The Freedom-Joy Syndrome

Peter H. Gibbon

Indignation can be a laudable emotion. It can provide the energy which prompts one to wish to correct deficiencies in a society. When evils are obvious and remedies possible it is appropriate. Indignation can also be dangerous. It can turn venial sins into mortal sins and encourage wild and impractical solutions. Indignation can be mere intemperance resulting from sentimentalism, naivete and an urge to feel superior. It can quickly banish modesty and a sense of complexity. It is the second form of indignation that pervades the book *High School.*[1]

High School is a collection of recent essays intended to be a "devastating critique of prevailing practices" in secondary schools. Some of the essays are written by students; others by such notables as Jonathan Kozol, Edgar Z. Friedenberg and Theodore Roszak. These people write for *New York Review of Books,* are canonized by the liberal intelligentsia, and quoted in the *Times.* They are asked to speak at teachers' meetings because they are novel, because a mere teacher doesn't speak on theoretical matters and because teachers prefer flagellation to the banalities of a headmaster or superintendent. The publicity and approval accorded these critics by the liberal press, the vehemence and sincerity of their attacks, and the fact that high schools like all institutions have problems seem to have placed them and their disciples beyond reproach. I am convinced, however, that there is a "silent majority" of teachers and parents who from daily experience intuitively sense these critics are wrong but have not articulated a defense. I would like to be their spokesman.

A common complaint of all these critics is what they refer to as authoritarianism. Authoritarianism generally means rules and adults deciding

1 Ronald Gross and Paul Osterman, eds. *High School.* New York, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1971.

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upon and enforcing those rules. Most rules are petty according to the radical critics. Examples of petty rules are lunch room rules, smoking rules, hall passes, telephone passes, and required study halls. Herbert Kohl is typical when he complains about the "obsession with power and discipline everywhere."[2] I would suggest that the radicals' disdain for rules arises from a rather casual disregard of the difficulties inherent in administering large institutions and excessive optimism about adolescents' ability to regulate themselves.

In large adult institutions such as hospitals, insurance offices, and government agencies, there are rules governing the conduct and movements of employees. They are necessary for some employees are unfair to others. However, looked at from the interests of the entire institution they were usually found to be understandable. I would say that an abundance of regulations, many of which appear petty, restrictive or arbitrary to a given individual, is a price we pay for working in a large complex organization. Simply to move 1,500 students from home to school to class to sports to lunch to activities, with a minimum of order, requires rules. To allow for dentist appointments, seeing the nurse, visitors to the school and college conferences—all require rules.

More importantly, a high school is an adolescent institution. Adolescence comes from the Latin *adolescere,* meaning to grow up. Adolescents are *in the process* of understanding themselves and their culture. In that process some periodically exhibit bad judgment, lack of consideration and a sense of responsibility; some are over-exuberant and mischievous; some are malicious and vandals. Toilets do become stuffed up, books mutilated, lunch rooms rendered uninhabitable, and telephones destroyed. Free time is not always used for self-improvement; disputes are not always settled by reason and quiet does not automatically descend on study halls. In *all* schools a number of adolescents are *inevitably* disruptive in degrees ranging from good-natured fun to malice. Inevitably there must be rules to give the school a veneer of orderliness. Inevitably there will be resentment, both from the orderly and the unruly.

Authoritarianism occurs in the classroom as well as in the corridors. So complain the critics. The administrators and teachers decide what courses will be taken, the content of those courses and "enforce" the knowledge through threats and rewards. This interferes with the "natural joy of learning."

> What is crucial, however, is to make sure that the schools serve the real needs of kids. From this principle it follows that the school should have a curriculum that grows out of student interest, that students should play a large role in running the school, that arbitrary regulations be abolished, that free and critical thinking be encouraged, that the pressures of grades, exams, getting into college, etc. be ended. In short, the school should unleash the spirits and impulses of the young, not damn them.[3]

2 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
3 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

Certainly the student should have some choice about his course of study. The modified elective program introduced in most schools, the easing of foreign language requirements are steps in this direction. However education of the young inevitably involves commitment to subjects that seem abstract and remote in the expectation that later on in the year or in life you will find use and meaning in that subject. There must perhaps be some forced exposure to different branches of learning, an initial deference to adult wisdom. Furthermore, it seems reasonable that an industrialized society should expect that a high school diploma indicates minimal competence in English and mathematics.

I admit to feeling some uncertainty as to what courses should be required in high school. I feel no doubt at all, however, about the radical critics tendency to romanticize "student interests" and the "natural joy of learning."

Students' interests range from the non-existent, to the short-lived and impractical, to the genuine. The skillful teacher learns to evaluate these different interests. He seriously consults his students, listens (for a while) to their complaints and pounces on any show of enthusiasm. He knows, however, that to cater completely to students' interests is to invite interminable bickering, unrealistic goals and uncertain performance.

I say that the skillful teacher pounces on any show of enthusiasm—implying that enthusiasm is not a constant in a classroom. The radical critics, of course, claim that this is the result of "uninspired teaching" and an "irrelevant curriculum." Never in all their writings do I find the slightest admission that education at times may involve some hard work, effort and discipline. They freely concede the tedium inherent in all jobs in "corporate" America. But when it comes to education there is a continual high, with joy and unmarred satisfaction. I find many students most joyous when watching *Kung-Fu*. It is violent, unrealistic and requires only passivity. I also find many joyous when "getting the best of the teacher." This joy is captured in an entry from the diary of one Daniel Hauben, a youthful critic of the schools who makes his debut in *High School*.

> March 20. Yesterday and today in social studies, the teacher, Mrs. Kranin, said we would have less than a week to do a report. Our class didn't like that idea at all so we decided to do everything she doesn't like. We crumpled paper and snapped open and close our loose-leaf binders. She is going crazy. So far not one kid raised his hand to answer a question and she doesn't know what to do. It is really great—getting the best of the teacher.[4]

With his unflagging faith in the perceptions of the young, Mr. Gross, an editor of *High School,* terms this diary a "remarkable" exposure of the alienation of the student.

I love to read and toy with ideas. I care passionately about education. But I

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

certainly think we need to create a more *sober* vocabulary to describe the rewards that can be derived from education.

Education for many adolescents involves a forcible removal from their real world of gossip, athletics and romances. It sometimes involves immersion in an initially technical and forbidding vocabulary—whether mathematical symbols, scientific formulas or anthropological terms. It involves writing papers, which everyone finds arduous, and thinking analytically, which requires discipline. It involves developing *skills*, reading and computational skills, which society deems necessary for the continuation of a technical industrialized society. It involves concentrating and participating when you may feel listless or have personal problems.

Education also offers many satisfactions for those willing to make some sacrifices. I would prefer the word satisfaction to joy because it connotes something solid, something permanent, something earned. Through literature you enter the minds and emotions of others. Through history you temporarily revive dead men and dead societies. Through the social sciences, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, you may partially understand individual and group behavior. Through the sciences you suddenly see some order and regularity behind a natural world once taken for granted. Through the study of languages and mathematics you receive the satisfaction of achieving competence in a cumulative discipline.

Education does not just involve the individual satisfaction of building skills and competency, learning to generalize and analyze, being projected out of an insular adolescent society into other minds and other worlds. It also involves the satisfaction of working together as a group. Jerome Bruner in his book *Towards a Theory of Instruction* calls this "reciprocity" and even goes so far as to say that it is a basic human need.

> For it involves a deep human need to respond to others and to operate jointly with them toward an objective. . . . Probably it is the basis of human society, this response through reciprocity to other members of one's species. Where joint action is needed, where reciprocity is required for the group to attain an objective, then there seem to be processes that carry the individual along into learning, sweep him into a competence that is required in the setting of the group.[5]

You share ideas, humor and occasionally intimate feelings. You learn to listen to other points of view and to react to them fairly and tolerantly. You plan field trips and projects together. It is hard to explain but there is a definite sense of well being and meaning in a class where everyone is drawn into the pursuit of

5 Jerome Bruner. *Towards a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1966, p. 125.

some goal—whether it be clarifying an idea or debating an important issue—and each contributes according to his abilities.

I don't mean to suggest that these satisfactions are obtained every day or are achieved by all students. They are ideals and therefore inevitably tarnished. When achieved they require effort and discipline. In the outside world frustration, tedium, even despair are interwoven with our satisfactions and triumphs. Why should the classroom be exempt from the human condition? Maybe the classroom should be less harsh but I find it presumptuous to think that human frailty and social ills are magically suspended when we walk through the doors of a classroom.

Even such a moderate critic as Charles Silberman insists upon talking about "joy" in the classroom as the goal all teachers should strive for and the goal all teachers could obtain. George Leonard, who has clearly been at Esalen too long, even goes so far as to call the goal "ecstasy." It is rapidly becoming an unexamined, undefined, given orthodoxy. The career teacher, I am convinced, would welcome a more precise, concrete and *moderate* statement about the rewards that *can* be obtained from education. He needs a balanced, sustaining ideology. He can't feed on theoreticians' dreams. In high school, Don Quixotes quickly quit or become cynics.

Those who talk about the joy of learning usually have a high regard for the adolescent. Theodore Roszak calls them "lively and unspoiled young minds." Gross calls them "young human beings so eager to explore and enjoy and invent and witness. . . ." They all talk about encouraging "a student to follow his natural impulses and interests, not to stifle them." For any maligning of the young that may have taken place in past centuries, the American press more than made up for it in the years 1968-1972. Writers fought to celebrate the wisdom and virtue of the Woodstock Generation. Youth on the go, having fun, righting the worlds wrongs—this was the image that bombarded the American people. The writers represented in *High School* certainly contribute to that image.

Educational research solves very few questions. It will certainly never end what I imagine to be an eternal debate over the wisdom and capacities of adolescents. I would suggest that, just as work in the classroom shares some of the qualities of work in the "real world," adolescents share some of the infirmities of adults. They have trouble being punctual and meeting deadlines. They cannot always find meaning in their daily tasks. They have good days when they are on top of the world and bad days when all seems "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable."

I would even suggest that adolescents have a few special infirmities. They are physically restless, tend at the start of class to resist the joys of education, are prone to interrupt one another in discussion, are erratic in judgment and excessively dependent on other students' opinions. The antidotes for these infir-

mities are: firmness mixed with patience and a sense of humor; role playing, though periodically giving glimpses of humanness; pressure—easing up in individual cases; and structure and routine—every now and then spiced with the unpredictable. Of course the radical critics would label these antidotes authoritarianism, hypocrisy and rigidity. "Lively, unspoiled young minds" require only freedom.

It is interesting that the great libertarian Bertrand Russell, who ran a "free" school in Sussex from 1928-1932 had the wisdom to see that in education there must be a check on the freedom allowed the young. In "The Negative Theory of Education," Russell claims that "discipline in observing time"[6] (punctuality), the "capacity for consistent self-direction"[7] and the love of "abstract knowledge"[8] are desirable qualities for an individual, necessary for the functioning of society and *unnatural* to the young. A civilized community, he says, "demands, therefore some method of causing children to behave in a manner which is not natural to them,"[9] i.e. some authoritarianism. Particularly supportive of my distrust of unbridled liberty is Russell's stressing the importance of structure and routine in the life of the young:

> Another respect in which, to my mind, many apostles of freedom go astray, is that they fail to recognize sufficiently the importance of routine in the life of the young. I do not mean that a routine should be rigid and absolute; there should be days when it is varied, such as Christmas Day and holidays. But even these variations should, on the whole, be expected by the child. A life of uncertainty is nervously exhausting at all times, but especially in youth. . . . A further point in favor of a large element of routine is that children find it both tiring and boring to have to choose their own occupation at all odd times. They prefer that at many times the initiative should not be theirs.[10]

Exactly what sort of community the adolescent should inhabit, the radical critics never make clear. It is not capitalistic or industrialized. It does not have bureaucracies and hierarchies. Work is not unpleasant. Clearly it is not present day America. If the radical critics reject authoritarianism because adolescents are innately curious and enthusiastic, and because learning is natural and fun, they above all reject it because it "programs" the young to participate in a society the critics don't like. High school encourages the young to be docile and conformist. It encourages status seeking and memorizing the right answers. Why? Because such people will be effective participants on the assem-

6 Bertrand Russell, "The Negative Theory of Education," in Ronald Gross, ed. *The Teacher and The Taught*. New York, N.Y.: Dell, 1963, p. 218.
7 *Ibid.*, p. 219.
8 *Ibid.*, p. 221.
9 *Ibid.*
10 *Ibid.*, p. 219.

bly line, in the corporation and the multi-university, the horrors of which are repeatedly hinted at. Beneath all the criticisms of high schools lurks a rather murky disenchantment with American life. It is typical of the radicals' regard for clarity and logic that this fact is never made explicit. Instead of wasting so much time flaying the school why don't they come right out and say that the *real* enemy is American values and American institutions?

Certainly there is a direct connection between one's educational goals and one's vision of the good life. I would certainly expect that if one is going to be a revolutionary and dismember American high schools; if one is going to proclaim freedom and root out all vestiges of authoritarianism; then, one would offer to his reader a lucid detailed picture of the good life that will follow. How else can the reader fully evaluate his educational goals? I might consider an end to grades, pressure and authoritarianism if I were shown the utopia I could expect. Do the radical critics portray the Tsadi of the Philippines, the Diggers of San Francisco or the Peasants of Mao Tse-Tung? No such picture is offered. Like most revolutionaries, the critics are vague about what will come when the evils are overthrown.

This of course is not an essay to discuss how many redeeming features there are in America in the 1970s. It is obvious that I find some or I would join the radicals in their repudiation of the high school. I am annoyed, however, at their assumption that high schools are the automatic allies of the worst features of American life. I could never accept their contention that its primary mission is to produce acquisitive, memorizing robots that can fill undemanding, meaningless jobs. Inquiring, independent minds are and should be encouraged in the high school. Part of the function of this school is to encourage criticism, improvement, and reform of the existing society. At the same time, and I know of no more difficult task facing the teacher, the school will demand a degree of loyalty to the basic outlines of the culture. A society needs freedom of discussion and inquiry so that institutions will not ossify and citizens will not be robots. At the same time society needs shared values and goals, some conformity in order to prevent anarchy. Balance is everything. Reconciling antagonistic claims is what a good teacher, a mature person, and a wise society constantly do.

I would like to consider one final example of my disagreement with the radical critics, role playing. Role-playing, according to the critics, is merely another weapon in the armory of authoritarianism. It is the ally of the test, the grade, the gold star. It turns the teacher into slave master and encourages tension, pressure, memorization, and misunderstanding. Cry a little, rage a little, says Jonathan Kozol. Rap with the kids. Let them know you are human.

I "role play" all the time. I repress sexual fantasies and personal problems, conceal boredom and a distaste for certain students. I hide occasional doubts about my subject and its meaning and profess a seriousness and concern that

barely checks a bubbling irony. Thank God for role playing. It checks the anarchy lurking in all of us and propels us out of ourselves into other's needs and the world's needs. I expect my students to role play as well. I expect them to appear concerned, interested and respectful even when privately they would rather be anywhere in the world than in my class. Believe it or not the appearance can become reality during the course of a class. Again and again I have had the experience of both myself and my students (some of them) role playing, both of us concealing our boredom and doubt and then jointly producing a satisfying and constructive class. "Everyone knows what it is to start a piece of work, either intellectual or muscular, feeling stale,"[11] says William James. Role playing gets a class "going." It dispels inertia and induces action and affirmation in place of passivity and negation.

Role-playing also provides the adolescent with a sense of security. We all feel better when the moods of people with whom we deal are consistent and their responses to situations are predictable. The teacher-student relationship is no exception. It can give a sense of confidence in the adult world. I am not one of those who would have the full unpleasantness of the adult world descend upon those forming an identity and creating values. I favor selective and gradual disclosure. I am not suggesting that the teacher play Mr. Chips or Norman Vincent Peale. This would merely incite ridicule. But somehow he must convince his students that *though a realist* he approaches the world's problems with a degree of confidence and energy. This may involve role playing. I am convinced that it is therapeutic. I am not in favor of indoctrination, and I could never consider myself a romantic, but I am terrified of cynicism in the young.

Our disagreement revolves around totally disparate world views. I believe with Freud that civilization demands checks on freedom, impulse and individual desires and that man throughout history has proved himself covetous and selfish. The critics exalt spontaneity and trust human nature. I believe that acculturation—the process by which each individual learns the values and mores of his society—is valuable, that it promotes continuity, order and security. They believe it corrupts, that it is indoctrination. I believe that adults can be enlightened and should guide adolescents. They seem to believe that folly increases with age and that adolescents should exercise complete self-determination. I believe in a technical, industrialized, capitalistic society. They reject it—for what I am not sure.

Disparate world views are reflected in very different styles. The radical critics write passionately and sincerely. Reason, clarity, and balance, however, fall victim to their vehemence. Trusting spontaneity, they undoubtedly compose quickly. The result: imprecision, discursiveness and strange constructions. They give their articles such titles as "The Open Truth and Fiery Vehe-

11 William James, "The Energies of Men," in John J. McDermott, ed. *The Writings of William James*. New York, N.Y.: Random House, 1967, p. 671.

mence of Youth" and "Dangerous Saintly Tragic Brave Subversive." There is a straining after cleverness, with fondness for the paradoxical, the sentimental and the trite that I find irritating. Believing in revolution they are dogmatic and self-righteous. No qualifying phrase, no obeisance to an opponent's viewpoint, no admission of fallibility escape their pens.

Our disagreement also revolves around different perceptions of today's high school. I find it filled with problems but I find idiotic the prison camp rhetoric. Humor does occur; rules are bent and do not "oppress" the average student; the keepers do fraternize with the prisoners. I do not see students brutally coerced into the role of a grade-grubbing conformist. I do not find teachers to be humorless task-masters sadistically dispensing irrelevant information to be memorized.

This rhetoric of slavery, by focusing on extreme examples, wildly distorts the typical classroom. It sounds more like the torture chambers in Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* than classes of the 1970s. I find both students and teachers quick to detect and shun toadyism. I find most teachers repeatedly admonishing students not to "just memorize," encouraging inquiry, and looking rather desperately for signs of originality and enthusiasm.

Different perceptions then of human nature, the capacities of adolescents, the nature of education, the shape and needs of American society and the reality of today's high school all combine to dictate different educational goals. Some would dismember the high school, replacing it with no schooling, less schooling or alternative schooling.

I would insist on the way things are, a sense of the inevitable. Education will always be, at times, hard work and teachers will always be, at times, disciplinarians and task-masters. You can change your philosophy and introduce machines but this stubborn fact will remain as long as education equals serious use of the mind. I rejoice in this fact for I dread the utopia where one can easily, pleasurably and passively gain the greatest of prizes—a cultivated, precise, informed mind.