

HOMESCHOOLING AND JOHN HOLT'S VISION

By Patrick Farenga (Copyright 2006)

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John Holt was born into his fairly affluent family in 1923. He was sent to some of the "better" private schools and eventually graduated from college with a degree in Industrial Administration ("Whatever that means" John would always add after saying that). John didn't reveal his Alma Maters because, as he writes:

"I have come to believe that a person's schooling is as much a part of his private business as his politics or religion, and that no one should be required to answer questions about it. May I say instead that most of what I know I did not learn in school and indeed was not even 'taught?'"

Upon graduation John found the United States Navy needed his services to help fight World War Two. John was a lieutenant on the USS Barbero, a submarine that fought in the Pacific; he served a three-year tour of duty. After the war John felt nuclear bombs made war suicidal for mankind and he joined the United World Federalists, an organization that seeks to bring peace to our planet by establishing one World Government. John lectured for six years on their behalf and became the Executive Director for the New York branch of World Federalists. Dissatisfied with what he perceived as their increasing ineffectiveness, John left the organization in 1952, spent the next year bicycling around Europe, then went to visit his family in Colorado. It was there his sister Jane suggested John try teaching, urging him to visit the Colorado Rocky Mountain School, which had just opened. John went there to visit one day and liked it so much that he began teaching. The school was unusual for its time because it was co-educational and both students and faculty did almost all the manual work of the school.

John taught in Colorado for four years and decided to move to Boston to experience city life again. He got a fifth grade teaching position in Cambridge and met faculty member Bill Hull, who became a colleague with John and shared his interest in children. They decided to observe each other's classes, one

sitting back while the other taught. John's memos from his on-going observations form the core of his first two books. Eleven years of teaching provided John with the notes and journals that finally got published, after several rejection notices, as *HOW CHILDREN FAIL*. Today this book and the one that followed, *HOW CHILDREN LEARN*, have combined sales that exceed a million and a half copies, a remarkable feat for any books about education.

What is it that John expresses that so inflames discussions about school? There are two versions of the reason, a short one and a long one. The short version is two words: Trust Children. The other version is contained in all of John's books. Let me supply you with something in-between.

As they worked together John and Bill eventually decided to frame their work in the classroom with the question, "Where are we trying to get and is this thing we are doing helping us get there?" Clearly they wanted their students to be better learners and they tried all sorts of things to help them get there. John writes about ingenious ways he invented of using Cuisinaire rods for math, playing twenty questions to develop reasoning skills, using a balance beam for weights and measurements, all sorts of approaches to problems he thought his students were facing. But the endless cycle he noted from his first days as a teacher repeated itself once again: He taught but they didn't learn. Sure, some of them passed his tests but that didn't mean anything if they couldn't, and most couldn't, at least remember a week from now what was on the test.

First John and Bill thought the reason so many children in their classes learned so little was that they used such bad thinking and problem-solving strategies. Eventually John saw it differently. If we, and not the child, choose the task, then they think about us instead of the task. John meticulously details in *HOW CHILDREN FAIL*, how it is their position as teachers, which is to say givers of orders, judges, graders, that is the source of the children's strategies. If the children can somehow get the answer the teacher wants, be in a class situation or on a test, once they've provided an answer, they are out of danger. The tension is past. The teacher no longer threatens, fear of not having an answer, or of having the wrong answer, or of being ridiculed before classmates, goes by. Teachers, not math, not reading, or spelling, or history are the problem that the children design their strategies to cope with. Why does this happen? Because of fear.

Fear in the classroom. Most adults scoff at the idea, "What's a kid got to be scared of? You don't see other kids crying about going to school, do you? What are you, a wimp?" But we forget what it is like to be

a child. We find it hard to remember life as it looks four feet off the ground. Holt noted, "There are very few children who do not feel, during most of the time they are in school, an amount of fear, anxiety and tension that most adults would find intolerable; it is no coincidence at all that in many of their worst nightmares adults find themselves back in school."

John decided the prime reason children act stupidly, don't learn, or misbehave is because of fear, usually the ever-present fear of failure. Ask any sports figure, actor or politician what makes them choke in front of a group and the answer is fear. Studies show that anxiety and fear can actually create perceptual disturbances such as blurring of vision and loss of hearing. Can this be at the root of our recent discovery of "learning disabilities?"

Fear dominates the classroom environment in thousands of subtle ways, most of them disguised as helpful "motivation," some of them not disguised at all, and all of them coercive. John felt the error of "progressive educators" is that they thought there were bad ways (harsh, cruel) and good ways (gentle, persuasive, subtle, kindly) to coerce children. However there is a great difference between setting a goal for oneself and doing difficult and demanding things to achieve it, and doing something, in the case of school usually something uninteresting to the student, simply because someone tells you you'll be punished if you don't. In this book, John forcefully shows us how whether children resist such demands or yield to them, it is bad for them; and that the idea of painless, nonthreatening coercion is an illusion. Holt writes, "Fear is the inseparable companion to coercion and its inseparable consequence."

Fear is not all. Holt notes how boredom and resistance cause much activity in school as fear. Many of the tasks given to children in school are busy work in the purest sense of the word. If a child can properly do five division problems, why must he do twenty-five? If we think we must force children to learn, we are grossly mistaken, but this is the primary assumption of our school system. For many people, education is not primarily concerned with learning, but with discipline. A school where children learn but appear to be undisciplined is therefore failing in its task, and this is why so many of our finest teachers are fired, as John Holt was. In *HOW CHILDREN FAIL* John writes:

"The idea that children won't learn without rewards and penalties, or in the debased jargon of the behaviorists, "positive and negative reinforcements," usually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we treat

children long enough as if that were true, they will come to believe it is true. People say to me, If I weren't made to do things, I wouldn't do anything. This is the creed of a slave. You may believe that of yourselves, but I don't believe it. You didn't feel that way about yourself when you were little. Who taught you to feel that way? To a large degree it is school. Schools teach it because, believing it, they can't help acting as if it were true."

The seminal question teachers should always be asking is, "What do we do to help or prevent learning?" This is seldom asked because it is assumed that unless there's something wrong with the student, all teaching produces learning, so all we need to think about is what children should be made to learn.

Why do we presume that we can say what anyone must know? How can we say what a child wants to know is less important than what we want him to know? Even if we could all agree on what the curriculum should be, it still wouldn't work, because our knowledge of the world and ourselves is constantly changing, today faster than ever. Who can say what we need to know ten years from now? Our laws, our physics, our astronomy, our science, of ten years ago have all changed considerably. Many things once considered textbook facts have to be changed every year due to humankind's curiosity. We don't need fact-spitters for the future, we need able learners, and our schools are failing in their chosen task of educating the masses. This is because schools do not encourage real learning, which happens when children discover what they most want to know, instead of what we think they ought to know. Teachers need to be geared to the student's learning schedule, not the state's learning schedule.

Administering tests on a regular basis enforces the state's learning schedule and most of the school bureaucracy. The true purpose of tests should be so the one taking the tests can discover deficiencies and move towards improving them. Tests are designed by teachers to show these deficiencies, but instead the school system uses tests for different ends, as measures of intelligence and aptitude.

Never losing sight of the right to question what we are told, Holt maintains there are two real reasons why we test children: the first is to threaten them into doing what we want and the second is to give us the basis for handing out the rewards and penalties on which the educational system—like all coercive systems—must operate. Struggling with the inherent difficulties of a chosen or inescapable task builds character; merely submitting to a superior force destroys it. Do we want to turn out intelligent people or clever test

takers? How can we foster a joyous, alert, wholehearted participation in life if we build all our schooling around the holiness of getting "right answers?"

Besides this, why do we presume, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that the vast amount of knowledge and ability in each of us can be reduced to a number or grade? These numbers and grades are indelible marks on our lives that the school system can turn over to anyone, such as the government or prospective employers, and these marks can follow us forever. Many teachers' recommendations are written in secret and never seen by the student, so even the veneer of grades may be undermined by a careless recommendation. The student has little or no rights in this matter. As Edgar Friedenberg says, the student owes the school everything and the school owes the student nothing. This fact was upheld in a recent court case. Discovering that their children, upon graduating from high school, could still not add, subtract or write their own names properly, the parents sued the school. The court ruled against the parents claiming the schools are under no obligation to teach anybody anything and because they were worried that by making too broad a ruling they might encourage a rush of lawsuits that would bankrupt the schools. So learning must be the duty of the student, not the school, despite, as we see, the fact that the schools are designed to prevent real learning for the vast majority of students.

John maintained that the test-examinations-marks business, and it is a multibillion dollar business to many people, is a gigantic racket set up to perpetuate the school bureaucracy, not to serve the students. He often wrote how students, teachers and schools all join together in this masquerade of testing to show how the students know everything they are supposed to know, when in fact they know only a small part of it - if any at all. In his 1983 revision of *HOW CHILDREN FAIL* John added:

“No matter what tests show, very little of what is taught in school is learned, very little of what is learned is remembered and very little of what is remembered is used. The things we learn, remember and use are the things we seek out or meet in the daily, serious, non-school parts of our lives... The true test of intelligence is not how much we know, but how we behave when we don't know what to do.”

When John wrote *HOW CHILDREN FAIL* and *HOW CHILDREN LEARN* he still had a vision of what school might become. In these books John writes about rehabilitating old school buildings and turning

them into resource and activity centers, citizens' clubs, libraries, music rooms, theaters, sports facilities, meeting rooms, open to and used by old and young together.

John still thought that schools could be changed from within and his reputation was well respected by many educators at this time. In 1968 he stopped teaching grade school and became a visiting lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education; he held the same post the next year at U.C. Berkeley. His experiences in the upper echelons of academia spurred him to write *THE UNDERACHIEVING SCHOOL*. With this book John moves his case out of the classroom and studies the school system itself, which he sees, not surprisingly, as self-serving and demeaning to students. His unabashed sympathy for the plight of college students during campus unrest of the late sixties placed John squarely against the education establishment. I recently came across an unpublished manuscript by John from this time, 1969, entitled *LIVING FREE AMONG THE SLAVES: A Handbook for the Young*. In it he offers sharp reasons and strategies for nonviolent confrontation with one's elders. In the midst of this era of hippies, happenings and Vietnam John wrote:

“Older people will say that their anger and hatred has been roused by your appearance and behavior. They may well believe this. It is not true. At best, it is only a small part of the truth. I think the current hatred of large numbers of older people for the young began growing long before there was any movement of student protest and it has been strong for years. For a good many years I have been observing children with adults and particularly of adults with children around them and I have felt more and more strongly, and for some years now, that very large numbers of people have had a generalized dislike of any and all children of almost any age past three or four.

You have not created the hatred of the old. You have perhaps focused it and given it a clearly visible target...”

A publisher could not be found and the book was forgotten, yet it shows how seriously John takes young people's problems.

The next book to be printed was a year later, 1970. John called it *WHAT DO I DO MONDAY?* because it is essentially a book of practical ideas and suggestions for parents, teachers and anyone who

works with children. John writes about specific ways of teaching math, science, history and other subjects with household items or easily found examples so people can approach these subjects in more useful ways.

It was around this time John was invited by Ivan Illich to be a guest at CIDOC in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Illich wrote, among many books, *DESCHOOLING SOCIETY*, a book John admired. Illich's concept of making people less dependent on institutions, in effect "deschooling" themselves and becoming more self-reliant - life-long learning without credentials - mixes well with John's concepts.

During 1971 -1974, John wrote the books *FREEDOM AND BEYOND* and *ESCAPE FROM CHILDHOOD*. Inspired by his visits with Illich, these books show John moving from the classroom and school system to an analysis of children's place in society. He challenges our very notions about childhood and how we have created a sentimental prison, a walled garden that prevents our young from attaining the dignity and responsibilities they want and need until they reach the arbitrary magic age of eighteen. Children's rights are integral to John's ideas, and the way they are treated in our society angered him. In *FREEDOM AND BEYOND* John writes:

“What determines what sort of person a child will be is how they are treated, not what they are told. If children are brought up with strong sense of dignity, competence and work they will extend this to other people one way or the other.”

John officially gave up on reforming schools and challenging their assumptions about children and learning in the opening chapter of *INSTEAD OF EDUCATION* (1976):

“Do not waste your time trying to reform these schools. They can not be reformed. It may be possible for a few of you, in a few places, to make a place called school which will be a humane and useful doing (as distinct from educating) place for the young. If so, by all means do it. In most places, not even this will be possible.”

INSTEAD OF EDUCATION, like *WHAT DO I DO MONDAY?* offers a lot of practical suggestions for making the world of adults accessible to the young. John provides examples and methods for running

free schools, learning exchanges, and offers his thoughts on how compulsory schooling is among the most authoritarian and destructive of all the inventions of man.

INSTEAD OF EDUCATION marks a change in John's vision of schools and society. Rather than turning schools into resource centers and teachers into guides, as he envisioned in his first books, John describes a new utopia, the society of learners:

“In that society all people could have work to do which is varied and interesting, which challenges and rewards their skill and intelligence, which they can do well and take pride in doing well, over which they can exercise some control and those whose ends and purposes they can understand and respect...Beyond this, all people would feel - as very few people do now - that what they think, want say and do would make a real difference in their lives and the lives of people around them. Their politics, like their work, would be meaningful. Their elected officials would be public servants, not petty kings or officers. They would shape and control the society they lived in, instead of being shaped and controlled by it. In such a society no one would worry about "education." People would be too busy doing interesting things that mattered and they would grow more informed, competent and wise in doing them. They would learn about the world from living in it, working in it, and changing it and from knowing a wide variety of people who were doing the same. But nowhere in the world does such a society exist, nor is there one for the making.”

Given his pessimistic view, John provides sympathetic advice and sound tactics for change, including a plan for an underground railroad to get your kids away from authorities if you are serious about taking them out of the school system. It is here the bridge John created toward homeschooling starts to define itself.

People have been teaching children at home instead of sending them to school for quite some time before John became a spokesman for them. When John wrote INSTEAD OF EDUCATION he wasn't aware of such people but they found each other after publication of this book. A year later, on the basis of correspondence he started with some people who successfully taught their children at home, John printed the first issue of GROWING WITHOUT SCHOOLING and started selling books he thought were important and helpful to learners of all ages.

GROWING WITHOUT SCHOOLING, a bi-monthly newsletter started in 1977, is best described by John. In the first issue of GWS he writes that GWS will provide readers with approaches to learning...

“...in which people, young and old, can learn and do things, acquire skills and find interesting and useful work, without having to go through the process of schooling. It is mainly about people who want to take or keep their children out of school and about what they might do instead, what problems come up and how they cope with these... GROWING WITHOUT SCHOOLING is very interested, as schools and schools of education do not seem to be, in the act and art of teaching, that is, all the ways in which people of all ages, in or out of school, can more effectively share information, ideas and skills. “

Disappointed and disillusioned by previous efforts to reform the schools, John writes in GWS #1 about how homeschooling might cause social change:

“In starting this newsletter, we are putting into practice a nickel and dime theory about social change, which is, that important and lasting social change always comes slowly and only when people change their lives, not just their political beliefs or parties... I have come to understand, finally, and even to accept, that in almost everything I believe and care about I am a member of a minority in my own country, in most cases a very small minority... This doesn't trouble me any more, as long as those minorities of which I am a member go on growing. My work is to help them grow. If we can describe the effective majority of our society as moving in direction X and ourselves, the small minority, as moving in direction Y, what I want to do is to find ways to help people who want to move in direction Y, to move in that direction, rather than run after the great X-bound army shouting at them, "Hey you guys, stop, turn around, you ought to be heading in direction Y!" In areas they feel are important, people don't change their ideas, much less their lives, because someone comes along with a bunch of arguments to show that they are mistaken, even wicked, to think or do as they do. Once in a while, we may have to argue with the X-bound majority to try to stop them from doing a great and immediate wrong. But most of the time, as a way of making real and deep changes in society, this kind of shouting and arguing seems to me to be a waste of time.”

Tired of school but always fascinated by children and their ways of learning, John wrote an unusual book in his canon at this time, *NEVER TOO LATE*, his musical autobiography. John always loved music, jazz and classical especially, and he himself could play some flute and guitar which he learned as a young man. A few years before he wrote this book, when he was in his early fifties, John learned to play the cello on his own. Besides tracing his life and musical history, the book serves as a reminder for us to try something from the ground up again. As an adult learner John shows that to learn well we must become like a very young child again, dealing with endless false starts and seemingly impenetrable mysteries. It is a warm autobiography of a true individual and learner.

NEVER TOO LATE was published in 1978, a year after John started *GROWING WITHOUT SCHOOLING*. John would have preferred to spend his later life with his cello, but he soon found he was much in demand as an advocate for homeschooling. Families who were homeschooling for years contacted GWS and expressed relief that someone other than themselves practiced homeschooling.

Then, and even now, a family can get pulled into court on truancy charges because they are teaching their children at home but haven't permission from the State or School Board to do so. John frequently wrote and spoke on behalf of such families. This used to happen a lot more frequently than it does now because most school districts, like most people, never knew that people can or would want to keep their kids home rather than send them to school, or that it was a perfectly legal option. John's helpful and wise testimony before several state legislators and various commissions helped smooth the way for homeschooling in some states, and he found subscriptions and letters coming in bigger mail-bags every day.

John's last book, *TEACH YOUR OWN*, was a direct result of his involvement with *GROWING WITHOUT SCHOOLING*. Many educators felt John abandoned them when he wrote this book, but I don't think they read it closely. Its subtitle is: *A HOPEFUL PATH FOR EDUCATION*. *TEACH YOUR OWN*'s pages are loaded with letters from parents describing how they manage to let their children learn around them without anyone going crazy. It is full of positive news about children as well as containing the best nuts and bolts descriptions about how to answer questions about homeschooling, how to write a curriculum, how to make your proposal, how to find out what your legal rights are, and just about anything else you

need to know about unschooling children. Most importantly for John, homeschooling provides the proof that children can be trusted to learn without being forced to.

Why do people homeschool? John thought there are three reasons:

“They think raising their children is their business, not the government's; they enjoy being with their children and watching and helping them learn and don't want to give that up to others; they want to keep them from being hurt, mentally, physically and spiritually. “

John emphasized how homeschoolers can allow their children's abilities to develop naturally in an unforced manner. Certainly parents who take their children out of school would be wise to make sure they do all the work they say they would do on their curriculum, but once they get that out of the way, and some families can do a whole semester's required work in about six weeks, then they start their real learning. Everyday homeschoolers prove by their example that learning is a life-long process that can take place anywhere and anytime, not just in a school supervised by experts. Time and a great student to teacher ratio are on the homeschoolers' side, rather than pitting their child's learning against a schedule designed by someone who has never seen their child. They are best able to facilitate a child's learning, especially during their early school years.

Experience being the greatest of all teachers, homeschoolers can make their children part of their everyday adult lives. By being accepted into the continuum of their parents' lives, a child learns by doing, by seeing other people work and do things and wanting to do them themselves. By seeing how one uses numbers to decide what to purchase, seeing their parents read and write to communicate with others, these children are being exposed to the total territory the world of numbers and words encompasses. Math, science and English are no longer facts one memorizes and uses just for tests, disconnected from real life. Homeschooled children can learn math, science and other skills not in little increments of lesson plans, but by actually doing them, by counting, by reading, by taking in the manner they see other people behaving around them.

A child in a homeschool environment is afforded the opportunity to learn as he or she always did, that is, through play and interaction with the people and objects around them. The importance of play during childhood is noted by Piaget and many other child specialists, but most schools rob their students of that. From age six on, forty hours a week or more, the student must be forced to sit still and be instructed at the cost of his or her childhood. During classtime which fills the bulk of any school day, daydreaming and childish behavior, such as playing, are ridiculed and penalized; we chastise the child for being a child. Why are we in such a rush to get them out of childhood? John wrote in *HOW CHILDREN FAIL*: "Our teaching is too full of words and they come too soon."

Homeschoolers do not take their children out of school to escape from the real world or to make them antisocial. They make their children part of their world, the real world of business, home and family. Where being a citizen means getting out into the community, meeting and being exposed to people from all walks of life and all ages. Boy and girl scouts, 4H, YM- and YWCA's, church and community sponsored events, private lessons, apprenticeships, after-school sports activities - all these and more are ways that children who stay at home are "socialized."

The so-called social life of schools is probably a major reason why parents want to take their children out of school in the first place in *TEACH YOUR OWN*, John wrote:

"Social life in the classroom is mean-spirited, status-oriented, competitive and snobbish. No one ever says school is kindly, generous, supporting, democratic, friendly, loving or good for children. When I condemn the social life of schools people say, "But that's what the children are going to meet in Real Life." This seems to me to be a self-fulfilling prophecy."

In his last years, homeschooling provided John with the hope that children may escape the indignities, mind-numbing routines and hypocrisy of school and so become the loving, intelligent people he believed we are all capable of being. Two years before he died, John revised his first two books, *HOW CHILDREN FAIL* and *HOW CHILDREN LEARN*. His later additions make the books even more forceful in their arguments, and when looked at as the beginning of John's writing and thinking about schools, they clearly show how John's criticisms and ideas about schools and learning developed in a logically and consistent

manner based on his constant observations of people, especially young children, learning. As he says in the revised HOW CHILDREN FAIL:

“Nobody starts off stupid. You have to watch babies and infants and think seriously about what all of them learn and do, to see that, except for the grossly retarded, they show a style of life and a desire and ability to learn, that in an older person we might call genius... We adults destroy most of the intellectual and creative capacity of children by the things we do to them or make them do. We destroy this capacity by making them afraid, afraid of not doing what other people want, of not pleasing, of making mistakes, of failing, of being wrong.

We destroy the disinterested (I do not mean uninterested) love of learning in small children, which is so strong when they are small, by encouraging and compelling them to work for petty and contemptible rewards - gold stars or papers marked 100 and tacked to the wall, or A's on report cards or honor rolls or Dean's lists or Phi Beta Kappa keys - in short, for the ignoble satisfaction of feeling that they are better than someone else. We encourage them to feel that the end and aim of all we do in school is nothing more than to get a good mark on a test, or to impress someone with what they seem to know. We kill, not only their curiosity but their feeling that it is a good and admirable thing to be curious, so that at the age of ten most of them will not ask questions and will show a good deal of scorn for those who do.”

At one point John wanted to make a bumper sticker with this slogan on it: "Children are born smart. Schools make them dumb," but he thought better of it. It summarizes his thoughts quite neatly, though.

John's work is based on principles of nonviolence and faith in our intellectual abilities to grow. He showed this in his daily life as well in his books. As his ideas about school changed, so did he. He was frustrated by the lack of change in our schools, to be sure, but he kept finding new ways to approach the problem. John's grand vision of a peaceful society of life-long learners and doers was at least partially realized for him during his life through the efforts of homeschooling families, and their happy children are his tribute.