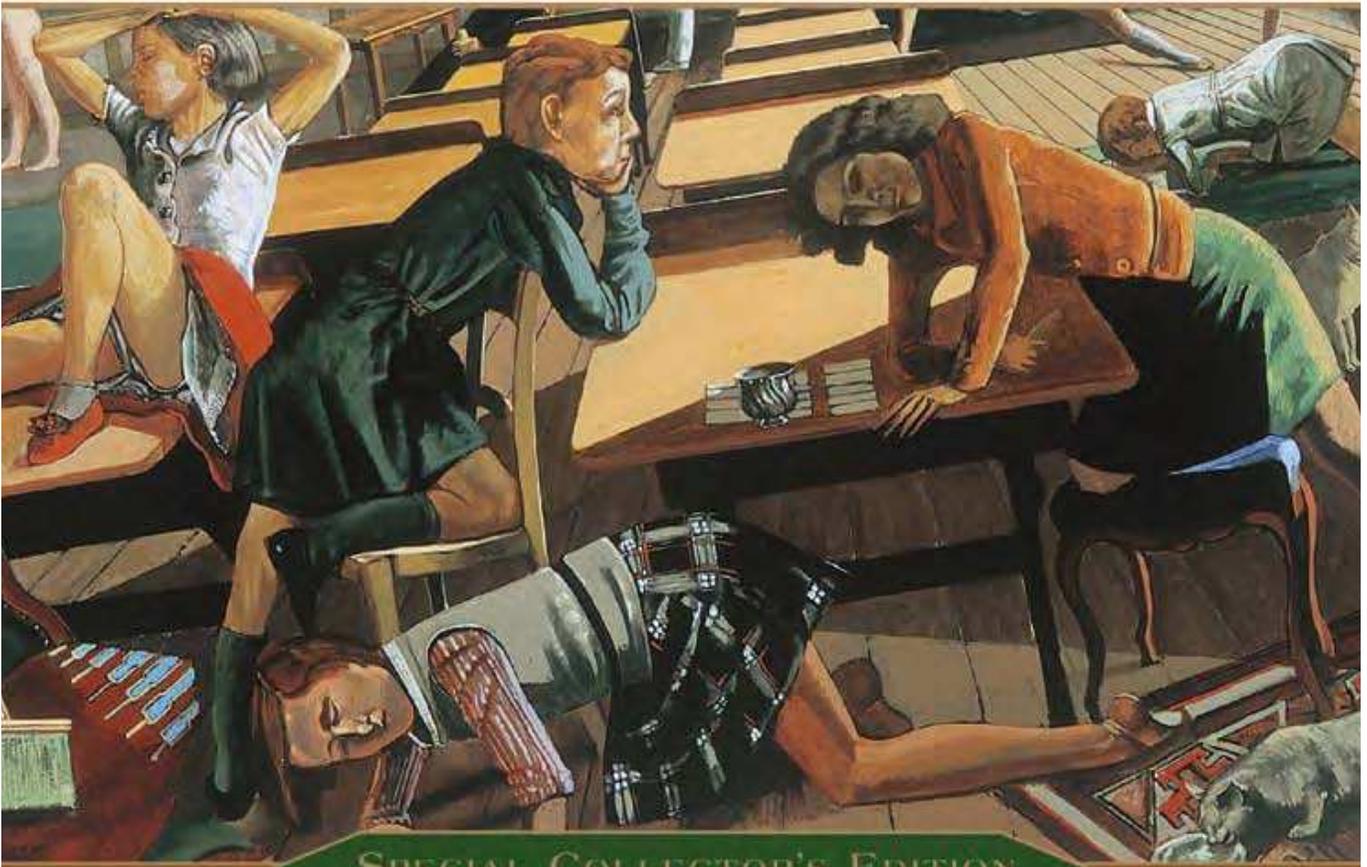


Dumbing Us Down

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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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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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

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.

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 age-segregation, 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 essays because of the nature of institutional teaching, wherever possible I have broken

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 school-children 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

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.

I. 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, staff-development 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 middle-class 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 self-confident 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. Self-evaluation, 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.

II

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 by-

product 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 self-motivation, 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.