

## Challenging Youths to Become Adults

*At the time of life when a man or woman is first aware of a capability for independent commitment to some purpose in life, society through its schools provides a little content in a few subjects traditionally reputed to prepare for entry into a guild of academics (whose own purposes in life are notoriously isolated from the mainstream). Gibbons postulates three life-long themes each with its own curriculum, that begin when we leave childhood: our unfolding as individuals, the development of our social ideas, and a search for knowledge by which we may live with the unknown. He finds in such practices as the Walkabout of an Australian aborigine a pattern of separation, initiation, and return that seems to hold for the management of all such transitions throughout life. On its basis he delineates a model of schooling that embodies two educational paradigms, that of tradition and that of "challenge;" and describes how such a scheme has indeed been put into effective practice.*

I

*When I graduated from school I had no idea of what I was going to do. I wasn't good at anything people pay you for. I thought mostly about things. You know — stereo, car, skis — that sort of thing. Most of the time I was with some of the gang. Fifteen or twenty of us that hung around together. We did a few numbers, but mostly we talked, listened to music and partied. Then, things got tenser and tenser at home. I was worried, you know. I knew all these big decisions were hanging over me, but I just ate and slept and went out and watched T.V. I didn't want to talk about it. Finally, I just got a job at the mill and moved into a house with some of the gang. And that was sort of that.*

If it is important to teach what is basic in education, it is also important to teach what is significant. Far too often we become so absorbed with routine lessons we forget the larger context of human endeavour which schooling is intended to serve. What is the essential human endeavour?

We can verify in our own experience what we have been told by psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, mythologists, and artists — that the basic motivation and primary task of men and women is striving to find a meaning in life. This striving occurs in three spheres: the personal sphere in which we ask “Who am I?” and “What can I become?”; the social-cultural sphere in which we ask “How does society work?” and “What role can I successfully play in it?”; and finally, the sphere of the unknown about which we ask, “Is this life all there is, or is there a power in the universe I can’t perceive and a plan I can’t comprehend?” and “Whichever is true, how do I function to give my life a deeper meaning?” These three major themes in our lives have profound implications for education.

### Active unfolding

Each theme is its own curriculum, and each is life long. The first theme is our unfolding as individuals. Many argue that the pattern of our development is determined by genetic heritage and the environmental conditions of our lives, that little can be done to change our personal destinies. Passive people without goals, initiative, self-discipline, or personal development skills may give themselves up to chance, to the statistics of the average, making self-fulfilling prophecies about themselves come true; but man is unique among life-forms in being able to shape his destiny, to envisage alternative futures, to choose among them, and to pursue his choice — if he determines to do so. At each stage in our lives, the theorists of human development such as Erik Erikson tell us, we are confronted with tasks that must be successfully accomplished if we are to grow into a healthy maturity and realize the potential of our lives. The list of attainments seems like an outline of the characteristics of self-determining persons capable of expressing themselves in the world: trust in self and others, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity. The consequence of failing at these life-development tasks is a litany of the characteristics evident in people who remain passive, dependent, and without shaping influence on their experience: mistrust, doubt, guilt, inferiority, role confusion, isolation, stagnation, and despair.

If we accomplish the tasks of development, we can influence this major theme in our lives. We can influence who we will become. We can express ourselves in the world and achieve a healthy maturity. A few people are productive far beyond any normal indication of their potential, but most of us function on a fraction of our capacities. We can choose to be more productive, to shape who we are by what we are doing. The question is, can education improve our ability to guide our own unfolding, and if so, how?

The educational essentials for personal growth can be summed up in the phrase *guided personal action*. Young people do not discover their distinctive selves sitting in an audience. They must act. And they cannot develop by only acting out the scripts of others. They can best prepare for a productive life by

learning to design and produce their own events, and by reflecting upon their success or failure before they act again. By these means they learn to take part in determining who they are.

What is the basic condition for cultivating guided personal action among students? The general condition, according to John Gilmore's analysis of research on *The Productive Personality*,<sup>1</sup> is self-esteem, which is itself developed by regular expressions of approval, warmth, and empathy by a person significant in their lives. Action is also enhanced by encouragement to action, especially action which challenges participants to reach for difficult outcomes they value highly. Success in action will be increased with training in the skills of successful action, such as goal-setting, strategic planning, and evaluation for refinement. As patterns emerge in the acts students plan, students can begin to concentrate on those few competencies that will become the expertise on which their identity can be solidly founded, and from which their future can be hopefully launched.

### Help for life's upheavals

The second closely related theme concerns our development of appropriate social roles. This means not only how we relate to family, friends, and intimates, but also what role we play in society at large. Far from a single leap to adulthood, this role we play is in constant flux, moving through a series of orderly stages described in greatest detail in Daniel J. Levinson's recent work *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. In addition to the relatively stable developmental stages, there are major transition periods which mark significant changes the individual must make in himself, his relationships, and his roles. The major transitions occur at early childhood, early adulthood, mid-life, and late adulthood, but other equally predictable, less disruptive transitions occur between the major stages. How important is this pattern? Levinson puts it directly and forcefully:

The primary task of every stable period is to build a life structure: a man must make certain key choices, form a structure around them, and pursue his goals and values within this structure. . . . A transitional period . . . terminates the existing life structure and creates the possibility for a new one. The primary tasks . . . are to question and reappraise existing structure, to explore various possibilities for change and to move toward commitment to choices that form the basis for a new life structure in the ensuing stable period.<sup>2</sup>

Each transition period may lead to drastic upheavals and changes in our lives. Crucial life decisions may be made about our work, marital status, friends, avocations, and community activities. In the following stable periods these decisions lead us to key choices around which we must then develop our life patterns. These personal negotiations are made even more complex by our need to integrate our developing personality with our changing age and our evolving life circumstances. Nor can we avoid the change. Not to decide is a decision with equally dramatic consequences.

One other feature of this unfolding social-cultural theme is that we play out its drama on a constantly enlarging stage. As infants our lives are inseparable from our mothers, but once we become aware of ourselves as distinctive entities, we begin to enlarge our circle of contacts, and with each expansion at each stage the relationships become more complex. As we mature, the nature of our relationships changes, also. Old relationships give way to new; old kinds of relationships give way to new kinds. Through all of the processes involved in this theme, the selves we present to the world, our social selves, and the roles we play are being forged. But this outward manifestation is not separable from the personal unfolding of the first theme in us. As Levinson says:

In countless ways (man) puts himself into the world and takes the world into himself. Adult development is the story of the evolving process of mutual interpenetration.<sup>3</sup>

Again, as we examine the importance of this theme in people's lives, it must amaze us that schools not only ignore it as subject matter — except for occasional vocational counselling based upon written tasks and fatherly advice — but also function in ways that obstruct its healthy unfolding. First of all, there is seldom a cooperative effort between parents and teachers to create a coherent, beneficial influence on the social development of the child. Secondly, children are kept together by grade and are isolated from adults in the community and so have only the narrowest of opportunities for social growth arising from activities under the aegis of the school. And finally, students are often forbidden social contact and compete on tests of skill completely unrepresentative of real world competition.

When parents and teachers function coherently with mutual support, children's learning increases remarkably. When the focus of those mutual efforts is on responsible self-directed behaviour, evidence of that increases remarkably, too. When children help others learn, they learn more themselves; when they learn in cooperative groups, they learn more; and when they learn with significant adults, they become more productive too. There is little reason for the schools not to actively cultivate the unfolding of the social theme, to provide opportunities to work with different age groups on studies and shared activities, to teach social and political skills for real life challenges, to enable students to develop social-vocational themes in which they practice their expertise, and to function at times cooperatively with parents and teachers to plan their activities. Surely the idea that the roles of home and school are separable and should remain so can no longer be defended. They are inextricably intertwined. It's time we tapped the potential of shared responsibility as preparation for dealing with the challenge of changing social roles.

## **Rigorous inquiry**

The third theme — the search for personal knowledge about the world, for a set of beliefs and values to live by, for a convincing view of the universe and

our place in it — is a life-long struggle with questions to which there are no definitive answers. Nevertheless, we create answers, however tentatively held, because without them we would have no basis for judgment in crucial decisions, no commitment to actions beyond self-interest, and no sense of purpose and significance in our lives. Objectively we are simply material creatures crawling the earth somewhat aimlessly for a wink in time. To find out how much more than this life is, we engage in inquiry. The nature of this dynamic process is well described by Michael Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*:

I believe that in spite of the hazards involved, I am called upon to search for the truth and report my findings.<sup>4</sup>

The development of beliefs and values is no less arduous:

I must aim at discovering what I truly believe in and at formulating the convictions which I find myself holding. . . . I must conquer my self-doubt, so as to retain a firm hold on this program of self identification.<sup>5</sup>

These hard won understandings, beliefs, and values lead to commitment, and with commitment, readiness for the action it implies.

The hazard, of course, is that the pursuit of personal knowledge by rigorous inquiry may lead one to conclusions that will be in sharp conflict with the majority. Although it is a democratic ideal, to state one's findings may indeed lead to consequences that evoke self-doubt. These findings are not just ideas, beliefs, and values, but also creations in all their multifoliate forms, from music to sculpture to space-city design. To produce the creation or act on an idea can be equally challenging. Schools, unfortunately, seem in a difficult position to promote this pursuit of personal knowledge. Open-ended questions — no matter how significant or basic to life — are messy to teach. To publish unusual reports of students' findings may be difficult for administrators and students alike. Parents and peers, both, can be easily offended audiences.

What would be required to cultivate the development of this theme in the lives of young people? Certainly, they must be encouraged to formulate questions of significance to them, and with equal certainty, the answers they begin to formulate must be respected as *their* answers. The movement from meaning to values to commitment to action must be managed by individuals for themselves. Education can most profitably be directed at the process. Such skills as formulating questions, following problem-solving procedures, evaluating the findings and so on can be taught. But the process must combine a greater depth of sincerity in the student on one hand, with a greater openness to new ideas, people, and values on the other. Personal findings must be reported, but not preserved as dogma.

While these three themes — personal, social and philosophical — have distinctive features, they also overlap. As Levinson points out, we place

ourselves in the world and take the world into ourselves, adapting to it and making it adapt to us. We evolve through this mutual interpenetration. But is there a paradigm of education equal to the task of cultivating the development of these three life themes?

## II

*The young Athenian, Theseus, sent with others to Knossos in Crete as a sacrifice to the fearsome Minotaur, decided to enter the labyrinth and confront the beast. Princess Ariadne offered to help. At the suggestion of crafty Daedalus, she gave Theseus a roll of thread to unravel as he searched through the maze. When he found the Minotaur, he fought and killed it; then, following the thread, retraced his steps and escaped. When Theseus returned to Athens with Ariadne, however, the ship's crew accidentally gave a signal of the youth's death to those on shore. His father, seeing it, cried out in grief and jumped to his death.*

In the Walkabout of the Australian aborigines, young tribesmen were sent alone into the vast desert outback for six months to demonstrate their mastery of the skills they would need to survive as individuals and to contribute to the survival of their community. Many other primitive tribes sent their young on similar challenging tasks to demonstrate their adulthood, or took them away for experiences especially designed to mark their transition to adult roles. But these rites are only a fragment of the evidence that Walkabout or challenge education represents, a unique kind of learning experience that is basic to personality-formation and growth.

Each of these rites of passage involves *withdrawal* from a familiar environment, society or roles; a *transforming* experience or a demonstration that transformation has occurred; and *re-entry* into the familiar environment in a new role. The aboriginal youth of Australia left to search out the waterholes in a vast circular track that would bring him home. Young native Indians of America left their villages to make their first kill in a hunt or a battle. In other societies the young met secretly with the elders to receive the secrets of

adulthood and later return to the tribe as if transformed into a new person — a hunter, a warrior, an adult.

### Separation, Initiation, and Return

This paradigm is apparently recorded in mythology also. Thomas Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* says that the central myth underlying all myths is a cycle with three stages — separation, initiation, and return. In a typical myth, the hero — who is Everyman, you and me — leaves the familiar surroundings of his home and community on an important quest. During the second phase the hero must find his way into a new realm of experience and once there must struggle fiercely — although usually aided by helpers — against great odds to fulfill his mission, as Theseus did by slaying the Minotaur. In struggling to victory he is transformed. With new knowledge, powers, status, or gifts he now must return to his old environment and find a way both to be accepted as the new person he is, and to gain acceptance of the contribution he has to make. Once a worthy quest has been identified, the hero proceeds with little concern for success or failure. To strive for meaning is everything. In the examined life, both success and failure contribute to the essential human endeavour.

A pattern similar to the one that appears in many rites and myths appears also in theories of psychological and social development. The separation-initiation-return paradigm is evident in the total life cycle, in transitional phases, and — to a lesser extent — in the regular tasks of development in each stage of growth. The life cycle as a whole seems to begin with the child's *separation* from dependency on its mother and home, to establish its own autonomous activities. This is followed by *initiation* into close-relationships with the intimates of the opposite sex outside the family, and initiation into a field or fields of activities in which the individual — with the aid of helpers — becomes competent or expert, and around which a sense of sustained identity develops. The cycle is concluded with integration and contribution to family and community, a consolidation period comparable to the *return* of the mythical cycle.

During childhood and adolescence — in fact, throughout life — the movement is steadily away from the safety of home, friends, and childhood loved ones to a greater and greater range of contacts, activities, opportunities and challenges. Once the benefits have been reaped or the task completed, the individual returns "home," at least to some place where he was known as he was. For many this regular extension — intellectually, interpersonally, or geographically — is terminated too soon, and with it much of their growth. As we have seen, the transition periods of four to five years each are periods of separation from the past during which the individual is able to explore new possibilities for change. After a transformation has occurred, life is consolidated around any new activities which may have been initiated, and a new stable period is established. In this stable-transitory-stable process we see clearly outlined again the same pattern of Separation-Initiation-Return that we have

observed in other fundamental human activities. At no other time is the process more intense, or the challenge greater, than during the transition from childhood to adulthood when the young must leave home, find their work, and then establish a new home of their own.

## Paradigms for education

From these examples we see deeply inscribed on our cultural and personal histories a pattern of learning, a paradigm of education, remarkably distinguishable from the traditional and still common paradigm of schooling in which teachers *Present* a lesson, students *Practice* the lesson in their books, and then the teacher gives the student a *Test* to see if the lesson has been learned. The other paradigm begins instead with students setting themselves a *Challenge* to accomplish a significant task that requires a level of performance beyond any they have previously achieved. In the second phase they *Struggle* to meet their challenge as strategically as possible, in their own way with their own helpers. Finally, during *Integration*, they attempt to consolidate their changes and establish a new but stable life pattern.

Whether the result of their efforts is success or failure, students consider what they have learned, how they have changed, and the implications of their experience for their lives. Our argument is not that the traditional *Present-Practice-Test* model is wrong minded and should be replaced, but that without the *Challenge-Struggle-Integration* model it is intolerably dull and repressive of the learning people need to face the life tasks, the fundamental themes and the opportunities that face them. What the P-P-T paradigm achieves by controlled environment, focus on the minute part, and forced repetition must be counter-balanced by C-S-I units conducted in real environments, focusing on whole life tasks, and employing a vast range of learning methods and strategies. There is a considerable difference between practising trigonometry and navigating a plane or ship; between studying grammar and writing for a newspaper; between drafting exercises and designing a house that will be built. The traditional paradigm is not wrong; it is simply insufficient. Practice at shooting the ball is trivial if we never play the game. Both are necessary.

This is not a discovery, or a swing of the schooling pendulum back from traditional values to progressive or humanistic ones; it is the resurfacing of a theme as old as recorded history and the earliest patterns of community. We find in tribal rites and myths, as well as in current studies of human behaviour, clear evidence of a pattern of instruction and learning well adapted to the pursuit of meaning but profoundly different from conventional patterns of education. In that recurrent pattern traditional and humanistic values are intermingled. But so far the ideas are too theoretical to guide practice. How can this paradigm be adapted to classroom or school use?

III

*When I was sixteen my Uncle got me a summer job in a logging camp up the Coast, about forty miles from the nearest town. I set chokers around the cut trees so the yarding machine could haul them away. It was hard work. I couldn't seem to do anything right. I couldn't carry the blocks, drive spikes, splice or even pull very hard on the steel lines we had to drag through the bush. The rest of the crew either made fun of me or ignored me. I stayed and I tried and even practised a few things at night. One exhausting day, after about a month, the hooker came up behind me and lifted me into the truck by the belt. "You're going to make it, kid," he said. After that everything was okay. Going home things seemed different — with my folks, school, the gang. I'm an accountant now, but that logging experience helped get me started.*

So far we have claimed that the great gap in formal education is the failure of schools to prepare students for their search for meaning in three realms: who they are, what their social-cultural role will be, and how they will deal with the difficult questions of human existence. A paradigm quite different from the usual pattern of schooling has been identified as well-established and effective. Rather than the familiar, Present-Practice-Test model, one based on the pattern of myths as well as current developmental psychology and sociology has been recommended: the Separation-Initiation-Return model. Let us call units based upon this pattern Challenge Units. The traditional model will now be referred to as Basic Units.

In a model of schooling that includes the new pattern, Challenge Units will have to be directed by students for themselves. Basic units, on the other hand, will be directed by teachers. With such a marked contrast between the two, a transitional activity will be necessary. This will be the Production Unit, and will involve students first in making choices; it will then teach the processes of self-direction; and it will finally involve students in activities that produce tangible results — productive units. The course model may now be outlined in full.

By introducing the Basic Units and following them through to a stage at which the student is planning and implementing his own, the teacher will become ready to introduce the Production Unit. While the Basic Unit may have no complete product (thus a class may study grammar and do nothing but grammar exercises), the Production Unit is designed as a project with outcomes, as close as possible to tangible results acceptable in the non-school world (thus, a girl produces a computer program to teach herself a foreign language).

Table 1

**THE PLACE OF CHALLENGE UNITS IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

	<b>Basic Units</b>	<b>Production Units</b>	<b>Challenge Units</b>
<b>Teacher-Directed</b>	Teacher presents, students practise and are tested.	Teacher presents production unit and walks students through it.	Assigned pre-challenge or mini-challenge activities.
<b>Guided Choice</b>	Student chooses from available course study units. Learns study skills.	Student chooses from available production activities. Learns production skills.	Student chooses from available challenge activities. Learns challenge skills.
<b>Student-Directed</b>	Student develops and implements basic units to complete subject.	Student develops production units and implements them.	Student develops challenge units and implements them.

When the Production Unit is completed, the challenges can begin. They may include challenge areas such as the following, which I first described in May, 1974:<sup>6</sup>

Adventure  
Service  
Logical Inquiry

Creative Expression  
Practical Applications

Others have added such challenges as the following:

Academic Concentration  
Spiritual Project

Future Planning  
Urban Survival Skills

We have found these challenges are most successfully accomplished when a contracting system is set up. For instance, Dr. Gary Phillips, in his high school program called Learning Unlimited, has worked successfully having students write contracts on self-directed challenges which are negotiated with a team including a student, a teacher, and a parent. By the time the student is planning his own challenge activities, he or she should have a goal, a plan, and a built-in evaluation procedure. This plan (or plans) is presented to the student's guiding committee which includes a parent or substitute, as well as a teacher and perhaps a member of the community. This committee guides and monitors the planning and execution of the challenge, meeting regularly with the student.

As students begin these self-directed challenge units with the help of their committees, they can focus on three new challenges:

- 1: At what will I become expert?
- 2: How can I practice a responsible adult role?
- 3: What search for meaning and value will I commit myself to?

In each of these challenges there will be a task that makes the student stretch his or her abilities. By completing each task students should end up not only with more knowledge and skill, but also with an accomplishment that has given them a greater understanding of themselves. In these ways what is basic in education need not be trivialized by meaningless exercises, but can be seen as preparation for challenges that strike at the essential questions people must ask and learn to answer for themselves — Who can I be? What role in society can I fulfil? And how can I make my life meaningful?

#### NOTES

1. John Gilmore, *The Productive Personality* (San Francisco: Albion 1974).
2. Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1978).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 299.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
6. "Walkabout: Searching for the Right Passage from Childhood and School," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 55 (May 1974) pp. 596-602.

The Journal invites contributions in the form of articles, research reports, book reviews and essays on books, and critical responses to its contents, in French or English. The field of interest is education, and especially the links between its theoretical and its applied aspects in school and university. It is concerned with the scholarly treatment of issues of current public concern, and is particularly hospitable to the treatment of problems and developments on the educational scene in Quebec. The emphasis is on the humane.

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