

## Education or Schooling?

From: *Loosing Heart: The Moral and Spiritual Miseducation of America's Children*

by Svi Shapiro

Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the Ray of Northern White Russia (died 1813), was put in jail in Petersburg, because the *mitnagdim* had denounced his principles and his way of living to the government. He was awaiting trial when the chief of the gendarmes entered his cell. The majestic and quiet face of the *ray*, who was so deep in meditation that he did not at first notice his visitor, suggested to the chief, a thoughtful person, what manner of man he had before him. He began to converse with his prisoner and brought up a number of questions which had occurred to him in reading the Scriptures. Finally he asked: "how are we to understand that God, the all-knowing, said to Adam: 'Where art thou?'"

"Do you believe," answered the *ray*, "that the Scriptures are eternal and that every era, every generation and every man is included in them?"

"I believe this," said the other.

"Well then," said the *zaddik*, "in every era, God calls to every man: 'Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?' God says something like this: 'You have lived forty-six years. How far along are you?'" When the chief of the gendarmes heard his age mentioned, he pulled himself together, laid his hand on the *ray's* shoulder, and cried: "Bravo!" But his heart trembled.

The rabbi's answer means, in effect: "You yourself are Adam, you are the man whom God asks: 'Where art thou?'" It would thus seem that the answer gives no explanation of the passage as such. In fact, however, it illuminates both the situation of the biblical Adam and that of every man in every time and in every place. For as soon as the chief hears and understands that the biblical question is addressed to him, he is bound to realize what it means when God asks: "Where art thou?," whether the question be addressed to Adam or to some other man. In so asking, God does not expect to learn something he does not know; what he wants is to produce an effect in man which can only be produced by just such a question, provided that it reaches man's heart—that man allows it to reach his heart.

Adam hides himself to avoid rendering accounts, to escape responsibility for his way of living. **Every man hides** for this purpose, for every man is Adam and finds himself in Adam's situation. To escape responsibility for his life, he **turns existence into a system of hideouts**. And in thus hiding again and again "from the face of God," he enmeshes himself more and more deeply in perversity. A new situation thus arises, which becomes more and more questionable with every day, with every new hideout. This situation can be precisely

defined as follows: Man cannot escape the eye of God, but in trying to hide from him, he is hiding from himself. True, in him too there is something that seeks him, but he makes it harder and harder for that “something” to find him. This question is designed to awaken man and destroy his system of hideouts; it is to show man to what pass he has come and to awake in him the great will to get out of it.

Everything now depends on whether man faces the question. Of course, every man’s heart, like that of the chief in the story, will tremble when he hears it. But his system of hideouts will help him to overcome this emotion. For the Voice does not come in a thunderstorm which threatens man’s very existence; it is a “still small voice,” and easy to drown. So long as this is done, man’s life will not become a way. Whatever power he may attain and whatever deeds he may do, his life will remain way-less, so long as he does not face the Voice. Adam faces the Voice, perceives his enmeshment, and avows: “I hid myself”; this is the beginning of man’s way. The decisive heart-searching is the beginning of a human way. (from Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*. Citadel Press, 1994, p. 9—11)

For the past 25 years I have taught high school students, students who are preparing to be teachers, teachers who have come back to the university to gain advanced degrees, individuals pursuing doctoral degrees so that they can assume positions of leadership in schools, and a whole variety of assorted people who have an interest in education and educational matters. In addition, I have talked to countless numbers of people, both informally and in invited settings, about what I see as the real issues that confront educators in today’s world. I don’t know how many people this totals: in the hundreds certainly, and quite possibly in the thousands. In addition, over the years I have written a good deal for both academic as well as less specialized audiences about educational matters. Still, as I sit down today to begin this new process of writing about education, schools, and the world our children face, I do so with the feeling that many of us face in our middle years. It is a moment of self-reflection and of soul searching, a time to take stock. What has it all added up to? What difference have my heartfelt efforts made to what is happening to children in our schools? Have all of those classes, discussions, articles, books made a dent on the kind of world and the kind of culture that we as adults are making for a new generation?

Of course, by now, I like to think I have shed some of the hubris that grips one’s younger years. Not without difficulty, I have begun to come to terms with the more limited effect that most of us (all of us?) have on things. The more ego-centered dreams that we have in our youth about heroically reshaping the world have had to give way to a more limited, more modest, set of expectations. The struggle of middle age, at least for those who came of age in the 1960s possessed of dreams of radical transformations in both our personal and social lives, is to hold in balance the more limited expectations about what any one of can do during our short sojourn on earth, while believing that whatever we do is not enough. Somehow the internal struggle—what is really a spiritual struggle, I believe—is to accept the finitude of our life and our human energies without succumbing to the sense that in this world of huge and terrible needs our efforts are so

puny that it matters little whether or not we try.

So on this grey North Carolina day I set out to recount, to renew, and to reassert those beliefs that have animated my professional life. And I do this with no illusions. An honest balance sheet that weighs up what has been achieved makes for less than happy reading. Put very simply, if my professional energies have been about the struggle to make educators aware of their important responsibilities in regard to bringing about a more socially just, a more compassionate, a more democratic, and a more ethical culture, such concerns are very far from what animates our public concerns around schools today. Today, even those who have only a passing interest in what constitutes the public discussion about education in the United States know that most of our time and energy centers on whether Johnny or Sally have improved their scores on the most recent round of standardized tests.

It seems to matter little whether our political leaders are Democrats or Republicans. Each candidate, we can be sure, promises to be the education president or governor. And they will do this by making schools more accountable, more efficient, and more successful by instituting a new layer of standardized tests for our children. This dizzying world of ever more pervasive testing has managed to monopolize most of what we now talk about in regard to education. This public discourse has disastrously narrowed, squeezed, and distorted what might count as meaningful talk when it comes to discussing the educational hopes and dreams for our children. Pick up any newspaper and turn to the education page or column and what you will find is the endless rumination on performance standards, measurable results, and student achievement scores. Here, for example, is a sample from the Raleigh News and Observer that appeared on the very day I wrote this chapter:

For the first time since North Carolina launched its school accountability program in 1997, with a sole focus on testing, education leaders are talking openly about raising the standards used to measure those test results. In all 73 percent of the state's 2,221 schools included in the mandatory accountability program exceeded their goals for expected progress based on student test scores. The year before, only 35.5 percent of the state's schools showed the same level of performance. Improvement among the state's elementary schools was even more pronounced: 95 percent of all elementary schools topped their goals for student progress, compared to just 44 percent a year earlier....

"We're at the point where we should be looking at whether we need to ratchet up the standards," said Howard Lee, chairman of the State Board of Education and previous leader on education issues in the state Senate.

Lee continued:

"We want to keep challenging students, and we want to keep challenging teachers," Lee said. We're going to have to keep the pressure on."

To be honest about this report, one needs to add that part of what was driving the concern to "raise standards" was the fact that so many schools had done well on the yearly round of tests. This meant that the extra cash promised to teachers because of their success in getting students to pass the tests was straining the already seriously stretched state budget. So there was a somewhat cynical side to this concern to make schoolwork more challenging for students. Yet, even beside this, we need to sit up and take note of all that is implied in these words and, of course, the millions of others like it that daily fill our newspapers and media when the subject turns to education. Success in educating our

children means success in passing standardized tests. To challenge our children means to make these tests more rigorous. Improvements in our schools means, first and foremost, more kids getting higher test scores. Progress in educating our kids mean that a higher percentage can pass the tests this year than the year before. And in all of this we are asked to watch the bouncing ball of percentages. Just as if we are talking about the production and output of manufactured goods, schools measure their products and compare their results to the efficacy of previous years, and, of course, to the output and productivity of their rivals in other schools, in their own state, or to the results of schools systems elsewhere in the country.

## **THE EMPTINESS OF LEARNING**

Something deeply disturbing is going on here, but perhaps, like the frog that is placed in a pot where the temperature of the water is slowly raised, the deadly nature of what we are about eludes us and, at least for now, may even seem reasonable and quite comfortable. The frog may not know the exact point when the water was no longer pleasantly warm but pointed to his demise. We, too, have lost track of when schools became for our children places of never-ending judgments and invidious comparisons, while all the time claiming to be places where all our children were nurtured and supported. Prepping for the test, taking tests, checking the results, comparing them to the results of others is, quite simply, taking over kids (and of course, teachers') lives in schools. And we as a nation have learned to watch the process like we have come to watch the ups and downs of the Dow Jones index. As the latter purports to be an indicator for the economic and social health of the nation, so the standardized test results purport to represent the educational health of our children. Neither, I believe, is correct!

There is plenty of evidence about the extraordinary increase in the extent and pervasiveness of testing in our schools. In my daughter's public school system in North Carolina (a state often touted as a leader in educational reform), there has been something like a seven-fold increase in the past 10 years. Indeed, a colleague of mine likes to quip that public education ought to be retitled as public evaluation. But perhaps what really brings home to me the effects of all this on education is reflecting on my own daughter's experience. Sarah was a good, even excellent high school student, hard-working and diligent in terms of her work and assignments. She was part of that group of predominantly middle-class to upper-middle-class students who are the real winners in the high school selection process. One of that group of students who most teachers prefer to teach, and administrators look to, to validate the academic reputation of their school. Her school is generally regarded as one of the better, more successful public high schools in the state in terms of the percentage of seniors going on to college, the prestige of the colleges or universities they attend, and the dollars awarded in scholarships. Nor should my reflections on her education suggest that she was unhappy in this environment. She made good friends, enjoyed the camaraderie of her peers, was recognized and affirmed for her achievements, and was served well in terms of the tickets that needed punching in order for her to be able to choose the four-year college she would subsequently attend. In terms of the many students in her school (typically of lower income and disproportionately Black) who fared much less well at school in terms of their academic success, Sarah's achievements could certainly be viewed as enviable.

Yet there is more to this story than simply celebrating an education for what it provided one fortunate individual in the way of recognition and success. Many parents may have felt delighted with such good fortune and be ready to laud the school for what was afforded to at least some children. Unfortunately, I could not ignore what appeared to me to be the vulgar degeneration of the educational experience. I had seen “up close and personal” what education had really become for so many young people in this time of supposedly rigorous academic standards and the demand for measurable accountability of what young people were learning.

The educational experience for Sarah was a study in just how deadening and dispirited learning had become in American schools in the early years of the 21st century. Most classroom instruction had come to resemble that process of “banking education” so pointedly described by the famous Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Most successful students worked hard to fill their heads with an endless array of information, quotes from books, selections from speeches, literary themes, scientific laws, grammatical rules, mathematical formulas, historical dates, thematic descriptions, paragraphs from the constitution—indeed, anything that they were able to parrot back as required by their teachers and as demanded by the *test du jour*. The sheer volume of the material that Sarah and her friends were constantly required to memorize seemed, however, to be in inverse proportion to the extent that it could be called either meaningful or useful to the students’ lives. The blizzard of disconnected bits and pieces of information seemed to have more in common with the game Trivial Pursuit than with the kind of understanding that might help young people begin to give some purpose or value to their world, or help them “map” or make sense of the culture that was confronting them. High standards and rigorous assessment in our schools, it was quite obvious, meant most of all the capacity to remember extraordinary amounts of information and the ability to “regurgitate” it when required on a test or exam. We sometimes laughed at home at the fact that teachers were giving so many tests it seemed to leave little time to actually engage in anything that resembled teaching or learning. The quest for greater academic rigor had, it seemed, become a matter mostly of more material to be covered, more information to be memorized, and more tests to discover whether or not you had remembered, at least for a day or two, what you had been taught. (One wit has suggested that the difference between those who are successful at school and those who are not is that the former forget what they learn after the test rather than before it!).

I want to be clear about my criticisms here. My dissatisfaction is not at all about the value of serious intellectual engagement. Indeed, education, I believe, ought, at the very least, to be about teaching young people to think and learn what it means to become critically minded human beings. This is the great legacy of enlightenment values: the belief that our humanity is deepened and enriched by the development of the capacity to go beyond the accepted dogma or the conventional assumptions of a culture. This, certainly, is a casualty of our current preoccupations in education. Schools are becoming quite simply crude, cramming factories. They are increasingly distant from being places where young people learn to reason, question, and critically interrogate the assertions that are placed before them, or to think deeply about the meaning and implications of the ideas, beliefs, or knowledge they encounter. Such a vision of education is, instead, replaced by one in which higher standards mean, quite simply, the drive to fill up young minds with a huge array of facts and information that resides in our brains for only as

long as it is needed for the next test. (For an influential example of where this thinking is taking us, pick up one of those popular tomes by E. D. Hirsch optimistically titled *Cultural Literacy* with its extraordinary, and surely absurd, lists of those things that an “educated” person is supposed to know.)

The current “ratcheting” upward of educational standards has made school an increasingly demanding and competitive place in terms of what it takes to be successful. This really means that success requires increasing amounts of time and effort in playing the “game of schooling.” More effort than ever is now required to familiarize, memorize, and regurgitate the bits and pieces of knowledge that ensure the good grades without which college admissions and scholarships will remain a pipe dream. This accounts, too, for the extraordinary increase in both the time spent in school and in the amount of homework demanded. A University of Michigan study showed that students spend 8 more hours in school now than they did 20 years ago. It noted, too, that in this time homework has nearly doubled. In 1981, 6- to 9-year-olds averaged 44 minutes a week of homework. In 1997 it was more than 2 hours. In their book *The End of Homework*, John Buell and Etta Kralovec argued that “both research and historical experience fail to demonstrate the necessity or efficacy of ever longer hours of homework.” They also noted that many students, especially, junior and senior high students, are suffering from the “fatigue factor” of putting in 50 or 60 hours a week of class time, which may burn them out before they go to college. Even among young children there is an increasing emphasis on making school a place of increasing productivity where there is reduced time for play, and more time is devoted to raising test scores and results. This is evidenced in the fact that since the 1980s hundreds of elementary schools have eliminated recess. Betsy Taylor noted the “extraordinary cultural pressure to put kids on the fast track by the age of two.” Parents, she said, are enrolling young toddlers in a myriad of precurricular activities to ensure they can compete and be successful in school. All of this effort and time may provide decent, or even exceptional, grades and test results. But we need to ask ourselves, what in the world does all the material students are now required to “cover” have to do with our proudest and noblest vision of a citizenry that knows how to reason, question, and think? Is there any connection between all of these increased demands and the development of the capacity to become creative, imaginative, or reflective human beings? Filling the minds of young people in this way may have much more in common with that venerable tradition of stuffing the turkey at Thanksgiving. Each may be the precursor to a celebration, but neither should be confused with the rejuvenation of an active, curious life. Perhaps our confusion over what it means to really know something, as opposed to merely “banking” knowledge, is testimony to just how far we have learned to detach the education we expect for our kids from any vision of learning that speaks to the quintessential human need to make or find meaning, to become reflective and thoughtful beings, or even to solve individual and societal problems in creative and responsible ways. We have made a Faustian bargain for our kids—a schooling that promises higher standards and test scores, instead of an education that enlivens and enriches how our children engage their world.

To walk into too many classrooms today is to see just how much this devil’s bargain has deadened the minds of our kids and dispirited their sense of active engagement with the world. It is, I believe, time that we as parents and as citizens recovered our sense that there is something being tragically destroyed in our restrictive obsession with grades, test

results, and grade point averages (GPAs). It is education itself that is being eviscerated by this process of intellectual narrowing and by the reduction of learning to those things that can be assessed through the simplistic yes/no answers of standardized bubble sheets. Although the sad results of this might be most evident in high schools, we should not imagine that elementary or middle schools have escaped the effects of the testing regime and its deadly effect on the possibility of joyful, creative, and thoughtful classrooms. Here is some of what a teacher of 8-year-olds recently wrote in a letter to our local newspaper expressing her frustration at the demand for additional pressure on schools to “raise standards”:

Please—the pressure is already more than most of us can tolerate. Teachers, administrators, parents, and yes, children most of all, are drowning in unrealistic expectations put on us by people who have no idea how we are affected. Imagine a world where 8-year-olds take a test every year that lasts longer than an SAT or GRE (three half-days of testing) and determines whether they will be retained or not the following year. Imagine having once passed that test, only to be required to take a similar test the next year and the next and every school year thereafter, each determining pass/fail for the next year. The very same children squirm every year and either get trapped or squeak by, knowing the relief may only be temporary.

I have heard such feelings expressed numerous times in my graduate classes, where experienced and dedicated teachers must daily struggle with what the relentless focus on tests and so-called “high standards” is doing to education and the children they teach. What I hear again and again is how destructive all this is to making classrooms that interest, stimulate, and challenge young minds!

### **BECOMING MANIPULATIVE, THINKING INSTRUMENTALLY**

Of course, when I return to my daughter’s experience it must be said that not all was darkness. Certainly there were classrooms that were challenging, that came alive with dialogue and discussion, even occasional incidences when the classroom focus resonated with her own experience and concerns. And, of course, with the deadening hand of the regime of tests and standards is the presence of teachers trying hard to make their subject material matter to kids beyond whether it is worth 10 points on the next quiz. But we need to look here not at the heroic and ingenious exceptions to the general trend, but at the trend itself. Often in my conversations with some of these very good and dedicated teachers, the mountains they were being asked to climb daily to do keep their classrooms places that emphasized the capacity to reason, or to be creative, or to encourage the capacity of students to challenge and question, were becoming just too difficult. I have witnessed these teachers agonizing over the choice of whether to leave teaching, or to accommodate to the assessment factories our schools have become. There is, sadly, evidence that it is often the most thoughtful and creative teachers who are the first to leave among those who have recently entered teaching. A recent report noted that nearly one in six public school teachers did not return to their school systems in the subsequent

year.

In actual fact, it is less than accurate to say that students in school do not think. Of course, conscious humans are always engaged in some kind of thought process. The issue is really, thinking about what, and in relationship to what set of meanings or purpose? We knew, for example, that Sarah had become very good at statistical computation. She was able to maintain, in her head, a complex accounting of her current grades in any subject, feeding into them all the various permutations relating to the numerical weight of different assignments, quizzes, exams, and other course requirements. Like all of the students around her, she was able to rapidly discern the best way to distribute her energies with the greatest efficiency, to maximize the numbers and grades in her classes. This was no small feat, and there were others who demonstrated quite extraordinary capabilities in this regard. Indeed, she was simultaneously impressed, and also chagrined, by the real hustlers in her classes who had developed an amazing capacity to beat the numerical system to ensure their own success. If nothing else, using one's wits in this way might be excellent training for those thinking about becoming Wall Street traders or even Las Vegas casino sharp hands. I often wondered whether this is what people had in mind when they talked about school preparing young people for the real world. It was frequently those who were the best "wheelers and dealers" in this process that received the most generous offers from the most selective universities. What all this focus on playing the numbers surely does produce is a strategically attuned mind set—a highly instrumental or manipulative attitude toward one's own education. Students learn in the competitive, test-driven, and grade-obsessed school environment that what counts has little to do with the pleasure of learning, or the intrinsic value of greater understanding. And certainly what is learned does not have much to do with increasing the wisdom we have about the purpose or significance of our lives, or our capacity to help shape a more just, free, or compassionate culture. In contrast to this, students learn to see education as mainly about how one can manipulate the system to get the best results with the least expenditure of effort. And who can really blame kids for that? Isn't that what we as adults are really conveying by giving so much attention to grades, test scores, GPAs, even the dollar amounts attained by schools in scholarships.

It should come as no surprise that the extraordinary increase in testing has been paralleled by evidence of widespread cheating both among school personnel and among students. A simple surf of the Web provides examples of a whole industry that now feeds on the instrumental, results-driven character of present-day schooling. Outfits like *Paperpimp* brazenly offer their services to any student who has learned the cynical message of contemporary education, which is to do whatever it takes to get the right grades or exam results. Increasingly it seems that this is the only thing that now really seems to count in our schools—win, or at least survive the game, by any means possible. A survey by the Josephson Institute of Ethics of nearly 21,000 middle and high school students found that 70% of high school students admitted to cheating at least once on an exam in the previous 12 months; 45% of these students agreed with the statement, "A person has to lie or cheat in order to succeed." Over a third of the students questioned would be willing to cheat if it would help them get into college. In another survey of high school students, 80% of students admitted to cheating to get to the top of their class. More than half said that they didn't view cheating as a big deal.



In the context of this increasingly dog-eat-dog world of public education, the incidence of professional employees cheating has also increased. In the past 2 years, schools in New York, Texas, Florida, Ohio, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Kentucky, and Maryland have investigated reports of improper or illegal attempts by teachers, principals and other administrators to raise test scores. In Texas a deputy superintendent was indicted on 16 counts of criminal tampering after central administrators and principals boosted scores by changing the identification numbers of students whose failing grades they did not want counted. In New York City cheating was so pervasive that it led to the resignation of a school superintendent. With the implementation of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind legislation, and its even greater emphasis on test results and sanctions against schools that fail to show "adequate yearly progress" in their test scores, we should expect more and more examples of dishonest practices by both teachers and school administrators seeking to save jobs or avoid public embarrassment. Of course, in this age of corporate scandals related to extraordinary ethical abuses of deception and cheating, it is hard to see schools as places that are alone in the tendency to emphasize the importance of winning at any cost. It is the results that count—whether this be in the form of grades and test scores, or profits and stock values—and the smartest and most successful individuals, it seems, are those who have learned how to play the game to their greatest advantage. David Callahan recently made this argument in his book *The Cheating Culture*, in which he noted that the free-wheeling economic climate of the past 20 years has produced a society in which cheating and dishonesty are rampant. The unfettered market is reflected in corporate scandals, doping in sports, plagiarism by journalists and students and corner-cutting in the most mundane matters. The "winning class," argued Callahan, has the money and clout to cheat without consequence, whereas others come to believe that not cheating will cost them their only shot at success in a winner-take-all world. This manipulative, win-at-all-costs mentality is the stuff that now provides our entertainment in so many "reality" TV shows.

## **DE-MEANING EDUCATION**

For students, educational chatter about knowledge and understanding is just "sweet talk" little related to the daily grind of schooling and the preoccupation with winning, getting ahead, or just surviving. Education becomes increasingly a high-stakes game in which success is defined almost entirely by one's ability to test well through whatever means necessary. For educators, the extraordinary extent and pervasiveness of standardized tests in American schools put a choke-hold on all other educational goals and purposes. In this process, as we have seen, education becomes the intellectually thin process of memorization and regurgitation of predigested information. Classroom instruction is more and more given over to "test prep." In this context, schools offer little that can be taken as a source of personal meaning, as a stimulus to critical thought, or as the catalyst for imaginative interpretation of human experience.

The effect of all this on students' interest, curiosity, and participation in their own learning is a devastating one. Study after study reveals that the longer kids stay in school, the drearier it becomes. The interest and excitement that is usually present during the first years of school gives way increasingly to the boredom of high school. Observers of high school have continually remarked on the vapid

nature of the educational experience, the shallowness of the way knowledge is engaged, and the alienated and manipulative attitudes of students. In a particularly vivid recent account of life in a suburban high school, the journalist Elinor Burkett described the shamelessly instrumental attitudes of students across the range of academic abilities. Some of what she wrote is worth quoting here:

The philosophy driving education was capitalism in its purest form. Everything was about the reward, and the reward had to be delivered in the currency of teenage life: points and grades. Learning, students had been taught, was an exercise in venture capitalism and they expected a decent return. How many points is this extra-credit question worth?" students badgered teachers who offered special questions at the end of exams. "I haven't decided yet," a substitute once responded. "How can we know whether we want to do it then?" replied the students, clearly confounded.

Arnanda Halvorson went one step further in the January issue of the *Laker Times*, the student newspaper, suggesting that schools pay students for good grades. "The majority of students today said they don't try their hardest in classes because they feel there is no point," she wrote: "They also say these things to teachers all of the time: Why do we have to do this?" This is useless, and I will never actually use any of this in life."

In the absence of such monetary compensation, students were clear about the purpose of their education: "Grades are what school is about," they declared. And they received few signals that they were wrong. "Work hard, get good grades," their parents urged, not "Work hard, and expand your horizons."

Not surprisingly, such nakedly instrumental attitudes toward education produced an entirely amoral view of cheating. School was a game with no compelling individual or social purpose beyond getting the best grade you could get with the least effort. As long as you can get away with it, why not do whatever is needed (a sentiment that interestingly parallels that found among executives at Enron and WorldCom). One student described it this way:

My belief is that every part of life is a game," he said, without a trace of cynicism. "I even see it with my dad and his work. The question is: What can I get away with before it's a problem?"

This student described how he "worked" the teachers, pretending that he was engaged and performing "careful cost-benefit analyses" about what work was likely to pay off in A's. Elinor Burkett found such attitudes to be the norm in a school, she was careful to point out, that was rated among the best in the state and nation as measured in the usual currency of college admissions—SAT results and AP scores. Cheating, she noted, in the school was near universal.

In a world without much shame, students weren't ashamed of copying friends' work or pulling papers off the Internet. When Joe Goracke asked his Psychology students about the morality of the practice, they were candid and forthright. "How many of you have never cheated?" he posed the question to his class that morning. Although Goracke was infamous for his toughness, his students seemed entirely relaxed and

open in discussions. In response to Goracke's question one girl out of the group of twenty raised her hand. When her friends glared at her suspiciously, she lowered it halfway. "Well, I've never cheated on a test, just on worksheets," she said timidly. "That doesn't count," the students declared unanimously. "Why not?" Goracke pushed. "That's just homework, it's different, they answered. "What about tests, then?" Inquired Goracke. "I wouldn't plan to cheat on a test, but if the situation arose..." one boy ventured.

I would be less than fully honest to say that there was not some relief in my daughter Sarah's capacity to cope successfully with this game of schooling. After all, the rewards are clear—admission to a good university, scholarship money that lightens the heavy financial load of a middle-class parent, and the avoidance of the constant clashes and crises faced by parents dealing with children who were in a constant mode of resistance toward the school regime. Within my community I have seen, for example, the pain of parents whose children (more often boys) find the school game meaningless and refuse to knuckle down and do what is required of them. There is a special poignance to the fact that these parents often, themselves, share with their kids the sense of the mindlessness of what schools require, but are caught between empathy for their offspring, and fear for the economic and social consequences of school failure. It is also fully apparent that for many working-class and poorer families the rules of the educational game remain the privileged knowledge of students from predominately White, middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds. This becomes painfully obvious at every school gathering where honors and academic recognitions are distributed. So to whatever extent Sarah's success eased our burdens, I confess that I possess no great sense of triumphalism in this process. The capacity to play the game makes life more comfortable, that is for sure. But this must not be confused with any deep satisfaction at what is being accomplished in terms of the quality and value of the educational experience. The end, here, can in no way be allowed to obscure or justify the means. After all, success is the capacity or willingness (often because of fear of authority or the need to conform—the reason, I believe, that girls now do better at school than boys, rather than because of any blossoming of feminist assertiveness) to play the school game. This means, in the schooling that so many of our children now face, a readiness to subordinate much of the human capacity for creativity and imagination, a questioning thoughtfulness, and the expectation that what we learn might enrich or add meaning to our lives. All of this is forced, much of the time, to give way to the shallow and often manipulative search for points, scores, and grades. In our fixation on the issue of achieving a better education it is as if we have substituted the currency of success for any real sense of meaning, purpose, or wisdom in what we do. It seems to parallel the way that the fetish of accumulating money or possessions has substituted for the question of how wealth might improve the quality of our lives. Day in and day out we drum this message into the heads of our children. Forget that learning might have something to do with the understanding that might, in turn, help us live fuller and more purposeful lives. Or that knowledge offers us the capacity to strip away the deceit, pretenses, and distortions of our grotesquely deceptive culture and, perhaps, empower us as citizens. Schooling is steadily removed from the quest for wisdom, meaning, or the capacity to think, question, and challenge. In its place we subject young people to an increasingly inane regimen of learning in which higher standards and rigor

are confused with more tests, more pages to memorize, and more information that can be parroted back to the teacher. All of this is driven by crude economic pressures that suggest that better test scores mean a more competitive workforce, politicians with simplistic promises for educational reform and improvement, and a public hungry for demonstrable evidence of change and accountability.

And at the end of the day, all talk about education and educational change is reduced not to the quality of the human experience but to the quantifiable measures of so-called learning. In other words, it is all brought down to numbers that can measure results and show relative gains and losses, akin to the profit and gain spreadsheets of business. In this one-dimensional world of educational accounting, what is being lost, as we flatten out the extraordinarily complex world of human growth and understanding and reduce it to the crudity and simplicity of a few digits on a school report or the assessment of a school system's adequacy, are any real references to the joy of learning, or the capacity to engage knowledge as the means to live as more discerning, engaged, and conscientious members of the human community. Einstein was surely right when he quipped that "not all that can be counted, counts, and not all that counts can be counted." This is clearly a message not heard by the legions of politicians, legislators, school administrators, and the corporate and academic industry that has supported our brave new world of educational reform. How can one not be darkly amused by reports in our local newspapers that the latest school accountability measures demonstrate that new levels of excellence have arrived in the schools of North Carolina? My everyday experience encountering the graduates of these schools in the college classroom reveals the real impoverished nature of this education—minimum knowledge of events in the world, lack of the ability to question or challenge incapacity at voicing contrary ideas in the classroom, incredulity that education should have something to do with democracy and critical examination of our culture, surprise at the application of education to the quest for meaning and purpose in our lives, and astonishment at the idea of education as a vehicle for affirming a position of moral responsibility toward the world in which we live. They are, however, familiar and moderately competent with essay "outlines," predigested readings, and, most importantly, clear delineation of the relative weight of assignments to the overall value of the final grade. I find little to celebrate in the claimed great march forward of "high educational standards." It seems to produce mainly intellectual timidity, the capacity for rote learning, a shallowness of thought, and an absence of imagination. More than this, it has left many students with a detached and cynical attitude to any education that doesn't have tangible connections to a better grade and job opportunity.

## **RETHINKING EDUCATIONAL REFORM**

The present era of educational reform is generally considered to have begun in 1983 with the Reagan administration's report *A Nation at Risk*. This report blamed the country's economic woes on the "rising tide of mediocrity" in the nation's schools. Strangely, when 10 years later the United States began the longest economic boom in the past 50 years, little was said either to congratulate schools on the good economic times, or to modify the theory that connected increased productivity and technological inventiveness to the quality of public education. Here is not the place to make sense of the ideological and political influences that had come together to blame schools for job

losses, industrial decline, and a general crisis of confidence about this country's cultural and military superiority. Whatever the cogency of the indictment of schools, the influence of the report in setting in train the next 20 years of educational reform can hardly be doubted. Certainly we are still living through the push for higher standards and increased public accountability in our schools. Interestingly, much of the debate around public education has been framed as a conflict between the liberal influences of the 1960s and 1970s with their concern for the psychological well-being of kids, and the defenders of academic standards—conservatives, who want to “return” schools to their true educational mission of ensuring young people have mastered fundamental skills and acquired “basic” knowledge. The former are blamed for permitting lax academic and moral standards in their zeal to create environments where all kids can feel okay about themselves. The 1960s and liberals (especially among the teaching profession and their allies in university schools of education) are accused of undermining clear standards of achievement and behavior by encouraging relativistic values. Whether in terms of affirming multiple forms of intelligence, the value of process over product, history that emphasizes multiple perspectives, or the incommensurable value of different languages and cultures, these liberals stand accused of pandering to the goal of making everyone “feel good” about who they are and what they know, to the detriment of legitimate standards of what might be considered “true” and “good.” Of course, there is a good deal of confusion in the conservative critique. For example, among some, ought to provide students with the capacity to thoughtfully analyze ideas and to discern the cogency or illogicality of texts. For the latter the shallowness of understanding required in the new regime of standardized tests ought to be cause for alarm. Certainly, report after report has made the point that educational reforms are producing forms of learning that require little critical engagement with ideas, and little more than the most superficial kinds of knowing or understanding to “pass” one's classes. It is also worth noting that careful study of changes in school practices over the past 50 years dismisses the idea that public schools ever really embraced the kind of openness or permissiveness that right-wing critics accused them of, or moved that far away from teacher-centered learning organized around the traditional subject-based curriculum. And, certainly, schools have never gone that far from giving up their roles as social “gate-keepers”—institutions that are engaged in the process of sorting and sifting students for future success and opportunity. Much of the criticism seems to have depended on a caricature of changes in schools that would support or enable the kinds of reforms that have become familiar in the last 20 years. In many senses there was what David Berliner and his associates called a “manufactured crisis” of falling standards, declining abilities, and sinking levels of knowledge. This is not to say that things in our schools were fine, only that the sense of a major disruption in how schools functioned that represented a departure from significantly better earlier times is a far cry from what was actually the reality of the overwhelming continuity and lack of fundamental change in what was going on in the nation's classrooms.

In fact, this conflict has always been about much more than what and how we should teach in our schools. It quite obviously touches serious tensions in our culture that have to do with the promise of democracy—something we return to later in this book. In some respects the conflict grows out of the anxieties and fears about what cultural observers and scholars refer to as postmodernity. A consequence of our postmodern world has been the unleashing of immense challenges to the certainties and clear categories that shape

our world. What can we truly depend on today as fixed, reliable, and assured? What part of our lives does not feel under siege or fragile? What do we know or believe that can be stated with absolute certainty? How secure is my economic future, my social relationships, or even my physical existence? In a world of increasingly permeable borders, and with easy access to an amazing array of new ideas, beliefs, sensibilities and identities, the solid secure self is now the willing subject of endless “make-overs.” With the promise of change and novelty held ever more tantalizingly before us, the familiar and comforting contours of home, relationships, and community no longer seem so dependable or permanent. In this sense, schools have become places where we enact (frequently with only limited awareness) the tensions, anxieties, and fears of our precarious and uncertain times. Debates over educational practices are often our attempts to *come* to grips with issues that are about much more than how much math kids should learn in the eighth grade, or whether learning to read through phonics is better than “whole reading” instruction. In this sense, as David Purpel has argued, there are really *no* educational issues, only human, cultural, moral concerns played out in the arena of schools, and in terms of the hopes and desires we have for our children’s lives. Sadly, and misguidedly, we often continue to talk about education as if it is a world apart from all of these wider concerns, anxieties, fears, and hopes, not the mirror and repository of them.

After 20 years of living in the shadow of *A Nation At Risk*, it is time, I believe, to begin to rethink what education for our children needs to be about. It is time to begin a new era of educational thinking, one that starts with rethinking the vision of what it means for our children to become educated in a time of profound economic, technological, cultural, and moral change. Such a vision needs to connect education to our hopes for our children’s lives in the context of a world in which the present often seems menacing, and the future precarious. Our vision will have to connect education’s work to our best hopes for what it means to be human and how we might live with others both within our own nation as well as in the larger world. In this new bold assertion of education’s mission, questions of identity, culture, and ethical commitment are integral to our educational concerns, and explicitly stated. In the face of such large and profound considerations, our present obsessions around schools will come to seem downright trivial if not ludicrous! Yet it is often hard to reimagine what could or should be—to think, as the expression goes, “out of the box.” What we do and think now is so much a part of our common sense, the taken-for-granted way we make sense of things, that it is really quite difficult to radically reshape the terms of our thinking and to reenvision how things could be. Sometimes, however, by looking around us we can discover the seeds of alternative thinking in familiar places. Answers to some of our questions may stand right before us. We need only to re-contextualize what we are looking at so as to see how it might provide inspiration and insight in areas that we have never before felt relevant to it. This is the case, I believe, with my daughter’s experience of summer camp.

## **THE LESSONS OF NONSCHOOL EDUCATION**

For a number of years now, Sarah has been an avid and enthusiastic participant at Camp Ramah. This Jewish summer camp, held each year for several weeks in Clayton, Georgia, is affiliated with the Conservative movement of American Judaism (conservative not in the usual terms of being right-wing but in its commitment to

maintaining the traditional rituals and practices of the Jewish faith while, at the same time, recognizing the need to reinterpret religious practices and values in the context of a changing culture). Like all summer camps, this one provides the usual opportunities for play, adolescent sociability, and release from the usual surveillance of parents and teachers. It is, as such, a world with rules, regulations, and controls, but, at the same time, it offers considerable opportunities for the spontaneity and pleasure of youthful exuberance and the expression of pent-up adolescent energies. Yet it is also, I have come to appreciate, much more than an adolescent playpen. No less than school, it claims to be a place for education. I have reflected often on what it means for this same word to be applied to both these sites but with a significance in each that seems so profoundly different. In the superficial sense both camp and school provide places to read and study, to discuss issues and to develop skills. Yet this seems in no way to capture the profoundly different character of learning in each place. Although my daughter as competent and successful in school, this in no way was comparable to the transformational experience of learning at her camp. One provided the satisfaction of good grades and the modest recognition of scholarly success; the other moves her soul and infuses her life with meaning and purposeful identity. One offers her the promise of instrumental rewards, the other the inspiration of ethical ideals and a life lived with, and toward, community. One crowned hard work with a transcript that celebrated individual distinction and status; the other connected learning to feeding the spirit's passion for finding existential significance in life's short journey. Of course, these are my words, not Sarah's. Yet I am convinced about the profound distinction that exists in regard to what education means within the context of her school, and within her camping experience. And it is the key to what for her, and other adolescents, is the joyful and moving experience of the latter, and the dreary, mechanical, and alienating experience of school learning. The totality of the camp experience—its formal classes, religious rituals, shared music, dance and aesthetic experiences, informal social life, and the important responsibilities and roles of adolescent peers—establishes an environment for education quite different from the one we expect, and have come to accept, for the 180 days of each school year. School offers only the hollow shell of meaningful experience to our children. In its zeal about academic achievement, test scores, grades, point averages, college acceptance, and the rest, it has turned our eyes away from what is most important in the process of human development and maturation. In focusing our attention on winning, getting ahead, being a success, we have offered kids little that speaks to what it means to live a good and purposeful life in the context of social relationship and communal responsibility. In the place of an education that seeks to connect knowledge and understanding to living lives of worth and significance, we have substituted the junk "education" of the grade game and test prep. If there is something important to be learned from my daughter's very different experiences, it is that the real crisis of the education we offer to our children today is not in declining achievement scores or poor test results, but in our inability to offer an environment that helps nourish the quest for meaningful lives. I am convinced that it is in the crisis of meaning, not in the crisis of test scores, that we may begin to seek understanding of what ails our lives and our culture. All of the tremendous energy we currently pour into our educational reforms will do little to help us address—and, even more importantly, to prepare our children to positively engage—this world of violence, intolerance, social injustice, alienation, addictive materialism, egoism, and spiritual

emptiness. All of our present attempts to “fix” education are very far removed from anything that speaks to the needs of human life and human community at this moment in time. There is little or nothing in all of our educational reforms that offers young people the capacity to deal with the deepening social and cultural crises that are engulfing us. My lifelong colleague and university collaborator David Purpel, in attempting to bring this point home, liked to pose to his students—mainly teachers and school administrators—two questions. The first was to list what they thought were the top 10 problems that now faced humanity (typical answers included war, prejudice, hatred, poverty, HIV/AIDS, social inequities, materialism, and so on). His second question was to have them consider how, and in what ways, the education we presently offer young people attempts to address these issues. There was usually a stunned silence as they recognized how removed our educational focus and work have become from anything that attempts to help us engage and change the human condition in the contemporary world. Education, for all the sound and noise of our local and national reforms, was increasingly disconnected from attempting to provide the knowledge, the understanding, the practical experience, or the moral and emotional climate that might guide young people in their struggle to build lives of meaning and purposeful commitment in a world that, for better or worse, is their home. It is a sad fact that the cramming factories that are our present schools have all but eclipsed any vision of education that might speak to the mind, heart, and spirit of our children so that they might become critically thoughtful, sensitive, and engaged members of the human community. As parents, as citizens, as teachers both in and out of the classroom, we must find a way to redefine, to reenvision, and to reconstruct what it now means to educate our children. What is at stake in this quest is far more important than the academic acumen of our children. What concerns us here is nothing less than the conscience, the awareness, and the moral commitment of those who will shape human life in this nascent century.