



4-1-1992

The Way Back to Educational Foundations

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Recommended Citation

Hillestad, James T. (1992) "The Way Back to Educational Foundations," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 19: No. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1518>

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What You Must Know to be a Teacher: (Variations on a theme by Gary Snyder)

Steven Lewis

to the human heart; the amplified sound
blood rushing across the placenta;
the pain of menstruation behind
closed eyes; first aid
for a spurting artery; the bloodless
face of betrayal.

The way

we use when everything we value
has been taken away; the noise of
freedom; the shattering
silence of an accusing finger;
the endless boring hours of hearing
others talk; the pain of healing.

The voice

of sex; the rage of injustice; the goodness
in Grendl; the evil in Mother Theresa;
Solomon's ignorance; the bravery of
Chicken Little; the heart of darkness.

The urgency

back.

The way

The Way Back to Educational Foundations

James T. Hillestad

This essay is contrary to the prevailing contemporary sophists respected by the power brokers of the government monopoly in education. Madeline Hunter, Albert Shanker, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the Iowa State University School Improvement model, are but a sample of those power brokers. In the footsteps of Descartes and John Dewey their power prevails. Having built this pillar of Baal they now wish to maintain that power. It is a power that rivals both Baal and Nebuchadnezzar. This pillar of government in both public and private education has come to serve death more than life.

This pillar will fall. Perhaps it already has:
"And they demolished the pillar
of Baal and demolished the house
of Baal and made it a latrine to this day."

II Kings 10:28

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I am in no need of a latrine. This essay does not urinate on the rubble of our past attempts at survival through schooling. The rubble is world wide. It is found both in Manhattan, Kansas, as well as New York. It is in Oslo, St. Petersburg, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, and Houston, Minnesota, as well as Houston, Texas.

I am an old man. I am a grandfather. I believe this best describes our present predicament:

"Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they who wait for the Lord shall
renew their strength
they shall mount up with wings
like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint."

Isaiah 40:31

The eagle wings I have found for the historical, philosophical, and sociological foundations in education course that I teach are:

Collins, Marva, *Marva Collins Way*, Tarcher, 1990;
de Nicholas, Antonio, *Habits of Mind*, Paragon House, 1989;

Hicks, David V., *Norms and Nobility*, Rowman and Littlefield, 1991;

Postman, Neil, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Viking Penguin, 1986.

The Voice

By utilizing Lewis' poetry, it is Marva Collins who provides the voice to which my students can and will attend. Her courage and commitment are unmistakably authentic. She forthrightly explains the benefit she has of not being a product of a teacher education program. She also avoided the simalacrum of what now passes as a liberal arts education. She resurrects her pupils from the curses of the Enlightenment as funneled through the behavioral sciences. She know these kids have something important—a soul. They come alive. They transcend the banalities of the Pharaohs of television, the Democratic Party, and the National Education Association. They transcend the descriptive labels of economics, race, and learning disabilities.

My students and I begin to have a hope that defies the descriptive and analytical mainstream. We are anointed by Marva. A dialectic that includes the prescriptive ideal begins to emerge.

The Urgency

Neil Postman so aptly describes the Babylonian captivity that has attempted to make products out of me and of my students. We are using *Amusing Ourselves to Death* because it magnificently develops the idea that "Public consciousness has not yet assimilated that technology is ideology." (p. 157) Our current habit of mind is permeated present darkness of information. My students are habituated (perhaps inhabited is more accurate) by this informative Pharaoh of ideology. The simalacrum is overwhelming. It is as though our image in the mirror could view itself.

Mr. Postman has exposed this current habit of mind in all its daily Huxleyan dimensions. The urgency of his *Disappearance of Childhood* and *Conscientious Objections* lead my students and me to see ourselves reflected in this mirror. It is perhaps the deepest culture shock to see oneself. Sometimes the reaction is one of denial, but most seeds germinate and many sprout at their appointed hour. As educators we can no longer be satisfied and comfortable with being merely well informed. The show business of the school and all its mass professionalism has been exposed.

The Way Back

In one of the most impossible and difficult books I have encountered, Mr. de Nicholas does indeed show us the way back to something that was left behind: the classical habit of mind. He dismisses the claim that "our culture dates all the way back to the Greeks." (p. 36) He asserts that the greatest difficulty to overcome is our current habit of mind which is limited to the formation of theories. "One need only visit any classroom to see firsthand what this habit of theory making is doing and how it is being used against the students." (p. 6) The social scientists share with the Protestant founders of American education "the belief that the scientific method is sufficient to organize the whole of life." (p. 6) Educators have become pseudo-scientists and daily fabricate "abstractions and impose them on the human and social fabric with such quickness that the students are left reeling, wondering about their human whereabouts."

But *Habits of Mind* addresses this predicament. It is, among other things, a generously and virtuously edited anthology in which de Nicholas utilizes Plato to identify and develop the classical dialectic which is to give us "the capacity and knowledge to distinguish the good and the bad life, and so everywhere and always choose the better from among those that are possible . . ."

Students can follow the way back by reading his inclusions of John Dewey's *Experience and Education*; Jude P. Dougherty's "Marx, Dewey, and Maritain—The Role of Religion in Society"; Voltaire's *Candide*; the Marquis de Sade's "Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man" and ultimately Plato's *Republic* (Books I, V, VI, and VII). When he does not write his own introduction de Nicholas includes dazzling essays such as "Some Reflections on Rhetoric" by John Bremer.

Because of the demands of this book it took one of my more courageous acts to use it in a beginning teacher education course. Could my students from Poughkeepsie, the lower east side, the South Bronx, and Scarsdale possibly succeed? The experiences of Jaime Escalante and Marva Collins brought out my most affirmative Hubert Humphrey Minnesotan language: "You betcha!"

And these students did. After great struggles on each weekly essay/quiz, their final examinations literally took my breath away as they savored their triumph.

The Way

In a 1988 seminar one of my graduate students made use of an author who was unknown to me, David Hicks. The book was *Norms and Nobility*. Her references were to sentiments and ideas I had longed to formulate since 1951 when I received my first morally earned "F" grade at St. Olaf College. The conclusions I was expected to develop in a final examination in the History of Philosophy course were so repugnant that I could not participate.

I hastened to my Sojourner Truth Library to examine this book. The excitement of this encounter prevented me from wasting even the ten minutes it would require to approach the checkout desk. At midnight the library closed. Eight hours later I closed the book. The peak experience I had twenty years earlier, upon discovering Lewis Mumford, had been surpassed.

The prologue of *Norms and Nobility* best explains its purpose in this excerpt:

"My purpose in writing this book is to offer a personal interpretation of classical education—its ends, as well as some of its means—and to respond to the objections of those who might approve of the goals of such an education, but who believe that it cannot meet the needs of an industrial democracy or that it is

not feasible as a model for mass education. I have some hard words for those social scientists whose analytical methods and unexamined assumptions have worked a profound mischief in our schools. My wish is not, however, to banish science from the modern curriculum, but to save it. For I fear that the modern educator's inchoate understanding of science, his naive belief in its all-sufficiency, and his unwillingness to acknowledge its methodological limitations are leading to a reaction and revulsion against it. If descriptive science is to aid our schools and flourish in them, it must remain in the service of a prescriptive ideal." (p.3)

Here was the vital work that my thirty-five years of serving students could not produce or find. It was in my hands at last!

But it was out of print. Even though the former publisher informed me the second printing had sold out in six months, there was no intention to reprint. After a frantic AT&T SEARCH I located Mr. Hicks at St. Mark's School of Texas, in Dallas. Though his commitments now were to those students and he chose not to expend further energies on the book, he did not object to my pestering publishers, and to their eternal credit Rowman and Littlefield did the job!

My students have discovered after reading Dewey that most of his disciples, including their professors, have not. It is not surprising therefore that none have even heard of David Hicks. Here is a sample that may recall the vision of some former "Normal Schools" that Progressive Education destroyed and replaced:

"The ancient student of the Ideal Type, therefore, started out with the dogma of a moral ideal called kalakagathia—a man both beautiful and good. When he asked—what is excellence in man?—he did not so much seek his answer in poetry and philosophy as he sought illustration and confirmation of his answer there. The answer, as it were, preceded the question and the questioner, but both were needed to elicit it. Each new generation of students began at the beginning with Homer and Hesoid, refining, perhaps reinterpreting, the primal stamp, but never presuming to set up a rival ideal and never daring to give in entirely to pragmatic doubts. Any rival ideal would have met with sheer incomprehension, as Saint Paul discovered on Mars Hill, and a worse fate awaited the doubter, as the Athenians learned when their Syracusan debacle (according to Thucydides) followed hard on their ruthless realpolitik at Melos. Because it was rooted in the dogma of a prescriptive view of man, the ideal withstood the ravages of time and change. Like the life of virtue at its heart, it remained immediately recognizable in all ages and to all men, whether it wore the mail armor of a Christian Richard or the flowing robes of a Moslem Saladin." (p. 45)

Epilogue

The essay you have completed was partially built upon the assumption that the reader appreciates the Cartesian nature and history of our modern university. Charles J. Sykes has confirmed my three decades of experience in education as well as giving such a history in *Politics and Corruption in Higher Education: The Hollow Men* (1990). It is this modern pillar of the university, not Baal, that upholds our fragile American and worldwide edifice. The university prepares all the powerful professionals in government, religion, medicine, technology, law, teaching, industry, and the military; the power brokers of our collective destiny.

Page Smith in his conclusion to *Killing The Spirit* (1989) quotes Robert Hutchins: "Civilization can be saved only by a moral, intellectual and spiritual revolution to match the scientific, technological and economic revolution in which we are now living." The four authors presented here with the poet, Steven Lewis, are most often excluded from the journals of education which limit themselves to the technological, or "findings" from the social sciences, constituting the

so-called "educational mainstream." In Orwellian language this describes a stagnant pond.

Only by including the moral, intellectual, and spiritual contributions represented by these authors can there be a stream. Then may we become educators rather than teachers and researchers limited to behavior modification, publishing, and promotion.