

Schooling As If Life Matters

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Lately, I have become aware of a sadness deep inside me. This sadness is about how contemporary schooling, despite its good intentions, robs us and our children of our self esteem, creativity, curiosity, spontaneity, lightness-of-being, confidence, and more.

Winston Churchill was on to this when he said: *Schools have not necessarily much to do with education... they are mainly institutions of control where certain basic habits must be inculcated in the young. Education is quite different and has little place in school.*

In a related vein Margaret Mead quipped: *My grandmother wanted me to get a good education, so she kept me as far away from schools as possible.*

Add to this Bertrand Russell's indictment: *We are faced with the paradoxical fact that [formal] education has become one of the chief obstacles to intelligence and freedom of thought.*

These pronouncements shouldn't really shock us. Indeed, I have observed that most adults—when invited to reflect on all the years they spent stuck in classrooms—readily acknowledge the many ways they were crippled, rather than enabled, by their schooling. That so many of us have little inclination to conduct this kind of inquiry into our schooling history is perhaps a measure of the power of schooling, itself, to expunge curiosity, critical thinking and self respect.

My lamentations have led me to conclude that schooling, as it's currently enacted, is *anti-life* in so far as it often undermines, rather than nourishes, people's relationship with themselves, each other and the world at large. The result is "relational illiteracy" on a grand scale

Think about it: If schools were successful in assisting young people in cultivating healthy relationships with themselves, each other, and the world—i.e., successful in cultivating *relational intelligence*—then, as "educated" adults, we would be at peace with ourselves (free of addictions and self rejection); we'd be at peace with each other (free of blame, anger, violence, war); and we'd be at peace with the natural world (free of biological destruction, toxicity, extinction).

But we are anything but a people at peace. Our lives are full of self deprecation, depression, drug abuse, recrimination, law suits, environmental disruption, violence, and more. Clearly something is amiss in our relating—i.e., our relational intelligence is deeply flawed.

One way out of this conundrum is to put RELATIONSHIP at the center of schooling. After all, the core ingredient of a successful life is success in life's myriad relationships. Getting our relationships "right"—becoming relationship masters—is what a well-lived life is all about. It's what growing up is all about, and it *is* what education, at its heart, *should* be all about.

Here's the punch line: Instead of prioritizing the traditional "3 Rs"—*reading riting and rithmitic*—we would be wiser, stronger, and safer as a nation if we cultivated excellence in an even more basic trio or "Rs"—namely: **R**elationship with Self, **R**elationship with

Other, and **R**elationship with Earth. These are the “Rs” that offer our young people a path to genuine success and fulfillment in life. Absent these “Relationship-Rs,” no amount of inventiveness, wealth accumulation, or technological wizardry will address the myriad social, environmental, and political challenges now confronting humankind.