

E. F. Beane

Into the Mainstream Life or Did I Grow Up Absurd?

School is a Sheltered Environment. Of course it is not without its brutal and abusive aspects, and there is more than enough literature on that score written in the last decade to attest to that. The point, however, I wish to make is that school shelters an individual in the most negative of fashions by not giving young persons adequate preparation for life, often muddling their minds up in the process by giving them a mistaken idea of the priorities of life by means of which they can manoeuver more effectively into and through this Brave New World of ours. This realization comes upon a body quite cataclysmically and, I feel, far too often catastrophically, when the young person makes his departure out the quasi-womb precincts of the school environment into what is called "The World" and what I, in this account, shall refer to as "Mainstream Life."

To flesh things out a bit, let me provide you with a few details about my background (to place myself into a historical context). I, the maker of all the bold claims of the previous paragraph, am part of the Post War Baby Boom. As was the case with post war babies, the whole lot of us or a considerable majority of us, once hitting age five, for Protestants, and six for Catholics (I was, as you've guessed by now, injected into Quebec's gloriously bi-religious and bilingual school system), were sent into public schools (elementary and secondary) after which those hangers-on of us either graduated, dropped out, or continued on, depending upon that subtle constellation of monetary resources, motivation, and just plain old intestinal fortitude. For my own part, I took a B.A. degree, and went on to take the one year teaching course at McGill, a line of study, to put it euphemistically, which I didn't complete. Floundering for a short while and using a summer to reorient

myself by working as a pot washer at a summer camp, I finally landed a job in a Meat Plant-cum-Emporium through a nepotistic connection — in short, the young man's father worked there and got him in. It is at this point in my life where I embarked upon one of the most important chapters of my education.



Now, by virtue of my position outside formal school I can actually bear down upon the crucial learning experiences or what I've termed educational chapters in my life:

The first, being the initial three years of primary school (excluding kindergarten) wherein I acquired the crucial skills of Reading, Riting and Rithmetic.

The second, came in my sixth grade when I was initiated into the whole business of doing projects and term papers.

The third, in my second year of university when I acquired the ability — which, with a varying degree of proficiency, allows me to relate seemingly remote bodies of knowledge — the old reconciliation of "the two cultures" trip.

The fourth, this one that I'm about to make all manner of grand advertisements concerning.

The importance of this last stage, I cannot stress strongly enough. Maybe, it derives its unique character from the fact that, on getting into this phase, I was twenty-three and about to set out upon my own and thus to become financially responsible for my actions. Nevertheless, I feel the act of facing some, just some, of the demands of the Mainstream Life, such as earning a living, keeping my appearance and my dwelling place in order, and seeking compensation for the stresses incurred at work, carried for me the greatest intensity and reality as a learning experience.

George Leonard, in what is to me one of the most positive and sanely visionary of books ever written about education, *Education and Ecstasy*, enunciates the terms of learning.

1. To learn is to change.
2. Learning involves interaction between the learner and his environment, and its effectiveness relates to the frequency, variety, and intensity of the interaction.

Interestingly enough, it was while doing the 9:00 - 5:00 shift that I came closer to experiencing the reality of these

two descriptions of learning than I ever had while attending school. Regardless of what level in formal school I found myself in, no matter what sort of subject matter I was dealing with, from the most appealing — such as biology, psychology, or literature — to the least appealing — mathematics — I never got as clear cut a notion of a progression, an evolution, a change, as Leonard puts it, as I did when I found myself working full time. At no time either did I ever develop a perspective about what learning was, that is, an awareness that the myriad schooling activities with which I was engaged, constituted a process called learning though, God knows, I could give you definitions along with the best of them.

Something had been missing all along in the schooling experience that prevented me from making these perceptions which, interestingly enough, were present in the working situation. That something, I now conclude, was a combination of a definite awareness of a Payoff (as bluntly as I can put it, there was money riding on whatever you did) and, that long delayed or perhaps, avoided, marriage of cause to effect, the connection between information acquired and the Observable Repercussion it had upon the environment. I think, in the end, for the purposes of making learning a Meaningful, Rich, and Real Experience, this second point is of paramount importance. Given the relative simplicity of the tasks that cropped up in the course of doing my job, I could finally see how the faculties of the mind could be used to do something that would have a concrete effect. For instance, one often had to reflect a few moments and formulate a strategy concerning how to place the incoming stock in such a way as to satisfy two conditions: The principle of stock rotation and the utilization of minimum space. Often, in the process of moving this incoming stock from the receiving dock into the store, one would be faced with various obstacles in one's path — unused pallets (raft-like structures, usually made of wood, used to place stock upon), tree hooks often with a full load of meat hanging from them, flat trucks, all of which had to be moved out of the way, usually, with the attendant consideration of putting them in places where they would not unduly impede the work of others.

In relation to these problems there was the great demand made upon one's ability of concentration. One had to learn how to handle a knife, for instance, while putting up with the premeditatedly distracting behavior of fellow workers, bent upon your learning not how to handle a knife. And one had to satisfy the perpetual obligation to have left no loose ends around job-wise, so that your boss might give you hell for fiddling

with a knife when you should have been doing something more appropriate to what you were being paid for, such as packing pork chops or minced meat, or sweeping the floor, or any hundred other minute chores, all so indispensable and God awfully important as they put it, for the proper and smooth workings of the entire operation. Though many of these endeavors had an undeniable humdrum and trivial quality about them, the necessity to integrate these disparate activities into a smooth repertoire of behavior proved to be a Challenge, one to which I could see the Rhyme and Reason and one which gave me the opportunity to see thought undergoing an almost immediate translation into action.

This, I guess, could be considered the self-reinforcing side of learning behavior, the one so highly emphasized by Bruner and his colleagues when they contend that learning is intrinsically reinforcing. However, I cannot, in this context, minimize the importance of the "Payoff" function because that, if not the original Reality Principle behind the whole operation, was certainly a complementary agent to the Intrinsically Reinforcing side of the learning process. The importance of the payoff, to be understood fully, cannot be left at the stage of being considered merely as the carrot held dangling before the mule, but must be construed as engaging the young individual in another potentially rich and involving set of activities, that is, the circulation of monetary currency throughout society.

Thus, not only do you get a real Reward for work — not an Abstraction such as a gold star, or a percentage, or a better grade, or whatever the criterion of evaluation may be in a school situation, but is a reward that makes you feel all the more complete as a person, because you are now, an Economic Free Agent. In operational terms this means you are responsible to yourself for catering for your basic needs — food, shelter, clothing — as well as for your luxuries, the paraphernalia involved with hobbies, entertainment, and your long term projects be they the acquisition of a car, a super-deluxe stereo system, or the building of a financial empire in the best Carnegie, Rockefeller, Horatio Alger tradition.

I don't wish to turn this into a panegyric to the Almighty B**ck, but you've got to admit that these kinds of activities, with their marked purposive bent (maybe even warp), mean more to the average youngster in this our Brave New World than either pedagogical praise or reprimand. Consequently, it does the schooling system no honor to have kids — be they five, ten, or twenty-two — ignorant of a few basic facts, name-

ly that:

1. You need some kind of money to get by in this world.
2. That you need some sort of skill or ability to acquire this money, and by money I mean enough to make life liveable, because no body is going to throw open the doors of business or industry and welcome you therein with outstretched arms, just on account of your being you.
3. That in many respects, still, like it or not, as the song goes, "Oh baby, it's a wild world, it's hard to get by just upon a smile."

There are numerous people out there ready to take as much advantage of your young idealism, naiveté and talent as there are bacteria in a pile of dung, and they will try to do it however they can, whenever they can. This, this very point, is the catastrophe, and I'd say brutalizing part of the worldly, or mainstream life experience, the very thing which school does not prepare you for in the least either by inclining you to acquire a definite skill to help you get by, or by telling you in as frank and non-anxiety producing a fashion as can be, that you're going to be dealing with a pack of cannibals, some perfumed and others Damned Rotten Smelly!

Too Cynical? Paranoid even? I don't think so. To me, this recommendation is adaptive strategy of the most fundamental kind. And if you think I'm just throwing words around, why not take a deep breath of air in the inner city area of Montreal during the work hours of any ordinary week day?

Go down to the city harbor, look and smell the water there.

Look at the haze that covers the sky even on those brilliantly sunny Montreal mornings.

Gaze upward at the great skyscrapers that are encroaching upon everyone's view of the sky, and cutting off sunshine for the human ants that scurry their way along the bottom of the concrete-glass canyon.

Examine statistical reports of the increased occurrence of mental illness.

Consider the fact that young, intelligent, idealistic people have to band together in terrorist groups such as the S. L. A. to make the world understand the outrageous social injustice that still plagues, never mind the world, just this continent.

Maybe much of this harangue has no application to school as we know it in so far as there is only so much that can be conveyed in school learning situations, regardless of the good intentions behind them or the imaginativeness of their design. If that's the case, I would press for some alternative or middle ground between what we call schooling today and mainstream

life. Without that, I believe that we shall only be producing youngsters who will be hopelessly maladapted to the conditions in the world as they are.

Maybe I am the last person in the world to have the right to direct what I feel to have been some pretty alarming denunciations of our schooling system, let alone be audacious enough to recommend a middle ground set of experiences interposed between school and mainstream life. All I can say, in the end, is that to be so sickeningly out of contact with the demands of mainstream life as I was, really boils down to being out of touch with a major side of oneself. If this confession of sorts leads you to conclude that there was no one to blame for the condition but myself and that to foist a personal failing upon the shoulders of the school system is really unfair, you are right. The only question I can ask is this: How many more cases are there like myself, who grow up, as Paul Goodman put it, in an absurd fashion or, as I would say, in a vacuous environment? How many of us are there in an environment which, if we are ever fortunate enough, feel our impact upon the world even if it is in the most trivial respects of lifting a heavy load in a proper fashion, or wielding a boning knife with a modicum of expertise — we are able to earn, as they traditionally say, our daily bread, but more profoundly our place in the sun, in positions as effectively functioning adult human beings? If I am just one more sorry case included amongst the outer fringes of either aspect of a bell curve that depicts the relationship between scholarship and vocational realization, consider this account so much sour grapes.

But, if I, and others like me, are beginning to encroach upon the middle range of that curve, ensconcing our vile little bodies within the dome of the bell, start sweating folks because the times they are a changin' — what's more in a way that few ever believed they would.