

FOREWORD

Most of the essays in this book were first written as columns in the *Middlesex News*, beginning in late 1985 and extending into 1992. The intended audience was, and is, the average reader of a daily newspaper, an intelligent and thinking citizen possessed of good sense, who is entitled to full participation in our country's democratic process of self-government. I have always felt that whatever good emerges from a culture is grounded in the good of the individuals who make it up, and I have also always been confident that common decency and straight thinking will ultimately prevail where all opinions are freely aired.

Much of what I have written in these essays seems controversial and unconventional, and sometimes may look as if it was presented to be purposefully provocative. Appearances notwithstanding, I wish to make it clear that I have at no time set out to be confrontational or argumentative, but only to present views which I consider to be based on simple reasoning and plain, uncomplicated observation. Nevertheless, my perspective on education is deeply affected by my life's work at Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, and to acqui-

aint readers with the nature of this special perspective of mine, I have included in this book, as a Postscript, a talk I once gave on the principles underlying that school. Perhaps that should have been the Introduction; but the essays stand on their own merit, and the overview of Sudbury Valley School is necessary only for those who might be curious about what my own personal prejudices are in the field.

Often, when criticisms are made about some aspect of the current situation in education, the cry is raised: "Beware of the critics! They have an axe to grind, which makes their criticism suspect!" The idea seems to be that people who defend programs are somehow devoted to the objective truth, and their critics are somehow tainted with preconceptions.

Now, there is nothing more misleading than the notion of objectivity. The simple fact is that everything, absolutely everything, in the entire experience of the human race, is based on people's subjective appraisal of the events that surround them. Everyone without exception has their own personal "axe to grind"; or, put more delicately, everyone analyzes the world with the aid of their own private world-view, which they begin developing as soon as they are born (if not earlier), and never stop modifying till the day they die.

A person's model of reality is created out of a host of components, including his/her sensory inputs, social interactions, genetic predispositions, reflexes and instincts, biological drives, and intellectual constructs. As we have learned in the past century from anthropological research, there is literally nothing that can be said to be agreed upon as true by every member of the human species. One group's reality is

another group's fantasy. Even the supposedly objective truths of modern Western science have been shown to be phantasmagorias of scientists' imaginative minds – and the greater the scientists, the more “far-out” their creations turn out to be. It used to be that scientific “laws” stayed in place for centuries. Nowadays, a textbook is barely off the press before the contents are ready for the dustbin.

What this means in practical terms is something we all know instinctively: namely, that to deal effectively with another person, we must acquaint ourselves as much as we can with that person's predispositions. The fact that predispositions exist is not a barrier to communication; on the contrary, it is the starting point for personal interactions, as each person adjusts himself or herself to the world-views of those around them.

Getting down to practicalities, this means that when I criticize the prevailing educational system, I do the best I can to understand the realities of the people who built and sustain that system. Likewise, I realize – as does everyone else who reads what I write – that I am immersed in an altogether different approach to education, and I am perhaps foolish enough to believe that others might be interested in my perspective. Far from trying to hide my predilections, I am proud to discuss them openly, in the expectation that maybe someone else would benefit from knowing them, as I have benefitted from other people's experiences.

After all, to put it bluntly, I am not exactly working on Mars. The school I am associated with has been in existence since 1968, and is widely known throughout the world. We

are a private, non-profit organization, run as a pure democracy by the students and staff and parents – also not a concept completely alien to the American scene, I believe. Our graduates have gone on to excel in life, to be tradespeople, business owners and managers, artists, professionals, educators, just about everything. We have never received a penny of government or foundation money, nor do we do any fund-raising for donations. Our budget is entirely tuition-based, and it costs far less to send a child to our school than it does to educate a child virtually anywhere else, certainly in the public schools. So that's my “axe” to grind. The question is: So what? All the readers of these essays – including members of the school establishment – should care about is whether the arguments I am presenting could possibly make any sense to them in their own frame of reference. For some, the answer may be “yes”. After all, that's the way change begins, by people being willing to open their current set of prejudices to re-examination under the pressure of outside criticism.

I am of course grateful to the Middlesex News for giving me the opportunity, over these years, of presenting my views without alteration or censorship of any sort; and to the readers of that newspaper for continuing encouragement to continue writing my columns. I hope this collection will be useful in helping effect the transition now taking place between a system of schools designed for the industrial period of United States history, to an altogether different system appropriate for the post-industrial age we will be well into by the year 2000.

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