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School and It's Discontents

By Eric Anglada

In the spring of 1971, Dorothy Day refused an invitation to receive an honorary degree from the Catholic University in Washington, DC. "The Catholic Worker," she wrote, "stands in a particular way…for people who need some other kind of schooling than that afforded by universities and colleges of our industrial capitalist system." She added that the Catholic Worker is trying to "stimulate the young to study ways by which they can change the social and educational system nonviolently."

In that spirit, as part of our ongoing work at New Hope Catholic Worker Farm, in what Peter Maurin liked to call an "agronomic university," we hosted more than thirty people last September for a four-day workshop on alternative education. We sought to clarify our thoughts and practices in relation to the world of school, education, and learning. From unschooled children, to frustrated grad students, to parents exploring alternative education models for their children, to avid lifelong learners, our workshop contained a wide array of backgrounds and experiences. Thus we began our seminar by reflecting on our own experience of education, asking ourselves two basic questions: What has worked? What has not?

Recalling our time in both compulsory schooling and university life, we cited several things that worked: occasionally inspiring teachers, exposure to great literature, social life, resources that big educational institutions afforded and extracurricular activities such as sports and theater.

As discussions continued, however, we found that the drawbacks of school outweighed the benefits. Competition and compulsion made for an inhospitable context for authentic learning. Drab, artificial environments, with uncomfortable desks lined up in rows—the atmosphere the elite once envisioned, we later learned—created a stale place for study. The vast amount of transportation involved in centralized schooling uses an enormous amount of resources. Debt has forced many young people into a de facto life of servility. And tragically, standardized testing encourages a narrow focus on language and mathematics, at the cost of learning practical skills, studying critical history and theory, or exploring the spiritual life.

In order to better understand our education experiences, we read and discussed the history of school. We relied heavily on the valuable work of John Taylor Gatto, a public school educator for thirty years, well known for publically resigning from his job in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* ("I Quit, I Think"). His *An Underground History of Education* provides hugely important insights into the history and nature of schooling.

While education, as Gatto points out, has been centered on the home and the community for most of human history, compulsory schooling—six classes a day, five days a week, nine

months out of the year—is a recent phenomenon. Originally an idea of Plato, it wasn't until centuries later, in 1819, that compulsory education was first signed into law, in Prussia. Prussia's system inculcated values like obedience and lent itself to social stratification and uniformity in thought. School proved to be a perfect transition for children to go on to work in the military or the mines. Such a bold program of schooling did not go unnoticed. In the US, intellectuals like Horace Mann became fascinated with Prussia's educational system, seeing school as the perfect way to create a disciplined, ordered citizenry. In 1852, Massachusetts became the first state to follow in Prussia's path. Notably, the literacy rate has never been higher in Massachusetts than it was in 1850—before compulsory schooling was instituted.

The US ruling class observed the stratifying effects of school and quickly seized upon their opportunity: to "impose on the young the ideal of subordination," as they boldly admitted. Between 1896 and 1920, a small group of US industrialists—along with their private charitable organizations, subsidized university chairs, researchers, and administrators—spent more money on schooling than the government itself did. By 1917, the bulk of the university administrative jobs were controlled by the Education Trust, a group that included J.D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, the National Education Association, and several elite universities.

In 1898, the dean of Stanford's School of Education, Ellwood Cubberly, wrote, "Our schools are, in a sense, factories, in which the raw materials—children—are to be shaped and fashioned into products." The US Commissioner of Education at the turn of the century was equally honest, noting that "the great purpose of school can be realized better in dark, airless, ugly places." Upon hearing this during our workshop, a grad student proclaimed, "Now I realize why I struggle so much with school—I don't fit into the industrial model of education!"

These educational developments were a bold assault on the agrarian-oriented, family-centered economy in which children had played a vital role. Apprenticeships waned. Skills diminished. The result, notes John Taylor Gatto, is "an army of workers who know nothing," a perfect opening for the burgeoning urban, factory-based way of life.

Since the beginning of schooling, the poor have largely failed to fit into the society school has helped to create. Today, inner city drop-out rates are staggering: Detroit: 78%; New York: 61%; Kansas City: 54%. The radical priest Ivan Illich commented in *Deschooling Society* that, in effect, school operates as a "lottery system in which those who didn't make it" become "stigmatized as inferior for the rest of their lives." The story of an inner-city Catholic Worker recently illustrated this reality when he told me about sending his two kids to the public school nearest his home. He was dismayed that "it was clear and overt preparation for the majority of the students to transition to life in prison."

At our workshop, to deepen our sense of school's impact on the poor, we read "From Untouchables to Conscientious Objectors," an essay by Dan Grego. Grego, the director of several alternative schools in Milwaukee, put together a philosophy course for students thrown out of their high schools. The purpose of the course was to analyze the effects of the economy on their own lives. By the end of the course, these "marginal students" concluded that they had three options regarding school: they could drop out of school,

resigning themselves to the fact that they would remain on the bottom of the social hierarchy for the rest of their lives, and do the menial work for the successful class; they could try to play the school game and do their best to enter into the higher class that either paid or forces the first group to do the nasty, undignified work for them; or, intriguingly, they believed that as a third option, the could "rebel and become conscientious objectors to the System, using it if and when they chose for their own purposes."

To become a conscientious objector is to risk heresy. In her book *DIY U*, Anya Kamenetz argued that higher education is "the closest thing we have to a world religion." But I would argue that all school has taken on the veneer of religion. Teachers are sent as "missionaries" to bring "the good news of education" to the poor people living a subsistence lifestyle, often destroying the culture's focus on family and community in the process. (For a look at this destructive, albeit benevolent mindset, see Carol Black's documentary *Schooling the World*.) Ivan Illich commented in the 1960's that "The Church, holy, catholic, apostolic, is rivaled by the school, accredited, compulsory, untouchable, universal. Alma Mater has replaced Mother Church." Heresy means questioning a life of production, consumption, and bureaucratic growth.

On our farm I've had the first-hand experience of living in a community of heretics and conscientious objectors. My wife is an adjunct professor at a local university where she is able to expose students to social justice and spirituality. Another community member, a long-time school teacher, has opted out of the school paradigm and is instead teaching at-risk youth who voluntarily come to learn how to garden. One couple (one of whom majored in elementary education) plans to educate their two-year old on the farm, realizing his learning has already begun. After his grandparents worried about him "falling through the cracks," his dad quipped that "he can walk outside the house, identify and harvest a carrot—he's already ahead of the game!" As for me, in the context of of a community that offers periodic workshops in study in an integral way in our agronomic university, I've discovered the engagement with my body as well as the intellectual life that I always yearned for in college, but never found.

A nine year-old on the farm thrives as she learns in the context of home-schooling. She has not suffered, like other children have, from the notion that we must spend the majority of our time with people our exact age and thus is able to hold a conversation with persons of any age. She recently insisted that she come serve a meal to homeless people with several adult community members. Last summer, while the adults were occupied by a consensus meeting, she helped lead a group of visitors in canning salsa. She does schoolwork with her mom at certain times of the day and season, but if there are apples to be picked or tomatoes to be canned, that is the class for the day. Such a curriculum—embedded within a life of work, play, and community—not only harkens back to a life of learning within the household economy, but keeps her spirit of curiosity alive. No wonder a professor friend of mine told me that within a few weeks of every semester he can pick out the home-schooled students due to their engagement and genuine desire to learn. For the rest, the natural urge to learn has been largely quelled by their decade-plus immersion in the school system.

Not everyone has the luxury to educate their child at home. Thankfully, alternatives to the hegemony of mass, forced schooling abound in the likes of Montessori, Sudbury, Summerhill and other so-called Free Schools. As the children ran around the farm exploring the natural world during our workshop, we sat in a circle listening to and discussing presentations on Waldorf and folks schools. We read Astra Taylor's provocative essay on "unschooling," which, trusting the fact that we're all learners, offers still another compelling alternative. Perhaps most impressive was the presentation by one woman who shared about her unique project in creating an inter-generational gathering and network of people who share knowledge and skills with one another in the spirit of a small village. Their environment is bereft of grades or competition and there are no desk placed in a row. Frees are minimal, and the economy they embody is one of gift.

Throughout our workshop, it became clearer that education is ultimately the key factor in either sustaining the status quo or in creating, from the roots up, a different culture. If we are going to radically re-envision school, as Dorothy Day encouraged us to do, then our imagination can be illumined by these varied projects and traditions. They help us envisage decentralized learning communities passing on the stories, wisdom, and skills necessary to live harmoniously with one another and the land. ✣