

I Quit, I Think

– John Taylor Gatto

I've taught public school for 26 years but I just can't do it anymore. For years I asked the local school board and superintendent to let me teach a curriculum that doesn't hurt kids, but they had other fish to fry. So I'm going to quit, I think.

I've come slowly to understand what it is I really teach: A curriculum of confusion, class position, arbitrary justice, vulgarity, rudeness, disrespect for privacy, indifference to quality, and utter dependency. I teach how to fit into a world I don't want to live in.

I just can't do it anymore. I can't train children to wait to be told what to do; I can't train people to drop what they are doing when a bell sounds; I can't persuade children to feel some justice in their class placement when there isn't any, and I can't persuade children to believe teachers have valuable secrets they can acquire by becoming our disciples. That isn't true.

Government schooling is the most radical adventure in history. It kills the family by monopolizing the best times of childhood and by teaching disrespect for home and parents.

An exaggeration? Hardly. Parents aren't meant to participate in our form of schooling, rhetoric to the contrary. My orders as schoolteacher are to make children fit an animal training system, not to help each find his or her personal path.

The whole blueprint of school procedure is Egyptian, not Greek or Roman. It grows from the faith that human value is a scarce thing, represented symbolically by the narrow peak of a pyramid.

That idea passed into American history through the Puritans. It found its “scientific” presentation in the bell curve, along which talent supposedly apportions itself by some Iron Law of biology.

It’s a religious idea and school is its church. New York City hires me to be a priest. I offer rituals to keep heresy at bay. I provide documentation to justify the heavenly pyramid.

Socrates foresaw that if teaching became a formal profession something like this would happen. Professional interest is best served by making what is easy to do seem hard; by subordinating laity to priesthood. School has become too vital a jobs project, contract-giver and protector of the social order to allow itself to be “re-formed.” It has political allies to guard its marches.

That’s why reforms come and go-without changing much. Even reformers can’t imagine school much different.

David learns to read at age four; Rachel, at age nine: In normal development, when both are 13, you can’t tell which one learned first — the five-year spread means nothing at all. But in school I will label Rachel “learning disabled” and slow David down a bit, too.

For a paycheck, I adjust David to depend on me to tell him when to go and stop. He won’t outgrow that dependency. I identify Rachel as discount merchandise, “special education.” After a few months she’ll be locked into her place forever.

In 26 years of teaching rich kids and poor, I almost never met a “learning disabled” child; hardly ever met a “gifted and talented” one, either. Like all school categories, these are sacred myths, created by the human imagination. They derive from questionable values we never examine because they preserve the temple of schooling.

That's the secret behind short-answer tests, bells, uniform time blocks, age grading, standardization, and all the rest of the school religion punishing our nation.

There isn't a right way to become educated; there are as many ways as fingerprints. We don't need state-certified teachers to make education happen — that probably guarantees it won't.

How much more evidence is necessary? Good schools don't need more money or a longer year; they need real free-market choices, variety that speaks to every need and runs risks. We don't need a national curriculum, or national testing either. Both initiatives arise from ignorance of how people learn, or deliberate indifference to it.

I can't teach this way any longer. If you hear of a job where I don't have to hurt kids to make a living, let me know. Come fall I'll be looking for work, I think.