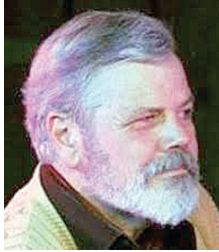


Talking Point

Things Worth Learning

By Rick Gray



Last week, I returned to a familiar theme – that American education lacks a sense of mission, and consequently, manages to spend colossal sums without accomplishing much.

Having no mission, American educators – and the politicians who have invaded and usurped the educational system – have adopted two default positions.

First, because both political parties are entirely subservient to the lords of unsustainable, corporate consumer capitalism, education has increasingly come to be linked to the sort of job-training responsible companies once did for themselves.

Today's great corporations – which already avoid paying their fair share of taxes – demand that the burden of training their employees be funded by those of us who do.

For the corporations, this not only represents an enormous savings. It also means that – having invested little or nothing in training their workers – they can casually discard individual employees, or whole battalions of them.

For the nation, it means that young people are, year by year, less prepared for their primary responsibility – that of citizenship in a self-governing republic.

Second, under the leadership of George W. Bush – who benefitted less from his own education than any president since Warren Harding – the United States adopted politicians' pet project of imposing high-stakes standardized testing at the Federal level.

High-stakes testing is a politician's dream. By making teachers and local administrators strictly responsible for whether students memorize a finite body of useless information, politicians can have it both ways. If the kids do well filling in their bubble-sheets, politicians can claim credit for how well schools are doing. If the kids do poorly, citizens will be inclined to blame the teachers – not the politicians.

Heads, I win. Tails, you lose.

As a result of these two trends – the replacement of education for citizenship by training for vanishing jobs, and the replacement of teacher-led pedagogy by a top-down testing regime – our schools increasingly turn out young people who can't see beyond the present.

Offered nothing of enduring value upon which to exercise their curiosity and critical intelligence, today's kids are ever more focused upon the evanescent fascinations of the internet.

What's timeless yields to what's trending. And the schools offer no resistance.

Of course, it's inevitable that youth will be drawn to novelty. It's the nature of adolescence to attend to the new, the fashionable, even the outrageous.

But the job of education – in every civilization worthy of the name – has involved balancing this natural proclivity for ephemera

with the disciplined study of enduring classics.

Schools dedicated to achieving this balance produce graduates who will grow into citizens capable of sustaining the nation. Schools that fail turn out herds of perpetually-distracted sheep, willing to perform mindless – even soulless – work in return for the means to purchase ever more useless stuff.

And here's the great irony of it all: The products of post-classical education are, of all American generations, the most insistent upon their own individualism – even as they follow the herd into the electronic marketplace, the mega-church, or two-option voting booth.

For forty years now, America's schools – even its elite universities – have done nothing so well as turn out people who insist on thinking for themselves, but who lack the essential equipment for doing so.

People who know no history, no philosophy, no literature – nothing of the classics of humanity's past – lack the capacity to challenge the present or imagine a different future.

Stuck in the Valley of the Present, they cannot even imagine the vistas open to the few who climb the slopes and gaze out on the sunlit mountaintops and dark valleys of the past – or the mist-shrouded topography of the future.

Isn't difficult to believe we live at the end of an age – not in the apocalyptic sense, but in the historical sense. Our particular brand of modernity has become both irrational and unsustainable.

Just look at how we live. Our particular brand of capitalism is not based – as was Adam Smith's – on more efficiently meeting basic human needs, but on mindless consumerism, driven by inescapable, non-stop advertising. When we started building enormous complexes of rental units to store the stuff we cannot cram into our closets, attics, basements and garages, that mindlessness became apparent.

But it's more than that. Our economy is also based on recklessly plundering finite natural resources; heedlessly fouling the only planet yet known to be capable of supporting human life; and destroying the habitats of other species upon whom our own lives – and our sense of beauty and wonder – depend.

And there are far too many of us, living increasingly longer lives. As our lives decrease in meaning and quality, we substitute quantity – both in numbers and in years.

Indeed, our mad insistence on mere human existence as being valuable in itself is proof enough that we no longer understand the notion that there are things – beyond having a pulse or minimal brain-stem function – which make human life worth living.

But then, how could we? Our schools no longer teach these things.

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