The Way Back to Educational Foundations

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Recommended Citation

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The Way Back to Educational Foundations

James T. Hillestad

This essay is contrary to the prevailing contemporary sophists respected by the power brokers of the government monopoly in education. Madeline Hunter, Albert Shanker, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the Iowa State University School Improvement model, are but a sample of those power brokers. In the footsteps of Descartes and John Dewey their power prevails. Having built this pillar of Baal they now wish to maintain that power. It is a power that rivals both Baal and Nebuchadnezzar. This pillar of government in both public and private education has come to serve death more than life.

This pillar will fall. Perhaps it already has:

"And they demolished the pillar of Baal and demolished the house of Baal and made it a latrine to this day."

II Kings 10:28

James Hillestad is professor of education at the State University of New York at New Paltz.
The Way Back
In one of the most impossible and difficult books I have encountered, Mr. de Nicholas does indeed show us the way back to something that was left behind: the classical habit of mind. He dismisses the claim that "our culture dates all the way back to the Greeks." (p. 38) He asserts that the greatest difficulty to overcome is our current habit of mind which is limited to the formation of theories. "One need only visit any classroom to see firsthand what this habit of theory making is doing and how it is being used against the students." (p. 6) The social scientists share with the Protestant founders of American education "the belief that the scientific method is sufficient to organize the whole of life." (p. 6) Educators have become pseudo-scientists and daily fabricate "abstractions and impose them on the human and social fabric with such quickness that the students are left reeling, wondering about their human whereabouts.

But Habits of Mind addresses this predicament. It is, among other things, a generously and virtuously edited anthology in which de Nicholas utilizes Plato to identify and develop the classical dialectic which is to give us "the capacity and knowledge to distinguish the good and the bad life, and so everywhere and always choose the better from among those that are possible." Students can follow the way back by reading his inclusions of John Dewey's Experience and Education, Jude P. Dougherty's "Marx, Dewey, and Maritain—The Role of Religion in Society", Voltaire's Candide, the Marquis de Sade's "Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man" and ultimately Plato's Republic (Books I, V, VI, and VII). When he does not write his own introduction de Nicholas includes dazzling essays such as "Some Reflections on Rhetoric" by John Bremer.

Because of the demands of this book it took one of my more courageous acts to use it in a beginning teacher education course. Could my students from Poughkeepsie, the lower east side, the South Bronx, and Scarsdale possibly succeed? The experiences of Jaime Escalante and Marve Collins brought out my most affirmative Hubert Humphrey Minnesotan language: "You betcha!"

And these students did. After great struggles on each weekly essay/quiz, their final examinations literally took my breath away as they savored their triumph.

The Way
In a 1988 seminar one of my graduate students made use of an author who was unknown to me, David Hicks. The book was Norms and Nobility. Her references were to sentiments and ideas I had longed to formulate since 1961 when I received my first morally earned "F" grade at St. Olaf College. The conclusions I was expected to develop in a final examination in the History of Philosophy course were so repugnant that I could not participate.

I hastened to my Sojourner Truth Library to examine this book. The excitement of this encounter prevented me from wasting even the ten minutes it would require to approach the checkout desk. At midnight the library closed. Eight hours later I closed the book. The peak experience I had twenty years earlier, upon discovering Louis Mumford, had been surpassed.

"My purpose in writing this book is to offer a personal interpretation of classical education—its ends, as well as some of its means—and to respond to the objections of those who might approve of the goals of such an education, but who believe that it cannot meet the needs of an industrial democracy or that it is not feasible as a model for mass education. I have some hard words for those social scientists whose analytical methods and unexamined assumptions have worked a profound mischief in our schools. My wish is not, however, to banish science from the modern curriculum, but to save it. For I fear that the modern educator's inchoate understanding of science, his naive belief in its all-sufficiency, and his unwillingness to acknowledge its methodological limitations are leading to a reaction and revulsion against it. If descriptive science is to aid our schools and flourish in them, it must remain in the service of a prescriptive ideal." (p. 3)

Here was the vital work that my thirty-five years of serving students could not produce or find. It was in my hands at last!

But it was out of print. Even though the former publisher informed me the second printing had sold out in six months, there was no intention to reprint. After a frantic AT&T SEARCH I located Mr. Hicks at St. Mark's School of Texas, in Dallas. Though his commitments now were to those students and he chose not to expend further energies on the book, he did object to my pestering publishers, and to their eternal credit Rowman and Littlefield did the job.

My students have discovered after reading Dewey that most of his disciples, including their professors, have not. It is not surprising therefore that none have even heard of David Hicks. Here is a sample that may recall the vision of some former "Normal Schools" that Progressive Education destroyed and replaced:

"The ancient student of the Ideal Type, therefore, started out with the dogma of a moral ideal called kalakagathia—a man both beautiful and good. When he asked—what is excellence in man?—he did not so much seek his answer in poetry and philosophy as he sought illustration and confirmation of his answer there. The answer, as it were, preceded the question and the questioner, but both were needed to elicit it. Each new generation of students began at the beginning with Homer and Hesiod, refining, perhaps reti

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Epilogue
The essay you have completed was partially built upon the assumption that the reader appreciates the Cartesian nature and history of our modern university. Charles J. Sykes has confirmed my three decades of experience in education as well as giving such a history in Politics and Corruption in Higher Education: The Hollow Men (1990). It is this modern pillar of the university, not Baal, that upholds our fragile American and worldwide edifice. The university prepares all the powerful professionals in government, religion, medicine, technology, law, teaching, industry, and the military; the power brokers of our collective destiny,
Page Smith in his conclusion to *Killing The Spirit* (1939) quotes Robert Hutchins: "Civilization can be saved only by a moral, intellectual and spiritual revolution to match the scientific, technological and economic revolution in which we are now living." The four authors presented here with the poet, Steven Lewis, are most often excluded from the journals of education which limit themselves to the technological, or "findings" from the social sciences, constituting the so-called "educational mainstream." In Orwellian language this describes a stagnant pond.

Only by including the moral, intellectual, and spiritual contributions represented by these authors can there be a stream. Then may we become educators rather than teachers and researchers limited to behavior modification, publishing, and promotion.