

Chapter 18 – Schooling: The Hidden Agenda

Table of Contents

Previous – Section Four – Chapter 17 – “The Trouble with Traditional Schooling” by Vahram G. Diehl

18

Schooling: The Hidden Agenda

by Daniel Quinn

A Talk Given at the Houston Unschoolers Group Family Learning Conference.

I suspect that not everyone in this audience knows who I am or why I’ve been invited to speak to you today. After all, I’ve never written a book or even an article about homeschooling or unschooling. I’ve been called a number of things: a futurist, a planetary philosopher, an anthropologist from Mars. Recently I was introduced to an audience as a cultural critic, and I think this probably says it best. As you’ll see, in my talk to you today, I will be trying to place schooling and unschooling in the larger context of our cultural history and that of our species as well.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with my work, I should begin by explaining what I mean by “our culture”. Rather than burden you with a definition, I’ll give you a simple test that you can use wherever you go in the world. If the food in that part of the world is under lock and key, and the people who live there have to work to get it, then you’re among people of our culture. If you happen to be in a jungle in the interior of Brazil or New Guinea, however, you’ll find that the food is not under lock and key. It’s simply out there for the taking, and anyone who wants some can just go and get it. The people who live in these areas, often called aboriginals, stone-age peoples, or tribal peoples clearly belong to a culture radically different from our own.

I first began to focus my attention on the peculiarities of our own culture in the early 1960s, when I went to work for what was then a cutting-edge publisher of educational materials, Science Research Associates. I was in my mid-twenties and as thoroughly acculturated as any senator, bus driver, movie star, or medical doctor. My fundamental acceptances about the universe and humanity’s place in it were rock-solid and thoroughly conventional.

But it was a stressful time to be alive, in some ways even more stressful than the present. Many people nowadays realize that human life may well be in jeopardy, but this jeopardy exists in some vaguely defined future, twenty or fifty or a hundred years hence. But in those coldest days of the Cold War everyone lived with the realization that a nuclear holocaust could occur literally at any second, without warning. It was very realistically the

touch of a button away.

Human life would not be entirely snuffed out in a holocaust of this kind. In a way, it would be even worse than that. In a matter of hours, we would be thrown back not just to the Stone Age but to a level of almost total helplessness. In the Stone Age, after all, people lived perfectly well without supermarkets, shopping malls, hardware stores, and all the elaborate systems that keep these places stocked with the things we need. Within hours our cities would disintegrate into chaos and anarchy, and the necessities of life would vanish from store shelves, never to be replaced. Within days famine would be widespread.

Skills that are taken for granted among Stone Age peoples would be unknown to the survivors – the ability to differentiate between edible and inedible foods growing in their own environment, the ability to stalk, kill, dress, and preserve game animals, and most important the ability to make tools from available materials. How many of you know how to cure a hide? How to make a rope from scratch? How to flake a stone tool? Much less how to smelt metal from raw ore. Commonplace skills of the Paleolithic, developed over thousands of years, would be lost arts.

All this was freely acknowledged by people who didn't doubt for a moment that we were living the way humans were meant to live from the beginning of time, who didn't doubt for a moment that the things our children were learning in school were exactly the things they should be learning.

I'd been hired at SRA to work on a major new mathematics program that had been under development for several years in Cleveland. In my first year, we were going to publish the kindergarten and first-grade programs. In the second year, we'd publish the second-grade program, in the third year, the third-grade program, and so on. Working on the kindergarten and first-grade programs, I observed something that I thought was truly remarkable. In these grades, children spend most of their time learning things that no one growing up in our culture could possibly avoid learning. For example, they learn the names of the primary colors. Wow, just imagine missing school on the day when they were learning blue. You'd spend the rest of your life wondering what color the sky is. They learn to tell time, to count, and to add and subtract, as if anyone could possibly fail to learn these things in this culture. And of course they make the beginnings of learning how to read. I'll go out on a limb here and suggest an experiment. Two classes of 30 kids, taught identically and given the identical text materials throughout their school experience, but one class is given no instruction in reading at all and the other is given the usual instruction. Call it the Quinn Conjecture: both classes will test the same on reading skills at the end of twelve years. I feel safe in making this conjecture because ultimately kids learn to read the same way they learn to speak, by hanging around people who read and by wanting to be able to do what these people do.

It occurred to me at this time to ask this question: Instead of spending two or three years teaching children things they will inevitably learn anyway, why not teach them some things they will not inevitably learn and that they would actually enjoy learning at this age? How to navigate by the stars, for example. How to tan a hide. How to distinguish edible foods from inedible foods. How to build a shelter from scratch. How to make tools from scratch. How to make a canoe. How to track animals – all the forgotten but still valuable skills that our civilization is actually built on.

Of course I didn't have to vocalize this idea to anyone to know how it would be received. Being thoroughly acculturated, I could myself explain why it was totally inane. The way we live is the way humans were meant to live from the beginning of time, and our children were being prepared to enter that life. Those who came before us were savages, little more than brutes. Those who continue to live the way our ancestors lived are savages, little more than brutes. The world is well rid of them, and we're well rid of every vestige of them, including their ludicrously primitive skills.

Our children were being prepared in school to step boldly into the only fully human life that had ever existed on this planet. The skills they were acquiring in school would bring them not only success but deep personal fulfillment on every level. What did it matter if they never did more than work in some mind-numbing factory job? They could parse a sentence! They could explain to you the difference between a Petrarchan sonnet and a Shakespearean sonnet! They could extract a square root! They could show you why the square of the two sides of a right triangle were equal to the square of the hypotenuse! They could analyze a poem! They could explain to you how a bill passes congress! They could very possibly trace for you the economic causes of the Civil War. They had read Melville and Shakespeare, so why would they not now read Dostoevsky and Racine, Joyce and Beckett, Faulkner and O'Neill? But above all else, of course, the citizen's education – grades K to twelve – prepared children to be fully-functioning participants in this great civilization of ours. The day after their graduation exercises, they were ready to stride confidently toward any goal they might set themselves.

Of course, then, as now, everyone knew that the citizen's education was doing no such thing. It was perceived then – as now – that there was something strangely wrong with the schools. They were failing – and failing miserably – at delivering on these enticing promises. Ah well, teachers weren't being paid enough, so what could you expect? We raised teachers' salaries – again and again and again – and still the schools failed. Well, what could you expect? The schools were physically decrepit, lightless, and uninspiring. We built new ones – tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of them – and still the schools failed. Well, what could you expect? The curriculum was antiquated and irrelevant. We modernized the curriculum, did our damndest to make it relevant – and still the schools failed. Every week – then as now – you could read about some bright new idea that would

surely “fix” whatever was wrong with our schools: the open classroom, team teaching, back to basics, more homework, less homework, no homework – I couldn’t begin to enumerate them all. Hundreds of these bright ideas were implemented – thousands of them were implemented – and still the schools failed.

Within our cultural matrix, every medium tells us that the schools exist to prepare children for a successful and fulfilling life in our civilization (and are therefore failing). This is beyond argument, beyond doubt, beyond question. In *Ishmael* I said that the voice of Mother Culture speaks to us from every newspaper and magazine article, every movie, every sermon, every book, every parent, every teacher, every school administrator, and what she has to say about the schools is that they exist to prepare children for a successful and fulfilling life in our civilization (and are therefore failing). Once we step outside our cultural matrix, this voice no longer fills our ears and we’re free to ask some new questions. Suppose the schools aren’t failing? Suppose they’re doing exactly what we really want them to do – but don’t wish to examine and acknowledge?

Granted that the schools do a poor job of preparing children for a successful and fulfilling life in our civilization, but what things do they do excellently well? Well, to begin with, they do a superb job of keeping young people out of the job market. Instead of becoming wage-earners at age twelve or fourteen, they remain consumers only – and they consume billions of dollars worth of merchandise, using money that their parents earn. Just imagine what would happen to our economy if overnight the high schools closed their doors. Instead of having fifty million active consumers out there, we would suddenly have fifty million unemployed youth. It would be nothing short of an economic catastrophe.

Of course the situation was very different two hundred years ago, when we were still a primarily agrarian society. Youngsters were expected and needed to become workers at age ten, eleven, and twelve. For the masses, a fourth, fifth, or sixth-grade education was deemed perfectly adequate. But as the character of our society changed, fewer youngsters were needed for farm work, and the enactment of child-labor laws soon made it impossible to put ten-, eleven-, and twelve-year-olds to work in factories. It was necessary to keep them off the streets – and where better than in schools? Naturally, new material had to be inserted into the curriculum to fill up the time. It didn’t much matter what it was. Have them memorize the capitals of every state. Have them memorize the principle products of every state. Have them learn the steps a bill takes in passing Congress. No one wondered or cared if these were things kids wanted to know or needed to know – or would ever need to know. No one wondered or ever troubled to find out if the material being added to the curriculum was retained. The educators didn’t want to know, and, really, what difference would it make? It didn’t matter that, once learned, they were immediately forgotten. It filled up some time. The law decreed that an eighth-grade education was essential for every citizen, and so curriculum writers provided material needed for an eighth-grade

education.

During the Great Depression it became urgently important to keep young people off the job market for as long as possible, and so it came to be understood that a twelfth-grade education was essential for every citizen. As before, it didn't much matter what was added to fill up the time, so long as it was marginally plausible. Let's have them learn how to analyze a poem, even if they never read another one in their whole adult life. Let's have them read a great classic novel, even if they never read another one in their whole adult life. Let's have them study world history, even if it all just goes in one ear and out the other. Let's have them study Euclidean geometry, even if two years later they couldn't prove a single theorem to save their lives. All these things and many, many more were of course justified on the basis that they would contribute to the success and rich fulfillment that these children would experience as adults. Except, of course, that it didn't. But no one wanted to know about that. No one would have dreamed of testing young people five years after graduation to find out how much of it they'd retained. No one would have dreamed of asking them how useful it had been to them in realistic terms or how much it had contributed to their success and fulfillment as humans. What would be the point of asking them to evaluate their education? What did they know about it, after all? They were just high school graduates, not professional educators.

At the end of the Second World War, no one knew what the economic future was going to be like. With the disappearance of the war industries, would the country fall back into the pre-war depression slump? The word began to go out that the citizen's education should really include four years of college. Everyone should go to college. As the economy continued to grow, however, this injunction began to be softened. Four years of college would sure be good for you, but it wasn't part of the citizen's education, which ultimately remained a twelfth-grade education.

It was in the good years following the war, when there were often more jobs than workers to fill them, that our schools began to be perceived as failing. With ready workers in demand, it was apparent that kids were coming out of school without knowing much more than the sixth-grade graduates of a century ago. They'd "gone through" all the material that had been added to fill up the time - analyzed poetry, diagramed sentences, proved theorems, solved for x , plowed through thousands of pages of history and literature, written bushels of themes, but for the most part they retained almost none of it - and of how much use would it be to them if they had? From a business point of view, these high-school graduates were barely employable.

But of course by then the curriculum had achieved the status of scripture, and it was too late to acknowledge that the program had never been designed to be useful. The educators' response to the business community was, "We just have to give the kids more of the same - more poems to analyze, more sentences to diagram, more theorems to

prove, more equations to solve, more pages of history and literature to read, more themes to write, and so on.” No one was about to acknowledge that the program had been set up to keep young people off the job market – and that it had done a damn fine job of that at least.

But keeping young people off the job market is only half of what the schools do superbly well. By the age of thirteen or fourteen, children in aboriginal societies – tribal societies – have completed what we, from our point of view, would call their “education”. They’re ready to “graduate” and become adults. In these societies, what this means is that their survival value is 100%. All their elders could disappear overnight, and there would not be chaos, anarchy, and famine among these new adults. They would be able to carry on without a hitch. None of the skills and technologies practiced by their parents would be lost. If they wanted to, they could live quite independently of the tribal structure in which they were reared.

But the last thing we want our children to be able to do is to live independently of our society. We don’t want our graduates to have a survival value of 100%, because this would make them free to opt out of our carefully constructed economic system and do whatever they please. We don’t want them to do whatever they please, we want them to have exactly two choices (assuming they’re not independently wealthy). Get a job or go to college. Either choice is good for us, because we need a constant supply of entry-level workers and we also need doctors, lawyers, physicists, mathematicians, psychologists, geologists, biologists, school teachers, and so on. The citizen’s education accomplishes this almost without fail. Ninety-nine point nine percent of our high school graduates make one of these two choices.

And it should be noted that our high-school graduates are reliably entry-level workers. We want them to have to grab the lowest rung on the ladder. What sense would it make to give them skills that would make it possible for them to grab the second rung or the third rung? Those are the rungs their older brothers and sisters are reaching for. And if this year’s graduates were reaching for the second or third rungs, who would be doing the work at the bottom? The business people who do the hiring constantly complain that graduates know absolutely nothing, have virtually no useful skills at all. But in truth how could it be otherwise?

So you see that our schools are not failing, they’re just succeeding in ways we prefer not to see. Turning out graduates with no skills, with no survival value, and with no choice but to work or starve are not flaws of the system, they are features of the system. These are the things the system must do to keep things going on as they are.

The need for schooling is bolstered by two well-entrenched pieces of cultural mythology. The first and most pernicious of these is that children will not learn unless they’re

compelled to – in school. It is part of the mythology of childhood itself that children hate learning and will avoid it at all costs. Of course, anyone who has had a child knows what an absurd lie this is. From infancy onward, children are the most fantastic learners in the world. If they grow up in a family in which four languages are spoken, they will be speaking four languages by the time they're three or four years old – without a day of schooling, just by hanging around the members of their family, because they desperately want to be able to do the things they do. Anyone who has had a child knows that they are tirelessly curious. As soon as they're able to ask questions, they ask questions incessantly, often driving their parents to distraction. Their curiosity extends to everything they can reach, which is why every parent soon learns to put anything breakable, anything dangerous, anything untouchable up high – and if possible behind lock and key. We all know the truth of the joke about those childproof bottle caps: those are the kind that only children can open.

People who imagine that children are resistant to learning have a non-existent understanding of how human culture developed in the first place. Culture is no more and no less than the totality of learned behavior and information that is passed from one generation to the next. The desire to eat is not transmitted by culture, but knowledge about how edible foods are found, collected, and processed is transmitted by culture. Before the invention of writing, whatever was not passed on from one generation to the next was simply lost, no matter what it was – a technique, a song, a detail of history. Among aboriginal peoples – those we haven't destroyed – the transmission between generations is remarkably complete, but of course not 100% complete. There will always be trivial details of personal history that the older generation takes to its grave. But the vital material is never lost.

This comes about because the desire to learn is hardwired into the human child just the way that the desire to reproduce is hardwired into the human adult. It's genetic. If there was ever a strain of humans whose children were not driven to learn, they're long gone, because they could not be culture-bearers.

Children don't have to be motivated to learn everything they can about the world they inhabit, they're absolutely driven to learn it. By the onset of puberty, children in aboriginal societies have unfailingly learned everything they need to function as adults.

Think of it this way. In the most general terms, the human biological clock is set for two alarms. When the first alarm goes off, at birth, the clock chimes learn, learn, learn, learn, learn. When the second alarm goes off, at the onset of puberty, the clock chimes mate, mate, mate, mate, mate. The chime that goes learn, learn, learn never disappears entirely, but it becomes relatively faint at the onset of puberty. At that point, children cease to want to follow their parents around in the learning dance. Instead, they want to follow each other around in the mating dance.

We, of course, in our greater wisdom have decreed that the biological clock regulated by

our genes must be ignored.

What sells most people on the idea of school is the fact that the unschooled child learns what it wants to learn when it wants to learn it. This is intolerable to them, because they're convinced that children don't want to learn anything at all – and they point to school children to prove it. What they fail to recognize is that the learning curve of preschool children swoops upward like a mountain – but quickly levels off when they enter school. By the third or fourth grade it's completely flat for most kids. Learning, such as it is, has become a boring, painful experience they'd love to be able to avoid if they could. But there's another reason why people abhor the idea of children learning what they want to learn when they want to learn it. They won't all learn the same things! Some of them will never learn to analyze a poem! Some of them will never learn to parse a sentence or write a theme! Some of them will never read Julius Caesar! Some will never learn geometry! Some will never dissect a frog! Some will never learn how a bill passes Congress! Well, of course, this is too horrible to imagine. It doesn't matter that 90% of these students will never read another poem or another play by Shakespeare in their lives. It doesn't matter that 90% of them will never have occasion to parse another sentence or write another theme in their lives. It doesn't matter that 90% retain no functional knowledge of the geometry or algebra they studied. It doesn't matter that 90% never have any use for whatever knowledge they were supposed to gain from dissecting a frog. It doesn't matter that 90% graduate without having the vaguest idea how a bill passes Congress. All that matters is that they've gone through it!

The people who are horrified by the idea of children learning what they want to learn when they want to learn it have not accepted the very elementary psychological fact that people (all people, of every age) remember the things that are important to them – the things they need to know – and forget the rest. I am a living witness to this fact. I went to one of the best prep schools in the country and graduated fourth in my class, and I doubt very much if I could now get a passing grade in more than two or three of the dozens of courses I took. I studied classical Greek for two solid years, and now would be unable to read aloud a single sentence.

One final argument people advance to support the idea that children need all the schooling we give them is that there is vastly more material to be learned today than there was in prehistoric times or even a century ago. Well, there is of course vastly more material that can be learned, but we all know perfectly well that it isn't being taught in grades K to twelve. Whole vast new fields of knowledge exist today – things no one even heard of a century ago: astrophysics, biochemistry, paleobiology, aeronautics, particle physics, ethology, cytopathology, neurophysiology – I could list them for hours. But are these the things that we have jammed into the K-12 curriculum because everyone needs to know them? Certainly not. The idea is absurd. The idea that children need to be schooled for a

long time because there is so much that can be learned is absurd. If the citizen's education were to be extended to include everything that can be learned, it wouldn't run to grade twelve, it would run to grade twelve thousand, and no one would be able to graduate in a single lifetime.

I know of course that there is no one in this audience who needs to be sold on the virtues of homeschooling or unschooling. I hope, however, that I may have been able to add some philosophical, historical, anthropological, and biological foundation for your conviction that school ain't all it's cracked up to be.

—

Copyright © 2000 Daniel Quinn. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission. "Daniel Quinn is an American writer best known for his novel *Ishmael* (published in 1992)." Visit www.ishmael.org.

Next - Section Four - Chapter 19 - "The Right to Control One's Learning" by John Holt