

The impetus to look back over my own school years first arose when I began to participate in the long march of the educational system a second time, as a parent. My young son was impressionable, in the process of being “formed,” and recognizing this made me explicitly aware of having once been similarly impressionable myself.

One afternoon I went to visit a school parents I knew had raved about, to which I was considering sending my son. Children loved it, they claimed—but I was skeptical. Who *loved* school? And I was opposed to private schools, aside from the fact that, as a single parent, I would have to go into debt to pay for one. I had already concluded that it would have been better for me to have been raised in a less rarefied atmosphere—to have grown up among a mix of

children from families who didn’t, or couldn’t afford to, make the quality of their children’s schooling a priority.

The teacher, one of the school’s founders, invited me to sit on one of the miniature chairs in her room, a carpeted room with an alcove filled with pillows, attractive posters, a Lego table, shelves of books, many inviting objects of study. She was informally, even sloppily dressed—blue jeans, long loose shirt, gray hair held back in a ponytail: nothing *crisp* about her. As we sat in mutual discomfort on the too small chairs (was this intentional, I, with my usual unpleasant suspicion of motives, wondered—to make parents stop feeling superior?), she described how the school helped children to learn *how* they learned, to discover what interested them, what they cared about. There were no grades; the students rarely knew that they were “good at” a subject until well after they had learned that they loved it. The school’s philosophy held that childhood was not solely preparation for adulthood, but an experience to be valued in itself.

Listening to the teacher, looking around at the cozy, inviting, *safe* room, I suddenly found myself near tears, remembering all at once, entire, as if I’d been transported back to them at that very moment, the classrooms with desks arranged in their neat lines, in which you had to sit no matter what, the teacher in front at the blackboard, dispensing knowledge, revealing from on high. I

remembered the anxiety that, like a lunchbox, I'd rarely not carried to school; the dismay at the end of the weekend, at the end of the summer when we were about to be remanded to that forced labor. And here was this teacher telling me that their students would pretend not to be sick in order not to miss school, would call up the teachers during vacations to ask why the breaks had to be so long.

I could hardly believe this. Was this simply good publicity? Could school really be a place children *loved*? Yet as I listened to her, as I came to know the school over the course of my son's time there, I began to think that I had been taught *all wrong*.

I attended "good" schools—private schools with small classes; a tiny college where I received individual, often enthusiastic, attention; graduate school. My parents, teachers both, held a near-religious belief in the necessity of getting a good education. They endured privations in order that I and my sister and brother could benefit from one. With other parents, they founded a school when the ones available did not meet with their approval. I have never in my life been in a class of more than fifteen students, and most were under ten. The teachers, by and large, were thoughtful and dedicated. Though an occasional teacher lost his or her temper, this was not common, and I was rarely scolded and never intentionally humiliated. The school buildings, until I went to graduate

school, were old houses or barns, converted from their previous uses to classrooms, set amidst trees and lawns. Homey and welcoming. We knew everyone. We never had to fear for our safety.

A protected, privileged experience, and I would have said that I liked school. I liked it if liking it means not *not* liking it. I was rarely consciously bored. I paid attention in class. I did my homework. Yet I'd paid a price for being such a "good" student, I suspected. When would I really graduate? Get over the feeling that someone, somewhere, was keeping a grade sheet on what I did and one day I'd be given it and know the measure of myself. Was it possible that not only my having been raised in the world of academia but the entirety of my education had conspired to set in motion the pendulum between self-doubt and uneasy dogmatism? How was I to get out of the way of its swing?

The transformation that occurred among kindergartners at my son's school was revealing. The first few days they were apprehensive, quiet, sidling, trying to scope out the hierarchy. They were the weak, the bottom of the totem pole. The news about school had reached them on the world's grapevine.

But then it dawned on them. It wasn't going to happen. They weren't going to be bullied. They were

going to be treated with kindness, their needs and opinions respected. They were people *now*, not people in the making.

They started smiling and got chatty. Five-year-olds swaggered through the rooms. During assemblies, the smaller children regularly sat on the laps of the older ones, girls and boys. This was a wonderful thing to see, particularly the older boys not learning to be uncomfortable with physical affection. At times I didn't care if anything else besides this was taught.

It wasn't paradise. There were competitions, fights, exclusions, loneliness. Children wounded each other, inadvertently and on purpose, but they soon learned that meanness wasn't tolerated. This wasn't lip service. Personal conflicts were not given cursory attention, relegated to the sidelines and considered peripheral. The teachers dealt with them. They grappled with them. They talked to parents. They talked to students. More importantly, they taught the students how to talk to each other. I regrettably had to recognize that, of the two of us, my son was becoming the more mature when it came to dealing with conflict. "Can we just talk about this?" he'd say, whereas my training was all in hurt silences, tangential outbursts, assigning blame. He has grown up taking for granted the fact that not everyone thinks alike, or needs to, whereas I absorbed the belief—the religion, really—that there is

a right way (to be, to live), and individuals are better or worse approximations thereof. His teachers were not the authority figures before the blackboard; they were people who were interested in things, who liked children. Maybe even more important, respected them. It seemed to me that, before they were teachers, they were people. They didn't pretend that they weren't.

I'd always assumed that there was school, and then there was life; somehow what you learned in the classroom would mysteriously transfer over. That's always been the idea. Certainly it was the driving idea behind the Great Books Program. It eschewed social engagement; "genuine liberal education," Stringfellow Barr complained, was being "swayed by sideshow activities, cafeteria courses, and conflicting vocational aims."¹¹ You withdrew from the world in order to understand it. But had I really learned anything in school about how to live in the world, engage with it, be a person?

Twenty years is a long time. To progress from lying on a red towel labeled with your name on it, after painting the bunny cages for the fourth time, to drinking Scotch in the company of other young writers—all in pursuit of education. But what, in fact, *was* the education?

Was it simply the residuum of information imparted through long years of sitting in a classroom, the segmented

¹¹ Smith, *op. cit.*, 44.

and sometimes derailed train of instruction and study? How to add and subtract, to recognize a verb; what happened in 1776—information that, retained, became part of me—or was it something more amorphous, something that, under the auspices of supplying me with knowledge, in fact formed the person that I am?

To my surprise, when I began to think methodically back over those two decades, besides my classmates (the eccentrics, loners, charismatics, scholars, bullies, who assume their roles in my recollection as if putting on Commedia dell'arte masks), what I recalled rather than the rare eureka moments when I first distinguished an isosceles triangle or grasped the subjunctive were the people who taught me these things. In my memory it's as if classes were themes for a party, whose occasions left less of an impression than the participants. Thinking back, it seems to me that I studied teachers' personalities and moods as assuredly as I did my parents', unconsciously attempting to decode the messages they telegraphed as assiduously as I did the long division or the conjugations with which they decorated the blackboard. Not gauging their idiosyncrasies solely in order to negotiate the classroom weather, but looking for messages about their own being in the world, their contentments and disappointments, which rode on the language and gestures with which they urged the subjects at hand.

The information wasn't hidden on purpose, with intent to deceive, but in most schools there's an unspoken code of behavior that dictates that the disappearing act is necessary: the professor arrives full-blown in wisdom at the front of the room, like Athena from Zeus's brain, judicious, without antecedents or preoccupation. (A purely mental creation—sex had no place in creating *them*.)

But what *about* what happens on the periphery, unacknowledged yet absorbed, from the gestures, personalities, enthusiasms of the teachers? I found I wanted to know what I'd learned from them that they never told me. The picture was missing the frame, or the frame the picture, though they were as likely unaware as their students that a significant part of what they taught wasn't on the syllabus. As I thought about them, explored the persistence of certain teachers in my memory, the more events and details I began to remember, as if their shades were saying, "I told you what I *know*; now look at what I *am*."

Looking at schools with the eyes of a parent, I remembered school as I experienced it as a child. I saw myself as the product of a certain set of assumptions about what learning was. *Product, result*—there is something suspicious in the fact that all the phrases that come readily to mind involve *manufacturing*. You do what everyone else is doing at the same time they're doing it and if you get the right

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answers, you're rewarded. You're rewarded all along the line. With good grades, acceptance by a good college, a good job. All these "good" things. Having been a student, a parent of a student, and a teacher of students, I now see this as an inhibiting blueprint.

While what follows is an idiosyncratic chronicle, a pursuit of the history I missed while I was busy studying other things, it's also intended to raise some general questions about what goes on in classrooms, what makes good teaching and bad, how we learn and why. To wonder why so many students leave school with their curiosity subtracted from them, as if prisoners were required to pay a fee for their incarceration. Not only children of the Great Books come through school worrying about whether they're right or not.

If the exhortatory note I've made fun of here occasionally sounds—what can I say? I'm afraid that I learned it at the same time that I learned to talk.