

On Education for Alternative Futures: A Conversation with Sam Keen

A former professor of philosophy, Sam Keen is a lecturer, contributing editor to *Psychology Today*, and the author of 12 books, including *Faces of the Enemy* and *The Passionate Life*. Here he discusses his views on education for the corporate world, the need to develop visual literacy, and the role of controversy in education.

Why do you believe education is headed in the wrong direction?

Unfortunately, we don't have educational leadership in this country. Far from leading, or even asking where we should be going, our schools are blindly following the imperatives of the larger society. As a result, our schools are taking us into an increasingly high-technological future—a future that is highly consumptive, highly urban, highly competitive, highly individualistic, and highly corporate.

You think that's a mistake?

Definitely. In doing this, education has betrayed our future rather than helping us fulfill its promise.

Now, I'm using a very strong word—*betrayal*—because I believe that offering education that does not prepare students to survive in a probable future is betrayal. If educators refuse to consider any future but one that's highly corporate, highly technological, and highly consumptive, then they betray the future.

Why do you say that a highly technological, consumptive future is not "probable"?

A major threat to our very survival is our technomania: our inability to imagine any satisfactory life that does not include making all aspects of our existence increasingly dependent on technology. Now, we know that ap-

proach isn't working. We know that, unless we develop a more organic relationship with the world around us, we're going to destroy that world. In order not to destroy the ecology, we must sustain life. We need a new way of living with nature, not just a new way of manipulating it. We need to find appropriate technologies; we



have to determine which kinds of technology are going to enhance the quality of life and which are not. We must be willing to use or to refuse machines.

And schools are not teaching our children these skills?

No. Schools are not preparing students to live in a way that is harmonious with the natural order and that promises its preservation. Instead, they are preparing students for corporate futures.

Corporations, institutions, and bureaucracies—students live within them, and yet nowhere are they given any wisdom about how to live within them without being co-opted by them. For most students the only real choice is which corporation to go to work for. They don't know that there's another way to live.

And the schools should give them that choice?

Yes. The educational system should show students alternatives. It should say, "Look, you can choose the different ways you live. These are the skills you need to live in a highly corporate world; these are the skills you need to live in a rural world."

If we want children to have an alternative, then we have to show them what that alternative is; we have to make it real and attractive. We have to combat the propaganda for highly consumptive ways of life with a vision of living in an organic relationship to the natural world. We need to reconstitute the integrity of rural life. We need to show that, for many people, life in small towns and villages can be more attractive and free than life in large metropolitan areas.

To do that in a meaningful way, wouldn't schools have to allow students to experience both ways of life?

Exactly. That's why education has got to begin to mix urban and rural environments. We need to use forms of apprenticeship learning, where urban children are taken into rural environments for significant periods of time, so they can learn that there's another way of living.

For most students, ecology is merely a theory. We need to show

them what it means to husband, to nurture, and to live with growing things. And to think that we can do this in kindergarten by putting two seeds in a Dixie cup and showing that things grow is crazy. That's no way to teach urban kids who have never had any experience of a world where growth rather than manufacturing is the primary reality.

Let's assume that schools do present children with alternative ways of living. Wouldn't they also need to provide different programs for students, depending on which way of life appealed to them?

That's right. That's why I believe we're going to have two different tracks in education in the future. One will be for students who want to be highly professional, highly specialized, and live in a corporate world. The other track will be for those who want to be broadly educated, to do vast numbers of things for themselves, to provide many of their own necessities.

Is the second alternative really possible in today's world?

Certainly. Even today, many people in America are self-reliant. We have a whole class of people who live what I call sustained lives: they live in communities that are real communities, and they live close to the ground. We don't advertise these people; they're not dramatic; but they're there. For instance, I know many people out in the country who live on six, seven, ten thousand dollars a year, and who live well, because they've learned to do most things for themselves. They raise large portions of their own food, for instance.

What about city dwellers? Can they be more self-reliant?

Yes, to a degree. It's been estimated that even within city limits people could raise 40 to 50 percent of their own vegetables. Now, for Americans, that seems like a radical idea; but in Scandinavia or Germany, it's just a matter of course. People there—even urban people—are taught love of the soil. In Germany they have gardens down by the railroads. It's part of their life, it's part of who they think they are; but it's also part of their pleasures. We

need to educate our students to live in a world where that's part of their reality.

You also believe that schools should develop students' visual literacy. Why?

We live in an age that gets most of its information from images, and yet we don't study the logic of images. We're manipulated by those images, and we don't even know how it's being done to us. An example of this is the last presidential campaign, where we were in the hands of skilled propagandists. They knew exactly how to manipulate sound bytes, audio bytes, and visual opportunities to make us do what they wanted. But schools are not teaching students how to talk back to the media. The lack of courses on critical visual thinking is the biggest vacuum in the curriculum.

In the old days, we had courses on how to think straight: courses in logic and rhetoric. But a student who knows logic very well and can tell you all the rules of critical thinking in the traditional philosophical sense may decide, after watching an hour of television, that he wants to buy G.I. Joe dolls or whatever else he's seen advertised. He's been manipulated by those images. He doesn't talk back to the image machine.

As educators, we're operating against enormous odds. Through television, the average child is bombarded with about seven hours of propaganda a day. If we don't teach students to think critically about the images they're exposed to, we allow them to live in a world of almost total indoctrination. And the tools of indoctrination—primarily television—are so powerful, so ubiquitous, that schools must make it a primary task to help students understand the way they're manipulated by the media.

Can schools combat such pervasive influences?

It's difficult, but it's possible. For instance, I once taught a course on Myth, Dream, and Symbols. I had my students record their dreams every day, so they could begin to understand the way their own minds made and used symbols. Once they did that, they could identify public dreams and be more critical of them.

After all, that's what television is: a public dream machine.

Students ought to watch the evening news every day and analyze it to find out how they're being manipulated by what is reported, by what isn't reported, by news presented in an entertainment format. To start the process, I'd get the arts teachers, the social studies teachers, and someone who knows psychology, and I'd have them watch Dan Rather, including all of the commercials. Then I'd say, "Now, what's happening to you when you watch these things? What do these images do to you? What aren't you seeing? What kinds of views of the world are you getting?" I'd suggest that they have students examine the same questions.

Most people believe that schools should help students assimilate the norms of their culture. How can educators distinguish that function from indoctrination?

The first task of education is to liberate. Hannah Arendt said it very well: Education has two tasks. One is

to introduce students to the values of their society. Students should know the Constitution, they should know America's values, they should know its history. But the second task is to prepare students to go into a future that they will have to create. So we have to open them up; we have to teach them that the values of the past, although we stand by them, are not values that we can extrapolate into the future. Education should ground students in the past but allow them to soar into a future that is different from past or present.

How can teachers help their students do that?

I see the teacher as primarily a questioner, as someone who says, "Look, we don't know how to get to a future that will allow us not just to survive but to thrive. We don't know the answers, so you'd better at least hear the questions." I want to see schools as places where value questions are thrashed out. After all, who is supposed to ask these questions if it isn't the teachers of America? Who else

is supposed to go beyond present assumptions? We should be asking questions in school, not giving answers. Teachers should have the autonomy to ask their own questions.

Many teachers have to contend with pressure from parents to teach the values they endorse.

The fear of controversy is a major problem in education. If I could put a motto over a school that might change it, it would be from *Zorba the Greek*: "Life is trouble; undo your belt and go out and look for it." If teachers aren't in trouble today, if they aren't getting flak from the community, then they aren't doing their job. Administrators should protect teachers from inordinate pressure from the outside so they can raise unpopular questions, examine values that everyone in the community may not hold. Education that does not arouse controversy is not education. □

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