

initiate lines of meaning to give substance and pleasure to their existence. It's a national disease, this dependency and aimlessness, and I think schooling and television and lessons — the entire Chautauqua idea — have a lot to do with it.

Think of the things that are killing us as a nation: drugs, brainless competition, recreational sex, the pornography of violence, gambling, alcohol, and the worst pornography of all — lives devoted to buying things, accumulation as a philosophy. All are addictions of dependent personalities and that is what our brand of schooling must inevitably produce.

I want to tell you what the effect is on children of taking all their time — time they need to grow up — and forcing them to spend it on abstractions. No reform that doesn't attack these specific pathologies will be anything more than a facade.

— The children I teach are indifferent to the adult world. This defies the experience of thousands of years. A close study of what big people were up to was always the most exciting occupation of youth, but nobody wants to grow up these days, and who can blame them? Toys are us.

— The children I teach have almost no curiosity, and what little they do have is transitory; they cannot concentrate for very long, even on things they choose to do. Can you see a connection between the bells ringing again and again to change classes and this phenomenon of evanescent attention?

— The children I teach have a poor sense of the future, of how tomorrow is inextricably linked to today. They live in a continuous present; the exact moment they are in is the boundary of their consciousness.

— The children I teach are ahistorical; they have no sense of how the past has predestined their own present, limiting their choices, shaping their values and lives.

— The children I teach are cruel to each other. They lack compassion for misfortune, they laugh at weakness, they have contempt for people whose need for help shows too plainly.

— The children I teach are uneasy with intimacy or candor. They cannot deal with genuine intimacy because of a lifelong habit of preserving a secret self inside an outer personality made up of artificial bits and pieces of behavior borrowed from television, or acquired to manipulate teachers. Because they are not who they represent themselves to be, the disguise wears thin in the presence of intimacy, so intimate relationships have to be avoided.

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

— The children I teach are dependent, passive and timid in the presence of new challenges. This timidity is frequently masked by surface bravado, or by anger or aggressiveness, but underneath is a vacuum without fortitude.

I could name a few other conditions that school reform will have to tackle if our national decline is to be arrested, but by now you will have grasped my thesis, whether you agree with it or not. Either schools, television, or both have caused these pathologies. It's a simple matter of arithmetic. Between schooling and television, all the time children have is eaten up. That's what has destroyed the American family; it no longer is a factor in the education of its own children.

What can be done?

First, we need a ferocious national debate that doesn't quit, day after day, year after year, the kind of continuous emphasis that journalism finds boring. We need to scream and argue about this school thing until it is fixed or broken beyond repair, one or the other. If we can fix it, fine; if we cannot, then the success of home-schooling shows a different road that has great promise. Pouring the money back into family education might kill two birds with one stone, repairing families as it repairs children.

Genuine reform is possible but it shouldn't cost anything. We need to rethink the fundamental premises of schooling and decide what it is we want all children to learn, and why. For one hundred forty years this nation has tried to impose objectives from a lofty command center made up of "experts," a central elite of social engineers. It hasn't worked. It won't work. It is a gross betrayal of the democratic promise that once made this nation a noble experiment. The Russian attempt to control Eastern Europe has exploded before our eyes. Our own attempt to impose the same sort of central orthodoxy, using the schools as an instrument, is also coming apart at the seams, albeit more slowly and painfully. It doesn't work because its fundamental promises are mechanical, anti-human, and hostile to family life. Lives can be controlled by machine education, but they will always fight back with weapons of social pathology — drugs, violence, self-destruction, indifference, and the symptoms I see in the children I teach.

It's high time we looked backward to regain an educational philosophy that works. One that I like particularly well has been a favorite of the ruling classes of Europe for thousands of years. I think it works just as well for poor children as for rich ones. I use as much of it as I can manage in my own teaching; as much,



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that is, as I can get away with, given the present institution of compulsory schooling.

At the core of this elite system of education is the belief that self-knowledge is the only basis of true knowledge. Everywhere in this system, at every age, you will find arrangements that place the child alone in an unguided setting with a problem to solve. Sometimes the problem is fraught with great risks, such as the problem of galloping a horse or making it jump, but that, of course, is a problem successfully solved by thousands of elite children before the age of ten. Can you imagine anyone who had mastered such a challenge ever lacking confidence in his ability to do anything? Sometimes the problem is that of mastering solitude, as Thoreau did at Walden Pond, or Einstein did at the Swiss customs house.

One of my former students, Roland Legiard-Laura, though both his parents were dead and he had no inheritance, took a bicycle across the United States alone when he was hardly out of boyhood. Is it any wonder that in manhood he made a film about Nicaragua, although he had no money and no prior experience with filmmaking, and that it was an international award winner — even though his regular work was as a carpenter?

Right now we are taking from our children the time they need to develop self-knowledge. That has to stop. We have to invent school experiences that give a lot of that time back. We need to trust children from a very early age with independent study, perhaps arranged in school but which takes place away from the institutional setting. We need to invent a curriculum where each kid has a chance to develop uniqueness and self-reliance.

A short time ago, I took seventy dollars and sent a twelve-year-old girl with her non-English speaking mother on a bus down the New Jersey coast. She took the police chief of Sea Bright to lunch and apologized for polluting his beach with a discarded Gatorade bottle. In exchange for the public apology I had arranged for the girl to have a one-day apprenticeship in small town police procedures. A few days later, two more of my twelve-year-old kids traveled alone: from Harlem to West 31st Street, where they began an apprenticeship with a newspaper editor. Next week, three of my kids will find themselves in the middle of the Jersey swamps at six in the morning studying the mind of a trucking company president as he dispatches eighteen-wheelers to Dallas, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Are these "special" children in a "special" program? They're just nice kids from Central Harlem, bright and alert, but so badly schooled when they came to me that most of them could not add or subtract with any fluency. And not a single one knew the population of New York City, or how far it is from New York to California.

Does that worry me? Of course. But I am confident that as they gain self-knowledge they will also become self-teachers — and only self-teaching has any lasting value.

We've got to give kids independent time right away because that is the key to self-knowledge, and we must reinvolve them with the real world as fast as possible so that the independent time can be spent on something other than more

abstractions. This is an emergency. It requires drastic action to correct. Our children are dying like flies in our schools. Good schooling or bad schooling, it's all the same — irrelevant.

What else does a restructured school system need? It needs to stop being a parasite on the working community. I think we need to make community service a required part of schooling. It is the quickest way to give young children real responsibility.

For five years I ran a guerrilla school program where I had every kid, rich and poor, smart and dippy, give three hundred twenty hours a year of hard community service. Dozens of these kids came back to me years later, and told me that this one experience changed their lives, taught them to see in new ways, to rethink goals and values. It happened when they were thirteen, in my Lab School program — only made possible because my rich school district was in chaos. When "stability" returned, the Lab closed. It was too successful, at too small a cost, to be allowed to continue. We made the expensive, elite programs look bad.

There is no shortage of real problems in this city. Kids can be asked to help solve them in exchange for the respect and attention of the adult world. Good for kids, good for the rest of us.

Independent study, community service, adventures in experience, large doses of privacy and solitude, a thousand different apprenticeships — these are all powerful, cheap and effective ways to start a real reform of schooling. But no large-scale reform is ever going to repair our damaged children and our damaged society until we force the idea of "school" open — to include family as the main engine of education. The Swedes realized this in 1976, when they effectively abandoned the system of adopting unwanted children and instead spent national time and treasure on reinforcing the original family so that children born to Swedes were wanted. They reduced the number of unwanted Swedish children from six thousand in 1976 to fifteen in 1986. So it can be done. The Swedes just got tired of paying for the social wreckage caused by children not raised by their natural parents, so they did something about it. We can, too.

Family is the main engine of education. If we use schooling to break children away from parents — and make no mistake, that has been the central function of schools since John Cotton announced it as the purpose of the Bay Colony schools in 1650 and Horace Mann announced it as the purpose of Massachusetts schools in 1850 — we're going to continue to have the horror show we have right now.

The curriculum of the family is at the heart of any good life. We've gotten away from that curriculum — it's time to return to it. The way to sanity in education is for our schools to take the lead in releasing the stranglehold of institutions on family life, to promote during school time confluences of parent and child that will strengthen family bonds. That was my real purpose in sending the girl and her mother down the Jersey coast to meet the police chief.

I have many ideas to make a family curriculum, and my guess is that a lot of you will have many ideas, too, once you begin to think about it. Our greatest problem in getting the kind of grassroots thinking going that could reform schooling is that we have large, vested interests profiting from schooling just exactly as it is, despite rhetoric to the contrary.

We have to demand that new voices and new ideas get a hearing, my ideas and yours. We have all had a bellyful of authorized voices on television and in the press. A decade-long, free-for-all debate is called for now, not any more "expert" opinions. Experts in education have never been right; their "solutions" are expensive, self-serving, and always involve further centralization. Enough.

Time for a return to democracy, individuality, and family.

I've said my piece. Thank you.



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