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Bringing Education Down to Earth

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Society is vastly concerned about depressed and disillusioned students despairing of a future, easily attracted to drugs, violence, and other aberrant behavior. It seeks solutions in behavior modification, suspension, boot camps, modern technology but always in things only modestly disruptive to mainstream goals. It has apparently not given serious consideration to the thought that those goals are heavily implicated in the symptoms displayed by students. Just as we have learned that young people are more sensitive to the inimical impact of pesticides, they may be equally sensitive to the dismaying conditioning afforded their developing personalities via the continually televised world of violence, greed, materialism and environmental deterioration.

There are no push-button solutions, no panaceas, no magical formulae to restore the integrity of society. There is only a long, uphill, dedicated climb to ethical attitudes toward life. Gandhi was prescient in his response when a reporter asked him, "What do you think of civilization?" He replied, "It would be nice." If he were alive today to contemplate our present state of technological euphoria he would no doubt agree with Havelock Ellis' reflection that

The greatest task before civilization at present is to make machines what they ought to be, the slaves, instead of the masters of men.¹

Would it deflate our vanity too much to face the strong likelihood that the highest source of creative power in our schools is the students themselves and the teachers who are there to serve as mature guides illuminating the path toward sorely needed wisdom? Will we never realize that Western society has set the stage for its own undoing by deliberately turning its back on the Earth and isolating itself in a surrogate world built on contemporary sophistry?

In their embryonic lives, students retrace the history of our species. From zygote through aquatic life in amniotic fluid, to birth as an air-breathing mammal, they depend upon an ecocentric creation. Yet this truth is deliberately obfuscated by an educational system which has been adapted and modified to the aims of an unstable surrogate world reminiscent of Wordsworth's lines:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!/Shades of the prison house begin to close/ Upon the growing boy.

The familiar words from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* remind us that a child's growth is attuned to ancient Earth rhythms. "*Behold the child, by Nature's kindly law,/ Pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw;...*" It is likely

that cumulative stress caused by radical deviation from natural patterns of education may commence early in life.

Post World War II euphoria and industrial marketing frenzy led schools away from traditional forms of education, turning schools into testing grounds - a simple source of funds to support market improvements. Some of the implementations have been useful and beneficial but there is little to suggest that technological innovations are of such a beneficial nature that expensive budgetary changes and educational time should be allotted any technology before research indicates that implementation offers both short and long term benefit, is non-injurious in any way, and is more valuable as educational material than what is displaced from the curriculum.

As E.F. Schumacher wrote in *Small is Beautiful*, "If Western civilization is in a state of permanent crisis, it is not far-fetched to suggest that there may be something wrong with its education....More education can help us only if it produces more wisdom."²

It has been a glaring omission in education, over a period of generations, that most people alive today feel less loyalty to the Earth than they do to their local union, club or home town sports team.

A strong component of Earth education is essential in our educational systems as an anchor to reality, to a sense of belonging, and to a sense of proportion. Inasmuch as every durable structure depends on a good foundation, we have been remiss in allowing modern industrial ambitions to convince our children that the Earth is only a resource cornucopia.

The early years of education should clearly establish the idea that the Earth must be respected and cherished. In intermediate years we need to develop an Earth-ecology curriculum which will provide students with an attitude that will be productive of respect and care of the Earth. No such life and Earth sustaining background exists today. Restoration of a ravaged planet will be an essential component of life in years to come, most likely the most pressing need that will exist. A major objective for the educational process is recognition that if the Earth is to provide for us, we must be sensitive and nurturing in our actions toward it. Even that is so obviously self-serving we should pay enthusiastic attention to development of a new idealism and a real sense of the Earth as home, as the one constant factor in our lives which really deserves our loyalty.

To forge this new relationship we must have the courage, as William James suggested, to face the dark abysses of the times in which we live.³ We cannot afford to blithely ignore the catabolic effects of unremitting "development."

Let us consider the matter of biocentricity for a moment. Birthright is membership in life. We exist as a result of processes that originate with the Earth. Unfragmented by gender, race or class the Earth is the true mother and father

of us all. Earth forms the blood, the muscles, the bones, the neurological systems of all living beings. It supplies life with every breath taken, with every morsel or drop ingested. The continued health of the planet governs the health of all life. In contrast, the copious toxicity of our surrogate world offers what amounts to slow poisoning of all life forms. The noticeable stresses experienced by our young people are tip-of-the-iceberg manifestations of serious, deep-seated consequences of the way we live, a direct result of the things we value.

We have, to our imminent peril, disassociated ourselves as much as possible from the realization that we are *only a part* of a natural, living world. As might be expected, the old sin of Pride - once assigned first place among the seven deadly sins - is very active among us, along with greed, another of the seven. Daniel Defoe defined pride as "the first peer and president of hell," and it is to be hoped he was not purely prophetic.⁴

Our pride focuses on our technological achievements. These may be impressive, but lack nature's precaution that for each organic compound produced by a living thing, there is an enzyme that will break it down.⁵ As a result, our technology produces prodigious quantities of waste which are an ever increasing menace to living organisms. When the four-and-a-half to five billion year existence of our planet is compared to the length of a day, our species arrived on the scene 35 seconds before midnight, and our several hundred year old Industrial Revolution began about five milliseconds before the clock struck twelve. It is not surprising therefore that much of our technological effort still belongs in the laboratory.

It is interesting, in a discouraging way, to read advertising which claims that we have (precipitously) become masters of high technology. This may be a sop to our vanity, but it is rashness to shout "High technology!" to the winds. In our vanity we have adopted a position suspiciously reminiscent of Aesop's fly, perched on the axletree of a chariot rolling down a dusty road, preening its ego with the thought, "My, what a dust I am raising!"

This is not to say that modest pride in technology is unjustifiable. But such pride should not blind us to an obvious truth, that the Earth in endless manifestations is the highest technology we are likely to know. If we object to looking at it as "applied science" (a definition of technology), because we dislike the thought of an "applicator" with competence higher than our own, we should realize that many of our great scientists had no such problem. As a single example among many, the noted astronomer, Sir James Hopwood Jeans, did not find his scientific composure troubled by his conclusion that the universe appears very much like a great idea.⁶

We are incapable of creating a surrogate world so good that we no longer need to worry about the laws that govern the universe. In fact we have been breaking little laws for so long that now the big laws are catching up with us. The lethal threats of continued destruction of the ozone layer constitutes a single example.

Dangerous smugness is involved in our response to such a serious ecological problem by placing it secondary to economics.

Itinerant schoolmaster, printer, and journalist Walt Whitman was perceptive enough to reflect upon life and see the wonder of the world in a sense which too much sophistication encourages us to ignore. These fragments of his may be familiar to you: "I believe a blade of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars, ... And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven, And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery, And the cow crunching with depress'd head surpasses any statue, And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."⁷

Saving ourselves and saving our young people are one and the same thing. We just, literally, have to get back to Earth. Well known Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould suggested a wise course of action in one of his columns in *Natural History Magazine*. He wrote that it would be *enlightened self interest* on our part to adopt the Golden Rule as the basis of our relationship toward the planet. He also contended that, "We had better sign the papers while she is still willing to make a deal." Having already pointed out that 99 percent of all species that have lived on Earth are extinct, he warns that if we continue our assault on Earth, "She will bleed, kick us out, bandage up, and go about her business at her planetary scale."⁸

Strong words indeed, but there are numbers of other scientists who hold the same prospect before our view.

Over the years I have collected more than ten dozen definitions of education, or statements of what it should be. One of these I like particularly. It names Nature as the foundation for education. What could be more sensible?

The following is from an address given by Thomas Henry Huxley in 1868:

...Education is the instruction of the intellect in the laws of Nature, under which name I include not merely things and their forces but men and their ways; and the fashioning of the affections and of the will into an earnest and loving desire to move in harmony with those laws.⁹

He added that anything that calls itself education must be tried by this standard, and if it fails to stand the test, it is simply not education.

The loudest voices in society today are those that call for wringing the last vestiges from the resource cornucopia. About these resources, their comment is typical of one made recently by a forest industry representative: "We want it all and we want it now."¹⁰

The late Dr. Hans Selye, Nobel laureate from McGill University, and a pioneer

in the relationship between stress and disease, referred to his book, *The Stress of Life*, in this manner: "In fact, one of the principal inducements to write this book was the wish to share with others the serene and elevating satisfaction which comes from understanding the inherent, harmonious beauty of nature." Elsewhere he spoke with favor of something badly needed to counteract the tensions of modern life. This is the *vis medicatrix naturae*, "a healing force which comes from within." He further cautioned that those most devoted to acquisition are engaged so busily in re-inventing they never learn how to cash in. These "realistic people" in their pursuit of "practical aims" are really less practical in the long run, he contended, than dreamers who devote their lives to their ideals.¹¹

Today's crisis in education is only a symptom of the greater crises that abound in society. It is pertinent to remind ourselves that the Chinese ideogram for the word "crisis" combines the symbols for "danger" and "opportunity." In our educational crisis there is danger if we do not act at all, but there is opportunity if we move correctly.

Two decades of study and work in the educational system have convinced me that a curriculum based on Earth itself could offer the finest of ideas and insights for the maturation of students. History, geography, literature, science, philosophy, economics - as a matter of fact, any discipline you would name - are enriched by the unifying concept of ecology, a taproot for Earth based education.

The changes in ourselves would be nothing less than the vaguely talked about, but ill defined renewal of civilization. As Albert Schweitzer wrote, "When in the spring the withered grey of the pastures gives place to green, this is due to the millions of young shoots which sprout up freshly from the old roots."¹² So too will the renewal of education be enacted through realization that education by its very nature is based upon ideals, and idealism is necessary to enable us to face the challenges of our times.

If as some suggest, we stand at an axial point, with civilization or extinction the two alternatives, we need travel by this "road not taken," the one that has thus far been less travelled by. And along the road there is an ethical system of economics that would be truly sustainable. This could hardly be better put than in the words of George Perkins Marsh, geographer, linguist, ambassador - the author of a much reprinted book, *Man and Nature or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (1864). From his observations, studies and reflections about the Earth and humans he concluded: "The Earth was given to him (man) for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste."¹³

In this age of ostentatiously profligate waste, it is pertinent to know that Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary says: "Usufruct - in law, the right of enjoying a thing which belongs to another and of deriving from it all the profit or benefit it may produce, *provided it be without altering or damaging*

the substance of the thing." (emphasis added).

A strong component of Earth education needs to appear today because it is a glaring omission. It can serve as an anchor to reality, as exploration of the true reality of their origins to students. It is also likely that it will be more useful to their future needs than concentration on current innovations. All students need to learn in early grades is that the Earth deserves to be cherished and respected. Within education there must be developed an Earth ecology stream of interested students whose education will lead them toward a greater ability for stewardship than exists today. Restoration of a ravaged planet will be an essential component of future life, most likely the most enterprising that future society must face. We must begin to emphasize that the major purpose of education is to teach us to care for the Earth so that it will be better able to care for all. From this will emerge a real sense of the planet as home, a new idealism deeply rooted in the Earth.

Notes

- 1 Havelock Ellis, "Little Essays of Love and Virtue".
- 2 E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*. New York, Harper & Row, 1975, p. 80.
- 3 Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., *Great Books of the Western World*. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1978), Vol. 2., pp. 253-254.
- 4 Tyron Edwards, compiler, *The New Dictionary of Thoughts*. New York: Standard Book Company, 1959, p. 516.
- 5 Barry Commoner, *Making Peace with the Planet*. New York: The New Press, 1975, pp. 11-12.
- 6 Ken Wilber, *Quantum Questions*. Boston: Shambala, 1985, p. 128.
- 7 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 49.
- 8 S.J. Gould, "This View of Life, The Golden Rule - A Proper Scale for our Environmental Crisis", *Natural History*, Sept., 1990, pp. 24-30.
- 9 Thomas Henry Huxley, "A Liberal Education", Speech at London Working Men's College in 1868, Published variously: e.g. Inglis, R.B., Stauffer, D.A., Larsen, C.E., *Adventures in English Literature*, (Canada: W.J. Gage & Co. Ltd., 1952), pp. 464-467.
- 10 Grace Herson, *Cut and Run*, (Telluride, Co: Western Eye Press, 1991), p. 139.

11 Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1956), pp. 11, 273-302.

12 Albert Schweitzer, *The Decay and Restoration of Civilization*, (London: Unwin, 1923), p. 88.

13 G.P. Marsh, *Man and Nature*, Ed. David Lowenthal, Orig. published 1864, Reprinted in 1967, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap Press), p. 36.

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