



The Rediscovery of Purpose in Education

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SOMETHING seemed to go awry with the once-sustaining purposes of U.S. education in the years between 1920 and 1970. By the late 1960's there was even the gloomy prospect that our instructional landscape might be on the way to becoming a littered ideological junkyard.

As we entered the 1970's there undoubtedly were more than a few Americans who uneasily speculated, and not without some reason, that we were moving into a confused, "Twilight of the Goals" interval which foreshadowed a social and educational Armageddon that was likely to occur in the next decade or two.

THE REDISCOVERY OF BASIC PURPOSE. Because of contemporary educational problems too well known to need recounting, it is suggested here with a sense of urgency that the need for a rediscovery of educational purpose is becoming frighteningly obvious. After 10,000 years we appear to have come full circle and once again need to rediscover the purpose of primitive man's education—human survival in the face of a dangerous, implacable environment.

From a life-and-death battle with a hostile nature early in our history we have cycled back to a point at which we face an analogous struggle to protect ourselves from an environment—a *biosphere* to use fashionable ter-

minology—which has been made dangerous for man by man. Among the present, clear dangers are our propensity for overbreeding, our ingenuity in devising deadly weapons, the careless release of poisonous technological wastes, and the thoughtlessly accumulated mountains of "indisposable" trash which crowd our living space.

It is simple to propose that learning to survive has become a new central goal of education; it is decidedly less simple to conjecture about how to go about approaching such an objective.

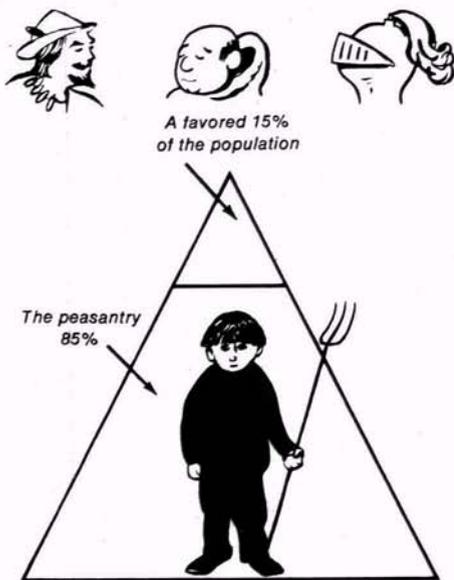
ATTAINING NEW "SURVIVAL BEHAVIORS." At least two paths of action present themselves if we accept the concept that survival in a meaningful world is an immediate goal for education. One of these is a reinterpretation of what constitutes "survival behaviors." The other is an educational reformation which will not only permit but which will begin to ensure that children and youth in our schools put together valid "behavioral survival kits." Such kits will help them not only to make it into the next century but, in the process, to begin to recast the world so

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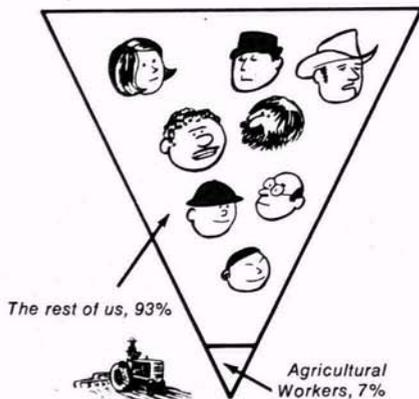
that it promises to remain a nutritive bio-environment suitable for mankind to inhabit. Let us look first at survival behavior.

From earliest times, the notion of survival was associated with attaining and staying at the apex of a socioeconomic pyramid. At least until the 19th century, about 15 percent of Western Europe's population—aristocrats, soldiers, ecclesiastics, scholars—was supported by the laborers, agrarians, and artisans making up the other 85 percent. Man fought like Duke William at Hastings to get to the top of the pile and schemed like King John at Runnymede to stay there. Indeed, through the ages, history has defined the one who survives as "successful" and has bestowed its worldly favors on those caesars who proved to have the highest "survival quotients" in life's arenas!

In the past century, however, science, technology, and democracy have combined to invert the human pyramid. Today in the United States, no more than 7 percent of the



The Traditional Socioeconomic Pyramid
(Pre-industrial and early industrial society)



The Inverted Socioeconomic Pyramid
(Post-industrial society)

population is needed on our mechanized farms to produce food for the remaining 93 percent. Theoretically, one-third of our adults, by 1985, would not even need to be productive workers. The remaining two-thirds of the U.S. population doubtless could meet not only their own material needs but those of tens of millions of others who would produce nothing. This is a projection of a repugnant possibility, however, and not a prophecy!

Despite the reversal of our human pyramid, a 50,000-year interval of deep-rooted survival behavior is not quickly forgotten. For the most part, society and its schools have both failed to teach and failed to understand that man is becoming more capable of surviving by living *with* his fellows rather than by living *on* his fellows. Conjecture clearly suggests that there is not only "room at the top" but room *everywhere* for self-realization and for a better life for all in the inverted social pyramid of the present century *if we can discipline ourselves to make the needed "survival decisions."* To put it bluntly, a 180° reversal is needed in the traditional concept of "get-ahead behavior" that man has learned to accept during the past 500 centuries. We now need to learn how to stop behaving like troglodytes in trousers and take the steps that lead from being the scattered

members of insecure tribes to becoming a secure mankind.

NEW PURPOSE AS A SOURCE OF DIRECTION FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE. Educational reforms of a sweeping and significant nature rarely have come about through the action of the schools in and of themselves. Educational practice tends to reflect what a majority or at least a plurality of society chooses to support in the classroom. Under such circumstances it seems reasonable to argue that *society itself must make itself accountable* for changes that are needed in the fabric of teaching and learning in order to bring us closer to a new central purpose for education.

Below is a sample of the kind of neglected or minimized learnings that a society interested in the survival and in the physical and psychological health of the children and youth should mandate that its schools recognize:

1. That we need to begin to lead less wasteful, extravagant lives, to do with less, and to rediscover enjoyment in simpler activities, objects, and pleasures so that our posterity will not live a marginal existence in a world stripped half-naked of its inheritance

2. That the despoliation of our forests and the pillage of our pure air and clean water shall cease along with the poorly managed exploitation of fuels, fertile soils, and metals. Such abuses must be terminated by group consensus and by the legislation to which it leads

3. That no one has the right to befoul or poison the earth with chemicals or radioactive wastes or poorly removed sewage and garbage

4. That unless we exercise prudence and personal responsibility, we will suffer badly from the malignant consequences of changes that affect man's relationships with his environment, as in faulty city planning, random dam building, or unwise land use

5. That there is a need to understand the immediate danger of irresponsible and uncontrolled human breeding as the world's population builds up toward the 4,000,000,000 mark

6. That the folly of conflict is becoming more and more incongruous in a world grown capable of self-destruction

7. That mass media need to become more positive agents for reinforcing the educational guidance of the young, for producing less misleading advertising, for more thoughtful and less strident news, and for a more accurate and dignified portrayal of life in the global village

8. That we must learn to be more personally responsible for the participation and earned support that are needed to ensure an increase in the number of able, dedicated public servants in elective and appointive governmental offices.

THE DEEPER MEANING OF "RELEVANCE." What we mean by "relevance" in education is implicit in the previous eight points. "Relevance" is more than teaching subject matter and providing experiences that the young say they find immediately meaningful, more interesting, and more useful to them. A relevant education, an education for survival, is one which introduces children and youth to participation in the tasks that they and adults confront together in the real world of the 1970's.

Furthermore, if we are to make rapid progress toward the successful attainment of a new central purpose for education, society must not only encourage but *require* that the schools work to produce a generation of hard-headed young people committed to survival yet remembering the meaning of compassion; persons who have been taught the *Realpolitik* of life with honesty but who are nonetheless untainted by cynicism because they believe that it is not yet too late to cope with man's threat to himself.

THE FIRST STEP IN REFORMATION. Making a beginning in reform is not up to "society" as an abstract entity but to each of us as the individuals who make up society. It is through a new sense of imprescriptible personal responsibility that we can dispel the threatening twilight that recently has shadowed our goals.

In the process of creating a more benign environment, some of our sensate pleasures and much of our conspicuous consumption must diminish. Also, today's thoughtless waste of human and material resources must first be decreased and then ended as quickly

as possible. In the process, our lives will perforce become not only simpler and less hedonistic; they will become more people-centered and less thing-centered. This necessary redirection can bring us far more gain than loss. The satisfactions of 40 or 50 years ago were not necessarily less warm or less desirable because feet, bicycles, or street cars transported an older generation to shops, schools, or theatres!

Furthermore, the short and long range changes that an endangered world requires for its future well-being should also involve fewer tensions, less erosive competition, and a clearer, more relaxing perspective with regard to what is most worth doing and most worth having.

A CONCLUDING CONJECTURE. Assuming we do avoid extinction, there would seem to be two levels or kinds of survival for man: as a biological *species* and as *humans*. The eight survival learnings itemized here should help to ensure that the species is around for some time to come. If nothing else, sheer panic seems likely soon to motivate us to

diminish the interrelated problems of ecology, of hunger, of waste, and of conflict.

To survive in a truly *human* context rather than a merely biological one is something else! Here we come to a more subtle aspect of a "survival kit" for young learners. Our rediscovery of purpose and of personal responsibility for the social and educational reforms that are prerequisite to physical survival is but one side of the coin.

There is the concomitant task of helping the young of each generation to discover for themselves a moral, aesthetic, intellectual, and scientific heritage that they see cause for making a part of themselves. Does it not then seem reasonable that our success in guiding this freshening, continuing rediscovery by the young of *what makes us human* is what gives the real meaning to "education for survival"?

And may one not rightly conjecture that as a society-of-the-individually-responsible accepts this task, it simultaneously could become its own best hope for survival through the rediscovery of sustaining purpose in education? □

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