class nor in any class I know of. Students never have a complete experience except on the installment plan.

Indeed, the lesson of bells is that no work is worth finishing, so why care too deeply about anything? Years of bells will condition all but the strongest to a world that can no longer offer important work to do. Bells are the secret logic of school time; their logic is inexorable. Bells destroy the past and future, rendering every interval the same as any other, as the abstraction of a map renders every living mountain and river the same, even though they are not. Bells inoculate each undertaking with indifference.

4. EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCY

The fourth lesson I teach is emotional dependency. By stars and red checks, smiles and frowns, prizes, honors, and disgraces, I teach kids to surrender their will to the predestinated chain of command. Rights may be granted or withheld by any authority without appeal, because rights do not exist inside a school — not even the right of free speech, as the Supreme Court has ruled — unless school authorities say they do. As a schoolteacher, I intervene in many personal decisions, issuing a pass for those I deem legitimate and initiating a disciplinary confrontation for behavior that threatens my control. Individuality is constantly trying to assert itself among children and

teenagers, so my judgments come thick and fast. Individuality is a contradiction of class theory, a curse to all systems of classification.

Here are some common ways in which individuality shows up: children sneak away for a private moment in the toilet on the pretext of moving their bowels, or they steal a private instant in the hallway on the grounds they need water. I know they don't, but I allow them to "deceive" me because this conditions them to depend on my favors. Sometimes free will appears right in front of me in pockets of children angry, depressed, or happy about things outside my ken; rights in such matters cannot be recognized by schoolteachers, only privileges that can be withdrawn, hostages to good behavior.

5. INTELLECTUAL DEPENDENCY

The fifth lesson I teach is intellectual dependency. Good students wait for a teacher to tell them what to do. This is the most important lesson of them all: we must wait for other people, better trained than ourselves, to make the meanings of our lives. The expert makes all the important choices; only I, the teacher, can determine what my kids must study, or rather, only the people who pay me can make those decisions, which I then enforce. If I'm told that evolution is a fact instead of a theory, I transmit that as ordered, punishing deviants who resist what I have been told to tell them to think. This power to control what children will think lets me separate successful students from failures very easily.

Successful children do the thinking I assign them with a minimum of resistance and a decent show of enthusiasm. Of the millions of things of value to study, I decide what few we have time for. Actually, though, this is decided by my faceless employers. The choices are theirs — why should I argue? Curiosity has no important place in my work, only conformity.

Bad kids fight this, of course, even though they lack the concepts to know what they are fighting, struggling to make decisions for themselves about what they will learn and when they will learn it. How can we allow that and survive as schoolteachers? Fortunately there are tested procedures to break the will of those who resist; it is more difficult, naturally, if the kids have respectable parents who come to their aid, but that happens less and less in spite of the bad reputation of schools. No middleclass parents I have ever met actually believe that *their* kid's school is one of the bad ones. Not one single parent in many years of teaching. That's amazing, and probably the best testimony to what happens to families when mother and father have been well-schooled themselves, learning the seven lessons.

Good people wait for an expert to tell them what to do. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that our entire economy depends upon this lesson being learned. Think of what might fall apart if children weren't trained to be dependent: the social services could hardly survive — they would vanish, I think, into the recent historical limbo out of which they arose. Counselors and therapists would look on in horror as the supply of psychic invalids vanished. Commercial entertainment of all sorts, including television,

would wither as people learned again how to make their own fun. Restaurants, the prepared food industry, and a whole host of other assorted food services would be drastically down-sized if people returned to making their own meals rather than depending on strangers to plant, pick, chop, and cook for them. Much of modern law, medicine, and engineering would go too, as well as the clothing business and schoolteaching, unless a guaranteed supply of helpless people continued to pour out of our schools each year.

Don't be too quick to vote for radical school reform if you want to continue getting a paycheck. We've built a way of life that depends on people doing what they are told because they don't know how to tell *themselves* what to do. It's one of the biggest lessons I teach.

6. PROVISIONAL SELF-ESTEEM

The sixth lesson I teach is provisional self-esteem. If you've ever tried to wrestle into line kids whose parents have convinced them to believe they'll be loved in spite of anything, you know how impossible it is to make selfconfident spirits conform. Our world wouldn't survive a flood of confident people very long, so I teach that a kid's self-respect should depend on expert opinion. My kids are constantly evaluated and judged.

A monthly report, impressive in its provision, is sent into a student's home to elicit approval or mark exactly, down to a single percentage point, how dissatisfied with the child a parent should be. The ecology of "good" schooling depends on perpetuating dissatisfaction, just as the

commercial economy depends on the same fertilizer. Although some people might be surprised how little time or reflection goes into making up these mathematical records, the cumulative weight of these objective-seeming documents establishes a profile that compels children to arrive at certain decisions about themselves and their futures based on the casual judgment of strangers. Selfevaluation, the staple of every major philosophical system that ever appeared on the planet, is never considered a factor. The lesson of report cards, grades, and tests is that children should not trust themselves or their parents but should instead rely on the evaluation of certified officials. People need to be told what they are worth.

7. ONE CAN'T HIDE

The seventh lesson I teach is that one can't hide. I teach students that they are always watched, that each is under constant surveillance by me and my colleagues. There are no private spaces for children; there is no private time. Class change lasts exactly three hundred seconds to keep promiscuous fraternization at low levels. Students are encouraged to tattle on each other or even to tattle on their own parents. Of course, I encourage parents to file reports about their own child's waywardness too. A family trained to snitch on itself isn't likely to conceal any dangerous secrets.

I assign a type of extended schooling called "homework," so that the effect of surveillance, if not the surveillance itself, travels into private households, where

students might otherwise use free time to learn something unauthorized from a father or mother, by exploration or by apprenticing to some wise person in the neighborhood. Disloyalty to the idea of schooling is a devil always ready to find work for idle hands.

The meaning of constant surveillance and denial of privacy is that no one can be trusted, that privacy is not legitimate. Surveillance is an ancient imperative, espoused by certain influential thinkers, a central prescription set down in *The Republic*, *The City of God*, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, *New Atlantis*, *Leviathan*, and a host of other places. All the childless men who wrote these books discovered the same thing: children must be closely watched if you want to keep a society under tight central control. Children will follow a private drummer if you can't get them into a uniformed marching band. ||

It is the great triumph of compulsory government monopoly mass schooling that among even the best of my fellow teachers, and among even the best of my students' parents, only a small number can imagine a different way to do things. "The kids have to know how to read and write, don't they?" "They have to know how to add and subtract, don't they?" "They have to learn to follow orders if they ever expect to keep a job."

Only a few lifetimes ago things were very different in the United States. Originality and variety were common currency; our freedom from regimentation made us the miracle of the world; social-class boundaries were relatively easy to cross; our citizenry was marvelously confident, inventive, and able to do much for themselves

independently, and to think for themselves. We were something special, we Americans, all by ourselves, without government sticking its nose into and measuring every aspect of our lives, without institutions and social agencies telling us how to think and feel. We were something special, as individuals, as Americans.

But we've had a society essentially under central control in the United States since just after the Civil War, and such a society requires compulsory schooling — government monopoly schooling — to maintain itself. Before this development schooling wasn't very important anywhere. We had it, but not too much of it, and only as much as an individual *wanted*. People learned to read, write, and do arithmetic just fine anyway; there are some studies that suggest literacy at the time of the American Revolution, at least for non-slaves on the Eastern seaboard, was close to total. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* sold 600,000 copies to a population of 3,000,000, of whom twenty percent were slaves and fifty percent indentured servants.

Were the Colonists geniuses? No, the truth is that reading, writing, and arithmetic only take about one hundred hours to transmit as long as the audience is eager and willing to learn. The trick is to wait until someone asks and then move fast while the mood is on. Millions of people teach themselves these things — it really isn't very hard. Pick up a fifth-grade math or rhetoric textbook from 1850 and you'll see that the texts were pitched then on what would today be considered college level. The continuing cry for "basic skills" practice is a smoke screen behind which

schools preempt the time of children for twelve years and teach them the seven lessons I've just described to you.

The society that has come increasingly under central control since just before the Civil War shows itself in the lives we lead, the clothes we wear, the food we eat, and the green highway signs we drive by from coast to coast, all of which are the products of this control. So too, I think, are the epidemics of drugs, suicide, divorce, violence, and cruelty, as well as the hardening of class into caste in the United States, products of the dehumanization of our lives, of the lessening of individual, family, and community importance — a diminishment that proceeds from central control. Inevitably, large compulsory institutions want more and more, until there isn't any more to give. School takes our children away from any possibility of an active role in community life — in fact, it destroys communities by relegating the training of children to the hands of certified experts — and by doing so it ensures our children cannot grow up fully human. Aristotle taught that without a fully active role in community life one could not hope to become a healthy human being. Surely he was right. Look around you the next time you are near a school or an old people's reservation if you wish a demonstration.

School, as it was built, is an essential support system for a model of social engineering that condemns most people to be subordinate stones in a pyramid that narrows as it ascends to a terminal of control. School is an artifice that makes such a pyramidal social order seem inevitable, even though such a premise is a fundamental betrayal of the American Revolution. From Colonial days through the

period of the Republic we had no schools to speak of — read Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* for an example of a man who had no time to waste in school — and yet the promise of democracy was beginning to be realized. We turned our backs on this promise by bringing to life the ancient pharaonic dream of Egypt: compulsory subordination for all. That was the secret Plato reluctantly transmitted in *The Republic* when Glaucon and Adeimantus extort from Socrates the plan for total state control of human life, a plan necessary to maintain a society where some people take more than their share. “I will show you,” says Socrates, “how to bring about such a feverish city, but you will not like what I am going to say.” And so the blueprint of the seven-lesson school was first sketched.

The current debate about whether we should have a national curriculum is phony. We already have a national curriculum locked up in the seven lessons I have just outlined. Such a curriculum produces physical, moral, and intellectual paralysis, and no curriculum of content will be sufficient to reverse its hideous effects. What is currently under discussion in our national hysteria about failing academic performance misses the point. Schools teach exactly what they are intended to teach and they do it well: how to be a good Egyptian and remain in your place in the pyramid.

III

None of this is inevitable. None of it is impossible to overthrow. We do have choices in how we bring up young people: there is no one right way. If we broke through the

power of the pyramidal illusion we would see that. There is no life-and-death international competition threatening our national existence, difficult as that idea is even to think about, let alone believe, in the face of a continual media barrage of myth to the contrary. In every important material respect our nation is self-sufficient, including in energy. I realize that idea runs counter to the most fashionable thinking of political economists, but the “profound transformation” of our economy these people talk about is neither inevitable nor irreversible.

Global economics does not speak to the public need for meaningful work, affordable housing, fulfilling education, adequate medical care, a clean environment, honest and accountable government, social and cultural renewal, or simple justice. All global ambitions are based on a definition of productivity and the good life so alienated from common human reality that I am convinced it is wrong and that most people would agree with me if they could perceive an alternative. We might be able to see that if we regained a hold on a philosophy that locates meaning where meaning is genuinely to be found — in families, in friends, in the passage of seasons, in nature, in simple ceremonies and rituals, in curiosity, generosity, compassion, and service to others, in a decent independence and privacy, in all the free and inexpensive things out of which real families, real friends, and real communities are built — then we would be so self-sufficient we would not even need the material “sufficiency” which our global “experts” are so insistent we be concerned about.

How did these awful places, these “schools,” come about? Well, casual schooling has always been with us in a variety of forms, a mildly useful adjunct to growing up. But “modern schooling” as we now know it is a byproduct of the two “Red Scares” of 1848 and 1919, when powerful interests feared a revolution among our own industrial poor. Partly, too, total schooling came about because old-line “American” families were appalled by the native cultures of Celtic, Slavic, and Latin immigrants of the 1840s and felt repugnance toward the Catholic religion they brought with them. Certainly a third contributing factor in creating a jail for children called “school” must have been the consternation with which these same “Americans” regarded the movement of African-Americans through the society in the wake of the Civil War.

Look again at the seven lessons of school teaching: confusion, class position, indifference, emotional and intellectual dependency, conditional self-esteem, and surveillance. All of these lessons are prime training for permanent underclasses, people deprived forever of finding the center of their own special genius. And over time this training has shaken loose from its original purpose: to regulate the poor. For since the 1920s the growth of the school bureaucracy as well as the less visible growth of a horde of industries that profit from schooling exactly as it is, has enlarged this institution’s original grasp to the point that it now seizes the sons and daughters of the middle classes as well.

Is it any wonder Socrates was outraged at the accusation he took money to teach? Even then,

philosophers saw clearly the inevitable direction the professionalization of teaching would take, that of preempting the teaching function, which, in a healthy community, belongs to everyone.

With lessons like the ones I teach day after day it should be little wonder we have a real national crisis, the nature of which is very different from that proclaimed by the national media. Young people are indifferent to the adult world and to the future, indifferent to almost everything except the diversion of toys and violence. Rich or poor, school children who face the twenty-first century cannot concentrate on anything for very long; they have a poor sense of time past and time to come. They are mistrustful of intimacy like the children of divorce they really are (for we have divorced them from significant parental attention); they hate solitude, are cruel, materialistic, dependent, passive, violent, timid in the face of the unexpected, addicted to distraction.

All the peripheral tendencies of childhood are nourished and magnified to a grotesque extent by schooling, which, through its hidden curriculum, prevents effective personality development. Indeed, without exploiting the fearfulness, selfishness, and inexperience of children, our schools could not survive at all, nor could I as a certified schoolteacher. No common school that actually dared to teach the use of critical thinking tools — like the dialectic, the heuristic, or other devices that free minds should employ — would last very long before being torn to pieces. In our secular society, school has become the

replacement for church, and like church it requires that its teachings must be taken on faith.

It is time that we squarely face the fact that institutional schoolteaching is destructive to children. Nobody survives the seven-lesson curriculum completely unscathed, not even the instructors. The method is deeply and profoundly anti-educational. No tinkering will fix it. In one of the great ironies of human affairs, the massive rethinking the schools require would cost so much *less* than we are spending now that powerful interests cannot afford to let it happen. You must understand that first and foremost the business I am in is a *jobs project* and an agency for letting contracts. We cannot afford to save money by reducing the scope of our operation or by diversifying the product we offer, even to help children grow up right. That is the *iron law* of institutional schooling — it is a business, subject neither to normal accounting procedures nor to the rational scalpel of competition.

Some form of free-market system in public schooling is the likeliest place to look for answers, a free market where family schools and small entrepreneurial schools and religious schools and crafts schools and farm schools exist in profusion to compete with government education. I'm trying to describe a free market in schooling exactly like the one the country had until the Civil War, one in which *students volunteer for the kind of education that suits them* even if that means self-education. It didn't hurt Benjamin Franklin that I can see. These options exist now in miniature, wonderful survivals of a strong and vigorous past, but they are available only to the resourceful, the courageous, the

lucky, or the rich. The near impossibility of one of these better roads opening for the shattered families of the poor or for the bewildered host camped on the fringes of the urban middle class suggests that *the disaster of seven-lesson schools is going to grow unless we do something bold and decisive with the mess of government monopoly schooling.*

After an adult lifetime spent teaching school, I believe the *method* of mass schooling is its only real content. Don't be fooled into thinking that good curriculum or good equipment or good teachers are the critical determinants of your son's or daughter's education. All the pathologies we've considered come about in large measure because the lessons of school prevent children from keeping important appointments with themselves and with their families to learn lessons in selfmotivation, perseverance, self-reliance, courage, dignity, and love — and lessons in service to others, too, which are among the key lessons of home and community life.

Thirty years ago these lessons could still be learned in the time left *after* school. But television has eaten up most of that time, and a combination of television and the stresses peculiar to two-income or single-parent families has swallowed up most of what used to be family time as well. Our kids have no time left to grow up fully human and only thin-soil wastelands to do it in.

A future is rushing down upon our culture that will insist that all of us learn the wisdom of nonmaterial experience; a future that will demand as the price of survival that we follow a path of natural life that is economical in material cost. These lessons cannot be learned in schools as

they are. School is a twelve-year jail sentence where bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned. I teach school and win awards doing it. I should know.

