

Foreword

Thomas Moore

My father is a born teacher. He's the kind of man who can spot a potential learner from a distance and go into action. When I was in my forties, he taught me how to bowl at his local bowling alley. In his typical fashion, he said, "Pick up the ball and roll it fast toward the center of those pins." That's all. He knew I could learn this relatively simple skill on my own. He believed in what John Gatto calls "self-teaching."

With my father's blood in me, I've been a teacher for forty years and have always loved the role. I learned it through apprenticeship with him. At eighty-eight, having retired from teaching plumbing in a trade school, he taught courses in a local school to adults who wanted to learn how to use computers. I hope I still have that kind of passion in my eighties.

But my father has also run up against the hardheaded bureaucracy John Gatto criticizes so explosively. Once, he approached a local school to tell them that, as a former plumbing instructor, he could give a talk to a class of children on where their drinking water comes from, how it's cleaned up, and where it goes after it's used. The school thanked him for the offer but told him there was no room

on their schedule.

I thought the school missed the boat on many levels. My father knows how to talk to kids, and children need some practical learning. Who knows what rich rewards would have come to those children just from being in the presence of a real teacher who loved his material and loves children? And him teaching that class would also have been an act of community. John Gatto makes the important point that a community needs old people and children mixing together.

As a teacher I've done some things I consider relatively outrageous but nothing as profoundly educational as the efforts of John Gatto. Teaching piano, I've encouraged children to start by composing their own music, thumping the sides of the instrument for percussive effect if they are so inclined. I used to counsel a college student as she stood on the window well in my office, easing her shyness by remaining behind a curtain. A colleague once came in and saw a pair of shoes sticking out from the drapery and naturally wondered what was going on. The most enjoyable teaching I ever did took place in a classroom that had thick carpeting but no chairs. My thirty students had no textbooks, no syllabus, and no purpose. I picked up on whatever appeared in the room on any particular day and followed it through. I've never seen so much learning take place, for me and my students, anywhere else.

A physician once said to me that healing always takes place when her back is turned. For me, learning happens when the teacher has other things in mind. I believe this kind of learning can be shaped and even taught, not in schools as we know them, but, as John Gatto says, when a mother and daughter take a trip to talk to a police chief or

when some children learn how to put out a newsletter by apprenticing to a publisher. Learning can't take place in pieces of time cut out for the convenience of an institution or in lessons set apart from the world in which students live. We don't learn when life is divided up into sections that have little connection with each other.

I met John Gatto about ten years ago at a small gathering of educators. During the course of a day's activities, we were asked to present an object that meant something to us. I remember John grabbing an old briefcase that I think he said had belonged to his father. It had a beautiful patina and evidence everywhere of years of loving use. When I saw John lift that briefcase, my heart skipped. It was so much like my father to value such a thing and to feel the passing of a sensibility from father to son to grandson. A gesture like this reveals that a person is full of soul. My father could never teach English, as John Gatto does, but the two of them share a way of seeing things, a way that is precious beyond measure and always in danger of being lost.

What I love about John's writing is the lively combination of outrageous irreverence and an omnipresent cool intelligence: the ease with which he refers to school as a jail, as confinement, as a cell; school as a vampire network that should have a stake driven through its heart; school bells as inoculating each child with indifference. As a reader you have no doubt where John stands.

John's right – it won't do to tinker with schools and try to make them better. We have to start from the ground up and reconsider what education is. In my language, I'd like to see us educate the soul, and not just the mind. The result would be a person who could be in this world cre-

atively, make good friendships, live in a place he loved, do work that is rewarding, and make a contribution to the community. People say that the word "educate" means to "draw out" a person's potential. But I like the "duc" — part in the middle of it. To be educated is to become a duke, a leader, a person of stature and color, a presence and a character.

I'm happy to see this passionate book coming to light once again. I celebrate it. I think it should be read aloud to educators and parents everywhere. I know it asks us to reconsider what we may think of as natural and obvious, but we need original ideas. Crumbling school buildings are telling us how tired they are. Violence in schools is screaming at us to stop doing this thing we call "teaching." The sorry level of discourse in America should tell us that the imaginations of our citizens are being cheated by the desperate ineffectiveness of schools. I'm grateful to John Gatto for having the gutsy imagination to tell us what's wrong and for giving us some good ideas on how to make it right.

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