

11 AM - On schooling children

“Career Day convinced me more than ever, as a newspaper cartoonist, that education is screwy.”

“How did it go in the classroom this morning?”

“The kids were wandering down the aisles with sheets of paper, each listing some seven or eight questions, all the same. That was their assignment. Get answers to the questions. The assignment took no thought.”

“How did you feel about that?”

“You could sense their indifference. I was afraid. Actually, it was a two-way street. They were indifferent and afraid. I was afraid and indifferent. I wanted to shout one question to them all: ‘Why are you here?’ And, if they didn’t want to be where they were—and that’s okay, they have to be there—‘What can you take away from this?’

“I want to go into their classrooms and tell them, ‘My curse is that I think . . . It is also my blessing. As long as I have to think, I’m going to do it the best at it that I can.’”

“And what about them?”

“I want to tell them, ‘Get down and start doing your push-ups! If you don’t, in the end, you’re the one who’s going to be the 90-pound weakling. It doesn’t matter much if you get ‘D’s in math or history; just don’t get a ‘D’ in self-motivation. Self-motivation is everything . . . and the only thing you need to take away from school.’”

“Are schooled people educated? By third grade, many schools have failed to live up to their potential. Of school in *Hard Times*, Dickens despaired, ‘It is known, to the force of a single pound weight, what the engine will do; but, not all the calculators of the National Debt can tell me the capacity for good or evil, for love

or hatred, for patriotism or discontent, for the decomposition of virtue into vice, or the reverse, at any single moment in the soul of one of these its quiet servants, with the composed faces and the regulated actions.”

“How can you tell they have failed to live up to their potential?”

“Even simple things show it. They can’t write. They tire too quickly. They hold pencils in a death grip. Decades ago, teachers would range the room pulling pencils out of hands as we wrote. Woe to those that gripped the pencil too tight.”

“That’s an anecdote, not a compelling explanation.”

“It’s indicative of what has been lost. We teach cobwebs of nothing worth paying attention to. Educationists fritter away class time teaching thin threads that gum the mind with accumulated clutter strong as steel.

“Why don’t schools get better?”

“The professionals would assure you that they do, citing statistics, all vetted by credentialed academics. It’s a charade . . . as if educators don’t know what else to do and are scared you’ll find out. Students are busy in school with enough to do to fill the time, but they have little to show for it. Underneath the educational hokey so many classes are empty so that students never learn to detect empty news when they see it.

“It’s knowledge. It’s testable. It’s standardized. But it’s childification no different than increasing the drinking age higher than almost any other country in the world so that students don’t learn moderation. We imprison children in schools so that teachers—who suffered through the same schools themselves—can test current students on their success at testing them for success. When students fail, they are punished with stricter rules for not living up to constantly changing standards while their schools are rewarded with extra money for having failed.

“Some teachers escape to become administrators or guidance counselors, to fetter other good teachers and overlook failures of

the poor ones. Together they produce adults proud of their ignorance and ability to bully, while too few seem to care.”

“The more time I spend in the classroom the more I wonder, as the years pass, whether we are getting less and less of a person to work with. Is our clientele really changing?”

“Are the teachers who prepare them changing? Is it that their parents do not value education? Is it that government creates people who don’t have to care?”

“Our children have education handed to them but they don’t feel the need because the system cares for them even if they don’t care. We build in disincentives—our welfare system is lax, without checks. It’s easier to game the system to get Medicaid and welfare benefits.”

“It’s odd because somewhere elitism leaks into the process to close unwary minds. Education majors in college are taught some superior tools and methods to use to educate students, but then they are also taught to follow standards designed and implemented by state bureaucrats. Educators have run the gauntlet to become credentialed. Credentialed teachers are the chosen few to decide what must be taught, Credentialed teachers are officially right, even though the process of re-righting the educational ship has been repeated dozens of times with little evidence to support success. This time offers no special reason to get it right. Nor are unions at the core of today’s educational flaws. While a union does hold afloat the unsuccessful to preserve uniformity, insinuating itself into the process as if educational matters were job conditions, some states that are anti-union have some of the least effective schools in the country.”

“What is the problem?”

“Ayn Rand called progressive educationists *comprachicos*—child-buyers: mythical allusions to those who, for their nefarious ends, would manipulate the minds of children. Educationists commandeered John Dewey’s model of learning, developed in the first half of the 20th century. His ‘learn by doing’ promoted real world experiences, not just reading and drill. Somewhere,

Dewey’s nurturing of the process of thinking was distilled out of the exercise. Education became very ‘now,’ encumbered by a full set of blinders. What worked in classical education became *passé* because it ostensibly favored those of higher socioeconomic class. They promoted group work and cooperative learning rather than nudge students to think for themselves. They educated for social responsibility and democracy even if strong individual thinking is how one can deduce what society is, what responsibility one has to it, and what in democracy to value.”

“Written out of revulsion of the carnage wrought by World War I, Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain* said that we produce people conditioned to behave, not think. Leopold Bloom in Joyce’s *Ulysses* was a passive observer. Stephen Dedalus was introverted and cerebral, thinking, thinking, and thinking, but not of useful things. He was spent internally, confronting a hostile universe, admitting, ‘History is a nightmare I’m trying to forget.’ Philosopher Michel Foucault believed schools create people who are docile and capable. They are equipped to produce goods without complaint.”

“The apple falls near the tree. Many essays that come out of a high school classroom show the need for remediation for student’s style and substance. More clearly they show their parents needed to be remediated years earlier when they were in school.”

“Those parents would have attended school in the 1970s and 1980s. What was missing then? Is it still missing? What didn’t they learn to understand? Those parents would have been taught by the boomer generation teachers, flower power kids who escaped the Vietnam War by becoming teachers—confident of themselves while cynical of others.

“I’m embarrassed for them. They had the power to expose Post-modernism for its style-without-substance except that that would have required them to look in a mirror.”

“One of the students has a glimmer. ‘If I look at myself in the future I will realize how stupid some of the stuff I have done is and I’ll want to go back in time and punch myself in the face.’”

“If journalism has not lived up to its potential, why is that fact not being trumpeted from the highest parapets? People aren’t busily changing channels, turning pages, or buying different newspapers. Why are people not laughing at what they see?”

“Journalism at the national level is also myopic. I fired off an email to public radio in Canada: ‘When you didn’t laugh derisively at the *Rolling Stone* writer who claimed the presidential candidates ‘had been fully vetted’ by the press, I realized *As It Happens* had stumbled undetected from news into entertainment. To tell the difference, first remember that news should improve your map of reality, not tell you what to do.’

“They have lost the means to recognize what news is and rediscover what to do. It’s systemic and goes beyond journalism to their education. They can’t see anything they haven’t been prepared to see. Bureaucrats and journalists can be forgiven for not getting it right. After all, more important than doing their jobs, they were busy ‘making a living.’ Someone needs to tell these people to pay attention.”

“Pay attention to what?”

“Bingo! Since people should recognize the problem, it suggests the underlying problem is something else. If people ought to see differently and don’t, it is as if the basic understanding upon which society depends needs recalibration.”

“What school subject lesson would that fall under?”

“If students see no reason to go to school, that should tell you something. For the most part, outside the mechanics of working numbers and simple reading skills, one cannot put what is learned in school to work for oneself. Classes of empty content are a lousy substitute for developing character and developing character is a lousy substitute for education. School should help develop reliability of judgment, but Aristotle 2500 years ago had a more developed sense of the power of the mind than we do.”

“Are we getting less to deal with?”

“It’s more complex than that. Education is handed to students but they don’t care to work at it because the welfare and health

care systems create people who don’t have to care and they have little specific to work for.”

“They can go lemmingly toward false security or get to work.”

“Consider a new word, ‘half-think.’ That’s thinking something through just far enough to avoid think any further. Look at Robin Williams, Jon Stewart, and Jay Leno. These are brilliant comedians in their own way. How can they not care about their misrepresentations?”

“Hey, they make money off it.”

“But at what cost? They are either oblivious to the consequences or care less. Which half-think is theirs—the one that doesn’t know or the one that doesn’t care?”

“The opportunity of the century for humor is to poke fun at brittle shallowness. They share the same responsibility as art. They can puncture unconscious complacency. They can ridicule the inadequacy of education that has brought us to this place.”

“Leno shouldn’t be forced to be neo-politically correct, but he ought to be able to be laughed at for what he says, too. Rather than ‘Enlightenment’ we are in the midst of an era of ‘Endarkenment.’ No one ever admits to living in the midst of Middle Ages.”

“Hey. Here come the kids. See you after the newspaper tour.”

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“Eyes! I want to see all your eyes! . . .

“Thank you for coming to tour our newspaper. Settle down on the floor, please.

“You are all 10 to 12 years old. Some 150 years ago, when my great-great-grandfather was your age, he started work at this newspaper. Back then, they made up the newspaper one letter at a time, one story at a time, one page at a time. His first job was to recycle each letter used in that day’s newspaper, after the issue

had been printed, so they could use it again. The letters, called type, were sorted one-by-one, into a California case. Type was expensive. Each letter was hard to replace. Setting news that way was expensive. Each word, each sentence, was valuable. But it was worthwhile because people were hungry to learn. Has anyone told you why you should be hungry to learn?

“Okay, look at it this way. Who has seen people lift weights? Whoa! That’s a lot of hands! Why do people lift weights?”

“Get stronger!”

“That’s right. To build muscles. Tell me, then, what is weight lifting for the brain?”

“ . . . ?”

“Don’t know? Reading. Writing. Talking with people. We call that conversation.”

“Ooooh!”

“Now, why do you want to have a strong brain?”

“ . . . ?”

“You want a strong brain, because that is the only tool you’ve got to plan your best future.

“If, before now, no one explained to you why you attend school, now you know. Someone could have told you this, just by reading a book. Hundreds of years ago, Sir Francis Bacon wrote, ‘Reading maketh a full man; writing a ready man; conference an exact man.’ He wrote that in a book, and books have useful things to say if you listen to them.

“Now, please follow me through the advertising department to what used to be our composing room. . . . Watch your step!

“How can you tell news from information or opinion? . . . It’s important. If you learn, you’ll know something many grown-ups don’t know. See that big black cloth dot on the floor? Some of you walked across it on the way in.

“Okay, look at this poster: News, Information, and Opinion.

- News: The black cloth dot may cover a hole in the floor.

“News tells you something you need to know to plan your best future. You need to know that there might be a hole underneath that black dot. It’s important. News helps you learn useful things about your world, but not every fact is news.”

- Information: Many people like ice cream.

“That information is also true, but often not what you need to know. While true and entertaining, information is not always news.”

- Opinion: I like ice cream!

“Opinion may or may not be true, entertaining, or important. Opinion is not news.

“ . . . Now, follow the guides as we walk around the plant. You are going to enjoy seeing the presses, but don’t touch anything. The pressroom is inky. Printer’s ink, I’m told, can jump at least a foot, and you don’t want a permanent reminder of your tour.”

. . .

“Thanks very much for taking our classes around.

“You are welcome. You have a great responsibility teaching these children. Learning to read is a useful building block. Just a start. The idea that learning to read is somehow quite enough education is as absurd as suggesting that learning to press the accelerator to make the car go is quite enough learning for one who wants to drive.”

“No. Testing reading skills is not enough. I think you got to the students.”

“Thanks for saying that. What you do is so much more valuable. Not in subject teaching, specifically, but as a role model.”

“How so?”

“The small things. When you make a mistake in front of the class on the whiteboard and a student points out the error, some teachers would gloss over the problem. Good teachers make it a teachable moment. ‘Thank you. I’m really grateful that you pointed out my mistake.’ To be seen as not perfect and in need of the assistance of others shows they need to be humble and open to have their own mistakes pointed out.”

“By now, in the fifth grade, they should all be readers. By the fifth grade it’s almost too late to remediate one who is not. If you want to know the number of jail cells you’re going to need for adults, just count the males who can’t read by seventh grade.

“A frightening statistic.”

“In education and journalism there is a difference between telling you what to do or believe and pointing you toward the evidence to figure it out for yourself. Students need to learn not to let anyone wearing a white lab coat, sporting a clerical collar, or standing on a soap box assume more authority than the soundness of their ideas deserves. If you give in, it is the moral equivalent of baloney.”

“I wish older students understood what they are after. The idea that you don’t have to be good at what you do is naïve.”

“To become all of yourself, you must be aware of things greater than yourself. Threads of wisdom over time matter more than chronology, but chronology is what we teach. One year it’s state history, then American History. After that is ancient history up to Napoleon at Waterloo, followed up to the present day. Chronology offers students no pattern and no relevance to today. We teach what happened rather than how to think. To learn the date of birth of Paul Revere but not that he was a propagandist whose illustrations helped foment a revolution by misrepresenting what actually happened bypasses the useful lesson. Do the ends justify the means? If the goal is to better society, does undermining society along the way matter? And who put him in charge of tearing apart social fabric because, in hubris, he thinks he knows better? What matters the date of birth of Paul Revere when the lesson to be learned is how, even flawed, he affected society. But we don’t teach that because the good guys won.”

“So what should we do?”

“To live up to our humanity, build into education that society is the only means by which we can learn about flaws and how best to deal with them. What is so laughably silly is the angst and villainy of bureaucrats and administrators who misunderstand

the problem, and would regulate order rather than teach humanity. Show your work, dammit! If you get the answer ‘right’ but the process was flawed to get to there, you don’t have the answer.

“In the end, order isn’t the answer, and far more important is the humility that drives us to be social.”