**a nation of slaves**

One of the difficulties we have in thinking or speaking about the problems of our school system is that we presume the primary purpose of school is to help children learn how to read, write, and do arithmetic. This is an understandable mistake, but one we continue to make at our peril. For more is at stake in the process of schooling than mere booklearning or even the development of character. The process of schooling gives children the tools they can--and often must--use to survive after graduating into “the real world,” and teaches them what it is to be a member of our culture. Not often enough asked are the questions: What sorts of tools are these? and, What is it to be a member of this culture? In other words, we might be well served to ask what sorts of beings we are creating by the process of schooling.

My own primary experience of school was one of tedium. Year after year I sat in the back of the class, watching the second hand move ever-so-slowly. I can’t tell you how many times I calculated the seconds till school was over for the day, the week, the year, thus branding into my mind the importance of arithmetic. When bored I laugh, and almost daily I pinched the insides of my thighs until they turned red, or sometimes bit the inside of my cheek until it was raw, all to keep me from bursting into uncontrollable laughter. I shifted from cheek to cheek of my buttocks, trying to keep my legs from falling asleep. I snuck books into classrooms and read them in my lap. I taught myself American Sign Language in an attempt to silently communicate with a friend in another row, even if for no other purpose than to tell him he looked like a booger. I tested to see how long I could hold my breath. I counted the number of times the teacher said umm or okay in one hour, with the record being a remarkable two hundred and fifteen (I still remember the number as well as the welt I brought up on the inside of my thigh that day). In sum, one of the primary things I learned was how to kill time.

I learned also to wish away my life. I remember a spring day in eighth grade, standing on the football field with a new friend whose name I no longer recollect. I told him I couldn’t wait for the next month to be over, when summer vacation would begin. He looked at me, confused, and said to me something he had clearly heard from a parent: “You’re wishing away the only thing you’ve got.” I knew immediately he was right, but that didn’t alter the fact that I wished it were June instead of May.

What else did I learn? I learned to not talk out of order, and to not question authority--not openly, at least--for fear of losing recess time, or later of losing grade points. I learned to not ask difficult questions of overburdened or impatient teachers, and certainly not to expect thoughtful answers. I learned to mimic the opinions of teachers, and on command to vomit facts and interpretations of those facts gleaned from textbooks, whether I agreed with the facts or interpretations or not. I learned how to read authority figures, give them what they wanted, to fawn and brownnose when expedient. In short, I learned to give myself away.

I’ve talked to friends whose development was similarly shunted (or stunted) by school, though for some the emphatic feeling was anxiety instead of tedium. I am not the only person who twenty years later still dreams anxiously--as I did again about a month ago--that it’s the last week of class and I’m frantically preparing for a test on a subject I do not know and do not care about, and for which I’ve no idea even where the classroom is. It’s not possible to talk about schooling without talking about socialization. It’s not possible to talk about socialization without talking about society, and what society values. We hear a lot of talk--a lot of meaningless talk, really--about how terrible it is that high school students cannot locate the United States on a map of the world (which should be easy enough: just look in the center), give the century in which the American Civil War was fought, or name any members of the cabinet of the United States. We are told that standardized testing must be imposed to make sure students meet a set of standardized criteria so they will later be able to fit into a world that is itself increasingly standardized. Never are we asked, of course, is whether it’s a good thing to standardize children (sorry, I mean students), knowledge, or the larger world. But none of this--not maps, not dates, not names, not tests--are really the point at all, and to believe so is to fall into the fallacy that school is about learning information, not behaviors.

We hear, more or less constantly, that schools are failing in their mandate. Nothing could be more wrong. Schools are succeeding all too well, accomplishing precisely their purpose. And what is their primary purpose? To answer this, ask yourself first what society values most. We don’t talk about it much, but the truth is that our society values money above all else, in part because it represents power, and in part because, as is also true of power, it gives us the illusion that we can get what we want. But one of the costs of following money is that in order to acquire it, we so often have to give ourselves away to whomever has money to give in return. Bosses, corporations, men with nice cars, women with power suits. Teachers. Not that teachers have money, but in the classroom they have what money elsewhere represents: power. We live in a culture that is based on the illusion--and schooling is central to the creation and perpetuation of this illusion--that happiness lies outside of us, and specifically in the hands of those who have power.

Throughout our adult lives, most of us are expected to get to work on time, to do our boss’s bidding (as she does hers, and he his, all the way up the line), and to not leave till the final bell has rung. It is expected that we will watch the clock, counting seconds till five o’clock, till Friday, till payday, till retirement, when at last our time will again be our own, as it was before we began kindergarten, or preschool, or daycare. Where do we learn to do all of this waiting?

Also expected is that we will be good citizens, good boys and girls all. We won’t question country, God, capitalism, science, economics, history, the rule of law, but in all those areas we will defer--and continue to defer--to experts, just as we were taught. And the experts themselves? It is expected that they will be exquisitely sensitive self-censors, knowing always what or whom to question, what questions to leave unexamined, and most of all which asses to kiss. And none of us, if all goes well, will ever question how these areas--religion, capitalism, science, history, law--trick out in our own lives, even as we give our lives away.

Here are some questions I’ve been asking lately: What are the effects of schooling on creativity? How well does schooling foster the uniqueness of each child who passes through? Does schooling make children happier? For that matter, does our culture as a whole engender happy children? What does each fresh child receive in exchange for the so-many hours for years on end that she or he gives to the school system? How does school help to make each child who he or she is?

A couple of years ago I was at the public library in Spokane, Washington. A sort of counselor led a bunch of reluctant teenagers through the front door and to the computer card catalogs. There he turned them over to what he must have thought was the hippest of the librarians, a pony-tailed young man in a checked flannel shirt. The kids sulked. It was pretty clear they were from a detention center, or rehab, or perhaps had gotten in trouble at school and been sent here as punishment. The librarian pointed to the terminals, then said, “Give me a subject.”

No one spoke.

“Anything,” he said. “You tell me what you want to read about, and I’ll find you a book on it.”

From my vantage point at another bank of terminals, I could see that despite himself, one of the guys began to get interested. He was easy to read. *I can look up any subject,* he was thinking, *just like that?* The kid wore baggy jeans. He was hispanic, with a bandana on his head. He had as much goatee as any sixteen-year-old can muster. He started to say something, then stopped. Still no one else spoke. Finally he raised his hand, and said, “You got a book on guns?”

The man with the ponytail just looked at him, so the kid said again, clearly, as if the other were hard of hearing, “Guns.”

Everyone laughed. The kid stared for a moment before looking down, and away. I could tell he was wishing he had a gun right then, to blow a hole in the front of the computer. I was wishing I had one to help him.

I saw a blonde girl on the other side raise her hand, and I heard her say, “Whales.”

The librarian said, “Whales,” and typed it in.

That’s why children hate school.

I first touched on education in my book *A Language Older Than Words*. Because education was peripheral to that book, I knew someday I’d revisit the subject, and greatly expand on what I wrote there. And because what I did say there I said as well as I could, there’s an aggregate of probably four or five pages cribbed and reworked from that book sprinkled throughout this one.

I have experienced learning, even in a classroom, as liberation. I have taught—taught isn’t the right word, because I’ve always considered it my role instead merely to create an atmosphere in which students wish to learn—at a university and at a prison. The original intent of this book—with a working title of How to Not Teach—was to sketch my experiences at Eastern Washington University and at Pelican Bay State Prison—experiences that are more similar than one might at first expect—in the hope that someone else might gain from this retelling. I soon realized, however, that to describe my experience in a vacuum would be artificial, and less helpful than if it were embedded in a discussion of the social context that creates our usual experience of schooling. Another way to say this is that before asking whether I or anyone else has been successful in the classroom, we need to ask what we want to accomplish. And before we can rely on our answer to this second question, we need to ask what we are already doing and what we are currently creating by the process of schooling, because that understanding will help us understand—all rhetoric aside—what we really want, and will also make clear the stakes involved in the formation of students’ characters.

Pretend you wish to make a nation of slaves. Or to put it another way, you wish to procure for your nation’s commercial interests a steady supply of workers, and a population pacified enough to not resist the expropriation of their resources. The crudest and probably most common means of facilitating such production is through direct force. Simply capture the workers and haul them to your factories and fields in chains. A slightly more sophisticated approach is to dispossess them, once again usually at gunpoint, then give them the choice of starvation or wage slavery. Alternatively, you can force them to pay taxes or purchase your products, thereby guaranteeing they’ll enter the cash economy, meaning, ultimately, that they’ve got to work in your factories or fields to gain the cash. The primary drawback of each of these approaches is that the slaves still know they’re enslaved, and the last thing you want is to have to put down a rebellion. Far better for them to believe they’re free, because then if they’re unhappy the fault lies not with you but with themselves.

It all starts with the children. If you don’t start young enough you’ll never be able to enculturate them sufficiently, and they will still believe in alternatives. And if they honestly believe in alternatives--those not delineated by you--they may attempt to actualize them. And then where would you be?

Discussion:

1. According to Jensen, how are we a nation of slaves? In what capacity is Jensen using the term “slave”?
2. What is “learning as liberation”? Is this an idea that you all can relate to? Or does this idea seem abstract and meaningless?
3. What do you think Jensen’s problem with “experts” is?
4. Why doesn’t the librarian look up the topic of “guns”?

Answer FOUR of the following questions in *paragraph form* (at least 5 COMPLETE sentences per response). You may write in 1st person (i.e. *when I was 16….*).

1. Explain an instance in which you were “liberated” through learning. Your experience *does not* have to be academic. It can be anything in which you learned something meaningful that deeply impacted your life.
2. Describe something you were prevented from learning—either now or as a kid. Who or what prevented you from learning (i.e. was the information censored? Not available?).
3. What are your ideas regarding censorship? Are there specific topics that should never be discussed publicly? If so, why?
4. *“We won’t question country, God, capitalism, science, economics, history, the rule of law, but in all those areas we will defer--and continue to defer--to experts, just as we were taught.”* Why does Jensen equate all of these different subjects in his discussion of deferment? Would you agree that we—as a society—tend to defer to experts in these specific topics?
5. Do you agree with Jensen’s ideas regarding intellectually “slavery”? If so, why? If not, why? (I honestly do not care how you answer this question, but you MUST support whatever position you take).