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A New Curriculum for a Planetary Culture

William Irwin Thompson



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FOR ANDREW

Foreword

When he contemplated the emergence of a “noosphere” in the new global culture of the mid-twentieth century, the evolutionary philosopher Teilhard de Chardin proposed the idea that hypercollectivization leads to hyperpersonalization.¹ In other words, the large energizes the little, just as the atmosphere energizes the flame. This was not a surprising notion to come from a French Jesuit priest, as Catholics with their global Holy Roman Church are not quite so attracted to the doctrine of rugged individualism as are American Protestants of a Republican or Libertarian persuasion. However, if one stops to consider the impact of the electronic age of information and the role of the World Wide Web on the life of the individual alone before a computer screen, one has to admit that Père Chardin was onto something, even before that other Catholic theorist of the electronic media, Professor Marshall McLuhan.

As popular gurus of the sixties, Catholic thinkers like McLuhan and Ivan Illich² taught us to understand how the industrial age, which saw the shift from the family farm to the working father and mother in the city, also saw the rise of mass publications in newspapers and books and the

rise of the public school system as the means of indoctrinating the young into the patriotic and economic values of the expanding industrial nation-state. In an age of the electronic saturation of information, however, schools have now become youth reservations where the young are not educated so much as mugged in the consumer values of sports and pop culture. With hip-hop clothing from the mall, Coke machines in the hall, and hand phones off the wall, public school kids have found that the unexamined life is worth living and really cool if you have the right stuff.

So what do you do with a kid who wants to learn, is smart—and maybe even smarter than his teachers—and is getting persecuted by his fellow students for not fitting into the dumb-it-down era of celebrities and pop culture? Millions of parents have now decided that the solution is to take their kids out of school and organize an alternative approach through home schooling. National Public Radio has estimated that there are now more than four million families who have chosen to allocate time to home schooling their children. The Associated Press more conservatively estimates that two millions kids are now being home schooled.³ Since I was a home-schooling parent way back in the seventies, I now like to think of myself as a trendsetter who discovered that home schooling is a daytime extension—and an equally enjoyable form—of bedtime storytelling, as well as a new, electronically assisted form of shamanic, mind-to-mind transmission from parent to child.

There are many reasons to opt for home schooling: drug use in schools; teenage gangs; school violence and cruel hazing; and a mass culture in which art and science are not valued as much as sports, money, and celebrity idolatry. Consequently, if one is the parent of a gifted child—a dancer, a poet, a composer, philosopher, or scientist—to offer up that child on the altars of public education is a form

of human sacrifice. The emotional turning point came for me when my eleven-year-old son was abjectly sobbing over his misery in public school and then turned to me and said, “If you love me, how can you do this to me?” Looking into his eyes, I could see that this was not the theatrics of a kid trying to play hooky, but the cry of an old soul and brilliant mind trapped in a kid’s body and an institution that hadn’t a clue about what to do with intelligent children who truly wanted to learn. I took him out of the sixth grade, and he never went back—to junior or senior high. At sixteen, he went off to Amherst College, loved it, and graduated with honors four years later. He went on to get his Ph.D. and is now is a professor of cognitive science and the philosophy of mind at the University of Toronto.⁴

There are many impulses now energizing the search for educational alternatives. All are happening and growing simultaneously, contributing to the emergence of a new complex ecology of education that involves public, private, and charter schools; internet schooling; co-housing collaborative efforts of residents and neighbors; and home schooling by parents.

As for public schools, I don’t foresee them disappearing from the face of the land in a “rapture” whereby we are taken up into some completely new post-historical state of being. Great waves of immigration to the United States will continue to lift and support our collective societal need for good public schools. Such a need is essential for an open and just democratic society. But at the other end of our pluralistic society, there is another wave of emigration going on in which an electronic American culture is emigrating from the New World to an even Newer World.

Given the size of public school systems and the “America First!” social pressure brought to bear on them, I believe it is unrealistic to think that public schools will be the source of

educational innovation and cultural transformation to this Newer World. Public schools will have all they can handle merely to deal with the new waves of immigration and to stabilize safe and modestly academic environments for their students. It is far more realistic to expect innovation and transformative learning to come from new private schools, charter schools, co-housing efforts, and internet-supported home-schooling alternatives. What you have here in your hands is a new evolution-of-consciousness curriculum in its ideal form, so that private schools, states, countries, or home schooling parents may be able to think about a curriculum in a way that is more appropriate for our emerging planetary civilization.

Portland, Maine, 2009

NOTES:

1. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Beyond the Collective: the Hyper-Personal," in *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975, pp. 254–272).
2. Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).
3. Steve Giegrich, "Colleges Noticing Home Schooled Kids," Associated Press/Yahoo, Monday, January 26, 2004.
4. See Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).