

NOTES ON AMERICAN EDUCATION

the destruction of children

JOHN HOLT

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JOHN HOLT: Notes on American Education

The following is an edited transcript of some of Mr. Holt's remarks during the talks he gave at Washington University, November 14th. Mr. Holt is the author of How Children Fail and a practicing English teacher himself. His new book How Children Learn has just recently been released. freelance feels that what Mr. Holt has to say about education in the United States today is meaningful to all of us who have undergone the so-called "educational process" and who will be having children who will probably be educated in the system and style of which Mr. Holt is so critical.

What I seem to have in my mind are bits and scraps of ideas — I don't think they hang together in anything that an English teacher would recognize or acknowledge as a coherent speech or essay. So I'll give them to you as they occur to me and you may consider them sort of a do-it-yourself speech.

Someone said that the problem of education today is that we're not reaching many children in our schools. But I'm afraid we're reaching them all too well. Those of you who read *How Children Fail* will know that I feel that conventional or traditional education is a deeply destructive process, and I include in this most of what I have done myself in most of my own teaching.

Ronald Laing, a British psychiatrist, in his book *The Politics of Experience* has thrown a very sharp light on something that I have suspected for some time. He has brought into focus and

turned from a suspicion to a certainty a feeling about traditional or conventional education which I will put this way. It seems to me that what we do in most schools (there are honorable exceptions), but what we do in most schools carries a message to children which says, "What you know, what you think, what you want, what you're afraid of, what you're concerned about, all of these things count for nothing. The only thing that counts is what we know, what we want, what we want you to do, what we want you to be." We don't do this as villains, but you see, what the sum of a child or an adult or the sum of what a person knows, cares about and wants and wonders about and likes and dislikes, is concerned and worried about — the sum of these things is *the person* and when we deny, as we do in schools and conventional education, the validity of this person and his experience, we are doing something which seems to me to be performing a kind of spiritual lobotomy on children. And worse yet, is that most children receive this message very gradually without knowing they receive it. Now those children that are aware, and some of them are, quite rightly resist this with all the strength at their command. They fight us tooth and nail — thank goodness, although we are likely to break their spirit and ruin their lives for them in the struggle. They might all fight us if they recognized the message for what it is, but as a friend said last night, it's subliminal, it seeps in and by the time kids are 14 or 15, they have indeed accepted this picture of themselves and

have indeed come to feel that they are *only* what other people think they are, or the sum of the various little report cards that we make about them.

I'm opposed to the notion of curriculum, in the traditional sense of the word, in that I do not believe we should decide what children shall be made to learn or not be made to learn. I do not believe that you can say of any piece of knowledge whatever, that it is so valuable and so essential that children must be made to learn it at all costs, and if they don't learn it, they have no chance of leading any kind of useful or decent life. In my new book, I present my thesis, that children learn best, in fact they only learn in any real sense, when they are exploring the world and trying to make sense of it in the way that seems best to them. I believe that most of the learning problems that occur in school arise first out of our own anxieties and that anxieties that we create in the classroom, and second, out of our well-meant but misguided attempts to teach children — that is, lead them down prepared paths to pre-determined destinations.

I think teachers must rid themselves of the notion, and it's difficult to do, we have a lot of emotional capital invested in the idea, that somehow our mission is to become a kind of fountain of learning and inspiration for all these lucky little people in front of us. Particularly in a field which does not give very much in the way of money or prestige to the people in it, it is a great temptation to believe that we are primary and to feel that we are this great source of wisdom and enlighten-



ment and that all learning that goes on in the classroom flows from us.

I like books — in my overcoat upstairs there are 2 paperback books that I am in the middle of — and a good many others besides. (All of us like books) — I have read them all my life. I think books are a very convenient, handy and inexpensive way to transmit or get certain kinds of information and understanding. But I think we are in very great danger of making a kind of religion of reading in this country; of making it a kind of sacred cause. I think we are beginning to do very great harm — the fact is, while reading is a very useful way of getting many kinds of information, it is not a very good one for getting some kinds of information — it is by no means the way of getting all kinds of information. It is one of a wide number of possible ways of learning. The world out there is not an imitation of books. Anything that we know to put into a book we had to find out somewhere outside of a book. The primary source of knowledge is the real world. What we need, and I don't say that books aren't one way of getting it, are people who can use their eyes and ears and see, hear; I like books — I'm not denigrating them — I'm just saying that they need to be kept in their proper and very useful place.

I think reading in this sense can be considered more as a skill than a body

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of knowledge — it is something about which we definitely should be concerned. I don't think it needs as the word is ordinarily understood, to be taught. I think that most of our problems in reading are self-created — that we would have virtually no reading problems in our schools if we had no formal instruction in reading whatever.

I think that once we get out of the business of the actual technical skill out of the way, that our emphasis on understanding is almost wholly harmful. If we could stop worrying children about what they understand and what they didn't, they would be far more adventurous and capable readers and workers.

We've got to get out of the business of making judgments and assessments about children — I'm opposed to all grading and marking and testing for whatever reasons. Aside from the fact that testing is inherently inaccurate, that there is no real way of finding out what other people know or understand — aside from that, I think evaluation, in the first place, is misleading; we do not know, we cannot find out, we will probably never be able to find out very much what is in another person's head. We can ask questions, we can get answers but to infer from the answers to our questions the state of somebody else's knowledge or understanding or comprehension is to take a giant leap into the dark! We just don't know.

Aside from this, practically, I'm opposed to marks and evaluating because obviously the person who is being evaluated is going to think in terms of how to please his judge. It corrupts the learning process — it encourages the kind of cheating not only on the part of students, but what's more, on the part of schools and teachers.

As I say, when we pin these labels on people, in the first place they begin to act according to the label, and in the second place, it becomes very difficult for us to get the labels off. As anybody knows who has done any teaching, any teacher whose assessment of a child is much higher than the assessment of the people around him, than the child's previous teachers, this new teacher, this optimist, is going to find himself in trouble. If you want to get yourself in trouble with a university or school faculty, just find some student who has been getting D's and E's and give him an A . . . and watch

the ceiling come down! We all get some sort of vested interest in our own failures — it is very true of our urban schools. It becomes very important to us and this is a commentary on a weakness of human nature which I share — if we haven't been able to do a job, we can only salvage our self-respect by saying that nobody can do it, and if somebody seems to be doing it, we get very anxious and hostile.

I'm opposed to evaluation because an evaluation always returns into a prediction. Of course, the worst of it is that these evaluations are prophecies, and soon become self-fulfilling prophecies — people act as we expect them to act. There's lots of hard evidence about this — there has been more than one case in which there was confusion in the records. A group of high-level students have suddenly got put in the low-level class and visa versa and we find the high level students in the slow section doing much poorer work than they have ever done before and the slow students in the fast section doing much better work than they'd ever done before. An interesting experiment was done not long ago — the experimenter told some teachers a big, fat lie — that an instrument, as they love to call these guessing games — that an instrument had been developed to measure what they call "late bloomers". . . it would predict that even though certain children in your class for the moment look perfectly hopeless, we have this way of telling that someday they will be crack-jack students — with this instrument. So the children were given this phony test — the teacher never sees it — the teacher is given a paper with just results. 7 or 10 children are picked at perfect random and labeled as "late bloomers." Lo and behold, their regular school marks begin to rise and they do better work in class and they become the outstanding students. Why? Because the teacher begins to treat these people not as if they were dumb, but as if they were bright. Because if she treats them as if they were bright,

they are going to act as if they were bright.

This isn't going to be much help to people who have to give grades. Somebody asked me at dinner if I gave them last year. Yes, I did. I was at a school where I had reasons I wanted to teach there, and this was part of the deal. I didn't give any grade lower than C and I only gave a couple of those, so my range was in the A's and B's. I graded as seldom as I could — once a quarter — I didn't grade every paper and I told the students, and made them believe me, that I was judging them more on the basis of their best work than on some sort of average. So I think I reduced by a considerable degree the amount of harm that these things do I had to give them, and I understand most of you still will — but as I say, I

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think if you make them as private as possible, as seldom as possible and as lenient as possible, or as lenient as you can get away with, you will probably reduce the harm that they do.

There is an awful lot of talk in education about rates of progress. Those of you who have heard me do much talking around here know that I'm very sensitive to the way in which our thinking is directed by the kind of metaphor we use and directed in a way that we may not be conscious of. You talk about a rate of progress — you're talking about the idea that education proceeds with a kind of linear motions — something going down a track — down a path — some going faster and some going slower. This is a profoundly misleading notion of what happens when real learning takes place. I would like to submit for whatever use it may be to you a very different

metaphor — you're welcome to throw it out if it's of no use to you but it happens to help me. It seems to me that the process of learning about something and gaining more understanding is much like this. It's like going out in the morning of a very thick, foggy day and you go out and you see nothing but gray and perhaps a couple of vague, shapeless forms out of the fog. As the sun comes up and the fog begins to lift, these shapes begin to be a little clearer and their outlines a little sharper and you can begin to tell depth and distance and how they relate to each other — then gradually you see not only more and more of the details of the landscape, and you're able to see more and more things, and then you see more and more clearly how all of these parts fit together so that it does become kind of a structured whole and this fog-lifting process is what the process of learning is like. This hasn't anything to do with "rate", you see, this is not a linear process, it's not a "going down the path" process. The learning of a child goes out on a very broad front — he doesn't look through a tube or a telescope at one little part of this landscape and say, "I know absolutely what that's all about. I'm going to look at something else. He scans the whole works and gradually things become clearer and fit together better.

He does not feel, certainly most of the time, that kind of impulsive or neurotic need which I think most of us feel, to place everything, to understand everything, to fit it into some kind of structure, to put it into some kind of a pattern.

Children have an extraordinary tolerance not only toward confusion, but also for what we would call — this is our concept, not theirs, — failure. Your young child is experimenting all the time and the experiments hardly ever work out as he hoped. This doesn't discourage him very much — he just keeps at it. If he's trying to learn to walk, he takes 2 or 3 steps, falls down

and gets up again. Or he tries to climb up on the sofa — struggle, kick, kick, kick, can't get up, tries it again the next day. He is, as some writer once put it, foolish, feeble and ineffectual and he is, to some extent, aware of this — but he is not held back from it, he keeps trying. If he thinks of anything, it might be what we call "deferred success", when he doesn't do what he's trying to do. The feeling is, not in words, "Well not yet, but maybe next time." It's only later, and largely as a result of his association with his elders, that a child begins to think of non-success as failure — kind of terminal and shameful.

A child with this attitude begins to see school as a place in which he is given an endless succession of little tasks unrelated to each other or anything else he can imagine, which he has to do and which if he fails to do them will lead to getting into various kinds of hot water. Most children begin to develop different kinds of defensive, self-protective strategies and this marvelous learning that goes on early in their life, that dies down and comes to a stop.

One of the things that happens to most students in school is that they get to thinking of learning as kind of a passive process. You sit there and you open your mouth kind of like a baby bird in a nest and then someone comes along and they drop something in it. They really have ceased to believe in their own ability to make any decisions, to make any judgment, to do anything sensible — they say things to me like some very intelligent and capable young people who have said to me — arguing with me —, "If I wasn't made to do things, I wouldn't do anything." I was at Andover last summer, talking at their summer schools, and I heard any number of students say that and I've had kids at Commonwealth say it in Boston and my answer is 2 things — To that, the first thing I say is "I don't believe you" and the second thing I say is, "If that were true, it

would be the most damning indictment of your school that could possibly be made. If, after ten years in high-powered schools, you have been brought to the place where there isn't *anything* that you are interested enough in or care about enough in to want to do it without somebody telling you, then you really are in sad shape! But, in fact, I don't think that's the case."

Yet this is what our educational system does to children. I had a letter just the other day — from a man teaching a seminar to seniors at Princeton. . and he was trying to get the seniors in this seminar to do independent reading — he gave them a long list of books that he had found useful and he said, "I don't care which of these you read, I don't care if you read any of them, I'm not going to make you read any of them and I'm not going to give assignments, but I've found all of these useful and I recommend that you explore and see what you like", and a great many of them were very, very, threatened — "but you've got to tell us — aren't you going to tell us what to do?" And it took him many, many weeks, many months, to wean these students from their kind of dependence on authority which they had acquired during all of their schooling.

I remember a negro boy I talked with. He had a book in his hand and every once in a while he'd gesture with it to show us what it was. The book was — but let me say first of all — that I suspect that by the usual tests of reading ability, which are totally worthless, this guy probably would have tested at the 2nd grade, 3rd grade — hardly better, I suppose. The book he was reading was Martin Luther King's "Why We Can't Wait". I think King is a great man, but he's no stylist, believe me. He writes a very ponderous, cumbersome, difficult prose; lots of big words, complicated sentences; it's hard reading matter. And these people were reading it — they wanted to find out what's in it. As a matter of fact, I've heard from many

sources in our inner-cities that people are beginning to see — teenagers — who have been declared uneducable, unteachable, un-this and un-that, and there they've got *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and James Baldwin, Martin Luther King — because for the first time, they've found stuff worth reading.

Teachers keep saying, what do you do with a person who isn't interested in anything? There is no such person — there is no such thing as a person who isn't interested in anything! If he isn't interested in anything else, he's interested in himself. That's the first thing we have to do with these supposedly not interested students — and to convince them can't be done in a day — in a week or maybe a month. We have to convince them against the evidence of all their past schooling that their real interests — whatever they are — are *legitimate*! That we recognize them and respect them and when we have done that, then we may be in a position

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where they may be willing to tell us about what their real interests are — and they may surprise us. And then we may be able to get into the business of finding out how to help them follow their real interests, build on them and use them as a way of exploring the whole world. As I say, the very beginning is to let them know — and this may take some time — that their person, their life experience, their — that's why I don't like this upward bound, higher horizon, it implies some really bad things — their experience, to use Laing's words, is *real*, it's *legitimate*, it's as legitimate as anybody

else's.

I think it's good experiences that make us strong inside. A very good friend of mine is the head of a private school outside Detroit and he likes to talk about the iodine theory of education. It hurts, it must be good for you. And we could talk about the influence of puritanism and Calvinism, etc. I suppose this boils down to a kind of personal philosophy. There is plenty of frustration and problems and pain in the growing up of a child anyway. Believe me, it's not easy to be little. If you think of the happy, gayness of children living in this Paradise — you have forgotten what it was like! Little children want to grow up and get out of this. They're very much aware of their littleness, their weakness and their ignorance, their incompetence — at least until they get afraid of failure, this doesn't paralyze them into inactiveness, but boy, how they want to get out of this situation! We don't need to add to their troubles — they're tough little organisms; I think they survive a great deal. I don't believe adversity and I don't believe particularly that the kind of experiences of which traditional education is full — I don't think these things build strength or character. I think they build cowardice, evasiveness; I think children in conventional situations may get very cunning at conning teachers and learning how to duck out from problems and evade difficulties and protect themselves — and they get very good at self-protection which is a kind of minor skill of life. I suppose, but I think we've got to aim higher than that.

It seems to me the duty of any older person who deals with young, growing people is to enable them to, as soon as possible, stand straight and walk on their own feet. I suspect a lot of people in education, perhaps without knowing it, work in the other direction. They foster dependency instead of independence.

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some of the paths that lead from where they are to various directions, and to help them to perhaps go down whatever paths they want to explore. This is a very different manner of learning from the traditional view of education. It has not been much changed by curriculum reform of any kind — you start with a body of material which you have decided the child is going to be made to learn, like it or not. We must allow children to set their own tasks and to make for themselves assessments and judgments about how well these tasks have been done.

And finally, we have to give up the notion that we know everything that's going on — that we are in precise control like a conductor over an orchestra. That we know just what every child has learned all the time and just what his rate of progress is, etc. There may be a great deal of learning going on that we may not know anything about and that we haven't had anything in particular to do with, and in many ways we can't even prove that it's happening. We have to take as a matter of faith, I think, that in an environment in which children are active and open and alive and concerned and busy that a lot of learning is going on whether we know it is or not. If we can get ourselves over these hurdles, and they are hurdles in us, not in the children, then I think we will find that the classroom will be a place in which we can grow just as much as the children do.

Basically, I agree with A. S. Neill (*editor, founder of Summerhill*), I think school is a place where children should be able to learn what they want to learn, investigate the world in whatever way seems most useful to them, including sitting under a tree and thinking about it if that's what they happen to need to do at the moment. I find myself believing much more strongly than I used to — and here I'll have to repeat something that some of you heard me say this afternoon — that to decide for children what they shall be made to do or learn

as much as we do in traditional education is a vastly damaging and destructive process. What it does, it seems to me, is to deny the legitimacy of the child's own experience, interest, concerns of his own real self. We indeed treat children in school as if education were a kind of a molding process, and the child some inert, also somewhat recalcitrant substance like a very stiff clay which had to be kneaded and pummeled and hammered into some sort of a shape. But this assumption about the person is very damaging to the person — this is something that I think Neill has grasped intuitively. I think that one of the worst things that happens to our great pioneers of thought, be they Freud, Maria Montessori, or Neill and many others in many fields, is that we tend to turn their words into a kind of holy writ and carve them in imperishable granite so that not a syllable can be changed. You see a lot of this in Montessori education. There are some exceptions perhaps, but I have yet to see or hear of a Montessori classroom in which there are any materials except hers, and an awful lot has been done in the past ten years in the way of inventing materials for children. In the same way, I think it would be very dangerous, and I think the last thing that you would want to do would be to think of Summerhill as a kind of perfection. I found it physically a rather dismal environment. Neill is not really interested in pedagogy, and he hasn't got enough money to hire a really good staff — which he admits. His position is, that if a child doesn't have to go to a class unless he wants to, it doesn't make much difference what methods of instruction are used when he gets there. If he decides he wants to learn mathematics, or history, or Latin, one form of instruction is as good as another. I believe in the reverse of that — I believe that if he doesn't want to learn, that one is as bad as another. But I think that if he does want to learn, some people can help him much more than others and I

think Neill has been a little indifferent to this and would admit it, and I don't think the school is intellectually or artistically or visually, or in any other way stimulating or satisfying as it might be.

Some sociologists at Harvard asked me at a meeting a year or so ago when I was talking to them that if children were educated this way, how are they going to fit onto the tracks which society has laid down? And my answer was — they're going to make *new* tracks — they're going to make their own tracks. And then I went on to say — "Where do you think *these* tracks came from? From out of the sky? Where do human institutions come from? Someday, somebody started it, because he thought it had a function." If a person cannot find a way within certain institutions to do the kind of work that he thinks he wants to do, then let him make a new track. This would be true in any society, but particularly true of ours, which is going at breakneck speed to the edge of a cliff. What any society requires for its very health, its life, its survival, is people who can find new tracks — can make new tracks — can create new institutions, new ways of looking at human problems, new ways of cutting across these things that seem to make it im-

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possible, these institutional arrangements that seem to make it impossible for us to do what we know we need to

do, like get pure air to breathe and fresh, pure water to drink. This society is desperate whether it knows it or not, it desperately needs the kind of creative and innovative people which I think will come out of this kind of education. So when people talk about the needs of society and the kind of mental and spiritual needs that I'm talking about of individual people as if they were in conflict, I think they're crazy. Our society is dying of a surfeit

I think the first thing we have to do to reach these people that we have thought of as "unreachable" is to recognize that their interests — whatever they are — are legitimate, are real, are as worthy of concern as anybody else's interests, including ours.

of ignorant specialists, and for our survival we have got to develop a lot of them — (and in a hurry!) the kind of people you and I and I guess a lot of us are talking about. And I do indeed have this in mind!

The other thing that I like to talk to students about — I made a distinction between jobs, careers and work. A friend of mine has a job as surgeon in the Mayo Clinic. His career is medicine — his work is healing sick people. You see the difference? The old-fashioned word for what I'm calling work is "a vocation". Now I can see somebody getting a degree because he felt that he needed it to do the work that he had decided he really wanted to do. This isn't how most students stumble into their occupations today. They go to school and take all these required courses and they finally get higher marks in one course than in another. So they think they'd better stick with that — so they go to college and if they keep getting high marks, like in chemistry, why they go into chemistry! If it's in physics, then they

go into physics — the same with history or French. When they get through college, they go to graduate school and become a professor. There's no vocation — they've become physicists because this seemed to be the "slot" that they fell into, not because there's some question which they desperately want to ask of nature, and so they finally wind up with their Ph. D. — well, what kind of a research project am I going to do? Well, you know what this leads to. I don't think this is any sensible way for people to plan their lives. One of the things that a person ought to do in his education, and mind you, you're not going to be there when you're 21 or 25. This is a process which continues — the process of finding your vocation — of finding the work which you need to do and can do and think most worth doing. The problem perhaps of finding some kind of match between your own talents and something that needs to be done out there in the society you look at — this is a long job. But it is a very important part of what life is about and it seems to me that education ought to assist it in every way that it can, instead of impeding it.

Let me say again that I don't believe there is a person who isn't interested in anything. I think the desire to make more sense of the world and to understand something about how it goes is not only fundamental, but it cannot be completely killed even under the most hopelessly or unfavorable circumstances. I think everybody in the world is interested in something, be it only himself and his own problems. There are lots of children in school who *appear* to be not interested in anything — who have taken refuge in what I call "the strategy of deliberate failure" — who have decided that the best way they can avoid not only the public shame and humiliation but the private shame and humiliation of repeated failure is not to try to do anything. As the old saying goes, "You can't fall out of bed when you're sleeping on the floor." And so they put on a mask of

indifference and this is their protection — they're not going to expose themselves any longer. I believe that is only a mask — I think the first thing we have to do to reach these people that we have thought of as "unreachable" is to recognize that their interests — whatever they are — are legitimate, are real, are as worthy of concern as anybody else's interests, including ours. It won't be easy to convince some of these people of this — they will have every reason to believe that we're trying to trap them, or catch them. But I think that we can convince them. And if you can convince a person that *his* interest, *his* concerns, *his* worries are legitimate and worthy of not only *his* attention, but anybody's, then you may in time get him to reveal to you what some of these interests are. You may get him to the point where he'll begin to talk about them. This has been done and in hopelessly unfavorable circumstances, and if you can once get him to reveal what his interests are, his concerns and the source of his anger, frustrations and fear — what these things are — then you're in a position to start his education.

I suppose a lot of my beliefs about education do not rest on anything that could be called a scientific base, but on the other hand, I deeply believe, along with the philosopher, Michael Polany, that personal knowledge — all belief rests on a subjective base, so I don't apologize for the fact that this belief is subjective and not provable. I think, as I say, that the desire to learn is fundamental, basic, ineradicable, indestructible in all human beings, and if we can find ways to free people of the anxiety, of fear, of the need to please us; if we can convince them of the legitimacy of and worth of their own persons, their own lives, their own experience, their own concern that they will all be able to learn. Then perhaps we can create a society where people are whole men in the truest sense of the word.