

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

by Svi Shapiro

## **Education or Schooling?**

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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**

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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**

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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

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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**

**14**

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**

**16**

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.

## **Crisis of Meaning**

20-43

The tale is told about a nineteenth-century mystical master. Zusia of Onipol was the poorest of masters for many years. Before he revealed himself as a master, he wandered, Buddhist style, from city to city disguised as a beggar. In one city, he would often seek the assistance of a particular wealthy patron, but to no avail. The patron had little time for the likes of him. Later in Zusia’s life, he was revealed as a master and came not only to fame but also to fortune. As it happened, he had reason to pass through the town of this wealthy patron again and was of course invited to sup at the patron’s table. Zusia accepted.

However, a very strange scene ensued. Zusia would take the fine food from the patron’s plate and instead of putting it in his mouth, he would ever so delicately dump it on his clothes.

The patron was aghast. He tried to restrain himself, but as the master kept dumping food onto his garments, he could hold back no longer. “What are



you doing?” he cried out.

“Why, it is very simple,” Zusia responded calmly. “When I was poor you never invited me. The only thing that has changed since then is my clothes. Therefore, I assumed you must have invited my clothes to dine with you. So I was feeding them.” (Hassidic tale from Marc Gafni, *Soul Prints*, p. 238 New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002)

The present public discussion about education does nothing to address the sickness that is at its heart. It only deepens and prolongs the character of education as an instrumental form of human activity, one that is fixated on the extrinsic results of education in the form of grades, point averages, test scores, graduate rates, college admissions, and so on. The lack of any real concern with the human quality of the educational encounter must inevitably result in the corrosion of student attitudes toward education—apathy, disinterest, cynicism, and deceit. We get what we have asked for: students who are, at best (when they are not entirely turned off to the whole business), trained to focus not on the intrinsic experience of learning itself—the joy, power, and transformative nature of ideas—but only on the payoff in the form of a transcript, resumé, or diploma. The classroom becomes merely a form of menial labor where one puts in the necessary hours in order to get a “paycheck.” The paycheck here, of course, is the grade for a course. Education has become nothing but schooling, an obstacle course to be crossed to get on with the rest of one’s life. Each class, subject, grade level, and so on become not much more than rungs on a career ladder to be got over speedily and with minimum effort, to move on and up. There is little that is felt to be intrinsically valuable about each of the stages themselves. So much so that it hardly comes as a surprise when we read that a state like Minnesota is considering dropping the entire 12th grade. The process of education feels more and more like a necessary evil to be endured and survived, one that must be dealt with in ways that call on the least expenditure of students’ intellect or emotion, as long as it ensures successful passage to the next stage of their lives, whether this is college or a job.

To experience what we are doing as nothing more than a vehicle to get us to something else alienates us from the present, and teaches us to view education as not much more than a passport to some future state or opportunity. It not surprising that after so many years of this kind of behavior, many of us find ourselves pursuing religious or spiritual practices that might enable us to become more “mindful” of our lives: looking for ways to be present and alive to where our lives are now, rather than always “living” in some future and promised state. As I have found when I have raised this issue with my undergraduates, the main emotion associated with the classroom is that of waiting. When I have suggested that the emotions associated with real learning ought to be excitement, inspiration, joy, pain, confusion, struggle, and surprise, I am usually met by a sense of disbelief. Few can remember ever having had such feelings as a consequence of any classroom experience (except perhaps the pain of a poor grade, or the joy of a successful test result!). What we now witness is that schooling with its attention to extrinsic results has become everything; education and its concern for our life’s engagement with ideas that might provide insight into who we are and how we are living hardly exist.

**REDEFINING THE CRISIS****21**

We need, I believe, to transform our vision of education from this “result-centered” view with its individual alienation, and disengagement from authentic learning, to one that is understood in a radically different way. In the latter, education becomes a vehicle for that most human of all concerns—the quest and struggle for lives of meaning. Such a vision might speak to the real crisis that faces our children as they grow up in this world: not that of falling SAT scores or poor test results in reading or arithmetic, but that of a culture that is increasingly unable to offer young people the possibility of meaningful and purposeful lives. The fact that the crisis of education came to be defined and described in the way that it did is a strange and interesting tale. It is one I do not attempt to explain here. Others, such as Gerald Bracey, made it clear how the oft-repeated pronouncements about precipitous declines in academic achievement, or major downward shifts in things like SAT scores, ability to read or be numerate, or our academic standing vis-à-vis other countries, seriously exaggerated or distorted the reality of any changes that had actually taken place in educational performance in this country. Indeed, according to these observers, the changes that actually occurred during the past 30 or so years in students’ achievement levels and academic abilities were modest, at best, when all of the complex variables that influence our computations are factored in. Whatever purposes the “pumped up” crisis in academic achievement served, it certainly drove out the last vestiges of a more progressive, student-centered approach to teaching left over from the 1960s and 1970s. It also deflected attempts to define our crisis in education in some very different ways. The “manufactured” educational crisis turned our attention from the mounting anxiety that there was something deeply at fault with the dominant set of meanings and values that were determining how our kids viewed the world that they were growing up in. The crisis of meaning and values that emerged among the young in the 1960s and early 1970s needed to be either suppressed or given a new interpretation. This meant “re-presenting” or “re-telling” the 1960s experience as one that was all about drugs, sex, rock and roll, and violence. It told a story, repeated constantly by our media and many of our political and religious leaders, that omitted how the youthful energies of the period were directed toward confronting an ugly war, resisting the dominant role of money and materialism in our society’s values, and working to change the many forms of social injustice that blighted the landscape of our nation. A time of unprecedented concern for public and political issues among the young, and an unprecedented outpouring of interest in socially responsive activities, was to become seen as a time of little but mindless mayhem and hedonistic excesses. Of course, the radical nature of young people’s perceptions and concerns in that period also meant pressure on schools to make learning more connected to what was happening in the world outside the classroom. It led to the demand that education be more relevant, more encouraging of critical attitudes, and more inclusive of students’ own experiences. In a way, the turn toward a much more rigidly defined and results-oriented approach to education fitted perfectly with those who sought to stem the ethos of a more questioning classroom focused on questions about what was actually going on in our society and in our world. This “top-down” view of learning with its emphasis on getting the one correct answer to whatever might be asked certainly made for a much more conformist, “one-size-fits-all” approach to learning. It also tied in well with the increasing presence of a conservative moralism

that cast our nation's cultural problems as the result of too much sex, drugs, and rock and roll among the young. From this point of view the obvious crisis of meaning in this nation required, in response, more of that old-time religion—discipline and management of the young and the dangerous libidinous energies that had been released in the 1960s. The crisis of meaning would be dealt with through more discipline, through a more rigidly defined set of expectations for what needed to be learned in school (expressed, ultimately, in what became the juggernaut of standardized testing, and the demand that learning means nothing if it cannot be converted into results that fit a uniform set of wrong and right answers), and through the imposition of a far more controlled and coercive regime of permissible behaviors in our schools. After Columbine, and the other eruptions of violence on school campuses, this discipline became almost draconian, with zero-tolerance policies that made no distinctions between kids carrying aspirin to school and those with hard drugs, or between squirt guns and real weapons. Of course, the natural feistiness and recalcitrance of adolescence has meant that high schools and middle schools provide a running commentary on kids' refusal to simply conform to rules. The daily newspapers provide a continuing account of conflicts around locker searches, pushing the limits on what can be published in school newspapers, disputes over clothing, the demand for clubs addressing the needs of sexually marginalized youth, legal suits filed by students and their parents because of the suppression of First Amendment rights, and so on.

One thing we may say for sure is that the attempt to squelch the crisis of meaning in America can only result in temporary or limited successes. Perhaps more to the point, the attempt to siphon off the crisis into directions that offer only phony palliatives will ensure the return of what has been denied. Neither manufactured crises that do little more than distract us nor policies that do not get at the real issues will enable our children to truly prepare themselves for the challenges that they will inevitably have to face. The struggle for a meaningful life requires an education that will be at once intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual. It must deal with what it means to be a human being in all of its complexity. The shallowness of our present educational concerns will do little to prepare young people for the difficult years that are ahead of them. The challenge is very great, and our willingness as a nation to fiddle while our house of meaning disintegrates seems boundless.

## **THE POVERTY OF THE SOUL**

**23**

When Mother Teresa visited the United States to receive an honorary degree it is reported that she said, "This is the poorest place I've ever been in my life." As John De Graaf and his fellow authors point out in their wonderful book *Affluenza*, she was not talking about our extraordinary abundance of material goods or monetary wealth. She was, instead, talking about "poverty of the soul." Whether we educate in the classroom, in our communities, or simply in our homes, we cannot ignore such poverty. For our children's sake we must confront this reality, however threatening it may be to our assumptions about our country and its values. If, as Naomi Remen has said, meaning is the language of the soul, then we must face the fact that our market-driven culture corrodes not just the structure of durable and authentic meanings that might give significance to our lives, but the very essence of our humanity. With an intensity that has

no previous parallel, our lives exist under a barrage of messages that endlessly repeat and drive home a view of the world that emphasize money and wealth, celebrity, sex, status, and the possession of material things. To grow up in America (and, we need to add, increasingly throughout the world) is to be socialized into a culture where nearly everything of significance derives from the values of the marketplace. It becomes harder and harder to separate the value of anything from the price it commands. Quite simply, the market has become the primary source of meaning and value in our world. Consuming is, in a very real sense, our religion, and it is linked to the very definition of who we are and how we live. It is the focus of much of our energies, hopes, and passions. John De Graaf and his collaborators made the point clearly:

Since World War II, Americans have been engaged in a spending binge unprecedented in history. . . . We now spend nearly \$6 trillion a year, more than \$21,000 per person, most of it on consumer goods, which account for two-thirds of the recent growth in the U.S. economy. For example, we spend more on shoes, jewelry, and watches (\$80 billion) than on higher education (\$65 billion). On a five-day shopping trip to Paris the wife of Florida Governor Jeb Bush spent \$19,000, though she reported only \$500 of it to U.S. customs. But she's not alone in her passion for shopping.

In 1986 America still had more high schools than shopping centers. Less than fifteen years later, we have more than twice as many shopping centers as high schools. In the Age of Affluenza (as we believe the decades surrounding the Second Millennium will eventually be called), shopping centers have supplanted churches as a symbol of cultural values. In fact seventy percent of us visit malls each week, more than attend houses of worship.

Our capacity to consume is intimately bound up with the sense of being an accepted and effective member of the community. Citizenship, which used to be about public participation and expression, is now more about the "freedom to consume." Perhaps that is why nearly all of our national holidays have become sale days, usually associated with frenetic shopping opportunities, and our major religious holiday, Christmas, is a time of increasingly frenzied buying. Our public squares are now malls (often with fake names like "Town Square" or "Town Center") in which the public activity is really the very private one of buying for oneself or one's family. Indeed, in our "themed" malls, shopping has become the culture's primary form of entertainment or recreation. And as we have become more and more focused on the private business of buying, so support for public expenditures on our schools, housing, transportation, and other social needs have become increasingly hard-pressed.

The credit card has become an important, even a key, marker of having become an adult member of the society. Today, along with letters of acceptance to college come the credit card applications, which, in a strange twist of logic, link the encouragement of youthful debt to adult responsibility. Whatever it is that our schools teach, the most powerful messages that shape the values and aspirations of our kids lives are found in TV, movies, magazines, the internet, and in advertising, which relentlessly emphasize fame, success, and money. It can hardly be surprising that American teenage girls rate shopping as their favorite activity. Social acceptance, popularity, and attractiveness, we are reminded endlessly, come from what one owns or, more particularly, what can be

shown or flaunted. We learn quickly (how can it be otherwise when this message is on every billboard, magazine ad, and TV commercial?) that my worth as an individual is represented by the car that I drive, the shoes I wear, the makeup I put on, the clothes I wear, the electronic equipment I have purchased, the places I have traveled, and so on. Individual worth, it is drummed into us by the advertisers, is connected to the way I look and the impression I make on others. Respect is commanded by the show we can put on, not by the interior qualities of our humanity. This is a message that is understood well by our kids. It is made clear by the acute awareness of the product labels of the clothes they put on, or the gear they own. For the makers of jeans, or the stores that sell them to adolescents, there is the constant jockeying to make themselves into today's indispensable or "cool" label. Success is always about show, and it is always about the creation of invidious distinctions. In other words, it is a statement about having something that demonstrates a certain kind of social superiority. At the very least, it makes clear the fact that I belong and am accepted into (or, at least, acceptable to) a particular social group or clique.

The world of consuming is a world of never ending concern with appearance, measuring up, and comparisons with others. It is also, therefore, a world of anxiety where one is always having to strive to ensure that you are not falling behind or losing acceptance. And it is a world of permanent discomfort; I could look better, have more, be around the right people, or do more admired things. This is a context in which fear and jealousy are never far from the surface. Although surveys indicate that in the United States admitting to such emotions is often denied, envy and competitive feelings are never far away. Yet it is hard to deny how much the endless consumer drive is stimulated and supported by our looking over our shoulders at the appearance of others. This is certainly apparent when kids kill each other for a pair of expensive sneakers. It is also apparent in the sometimes viciously derogatory relations between cliques in high schools, in which style and appearance are the focus of their relations (this was an important ingredient in the indignity inflicted on students at Columbine, which, in turn, became the rage for revenge).

In the wider culture, comparing ourselves to others is a driving force in the ever-restless drive for new possessions. In her book *The Overspent American*, Juliet Schor noted the critical role television has in spreading notions of what we should expect as our "standard" of living. Indeed, she said, unlike in earlier years when our reference group may have been our neighbors, TV now provides powerful and seductive images of what is desirable or normal. Of course, such images are likely far removed from the real circumstances and resources of people's lives (the spacious New York apartments featured in the sitcom *Friends* or in *Sex and the City*—estimates run from \$2000 to \$3000 monthly rent—provide telling examples of places to live far beyond the incomes of most people, including the characters in the show!). Nonetheless these images help shape our ideas about the way others are living, and what we too should be enjoying. Schor noted the exponential growth in people's expectations that constantly run ahead of their actual earning power. This produces the paradox that even with increasing income people always feel like they have far less than they would like and need. There, in other words, is a constant sense of deprivation regardless of how much money we seem to have. How often do we feel that what we have is never enough? Someone seems to always have it better than we do? These feelings easily become greed among those at the

top end of our income structure, where there is a constant drive to shape tax policies that ensure their access to ever larger quantities of wealth, or in the behavior of corporate executives, who are ready to cheat, steal, and deprive employees of their livelihoods or pensions to add to their already huge chests of wealth. Despite the extraordinary levels of material wealth available to most Americans (certainly as compared to the way most other human beings live in the world), the consumer culture breeds a constant sense of not having enough, or not having the right things. It seems like the “emulation process” as Schor called it, never ends. We can never get enough. And indeed, it is built into the very structure of our economy and our way of life. The market imperative, she said, is always “bigger, better, more,” and progress is firmly attached to the belief that we should and ought to have more. It is easy enough to see how products that were once seen as luxuries become rapidly turned into necessities. Our “wants” turn into our “needs.” We regularly experience how the novelty of a new item rapidly seems to become tired and unsatisfying. Indeed, this is no accident. This obsolescence is built into the very logic of advertising. We are primed to be always one step away from a sense of dissatisfaction with what is currently in hand. What we have easily turns from being enticing to becoming boring or looking outmoded. This is readily seen in the constant ratcheting upward of electronic gadgets—the constant turnover of new “generations” of computers or communication products, with the promise of ever more extraordinary capabilities and functions (although, in fact, for most people the real differences represent marginal, even imperceptible, changes). Of course, matters of design and packaging are crucial here. Whether in the newest line of computers, cell phones, automobiles, sneakers, or TVs, the latest products must make the “old” ones look dated and unattractive. It is easy to see how this process—the constant turnover and novelty of products—creates the ever-restless and dissatisfied consumer so endemic to our way of life.

### **THROW-AWAY CULTURE**

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It should come as no great surprise that this constant search for what is new and different also influences not just our attitude about material things, but also human relationships. The rapid turnover of consumer items and the planned obsolescence of the things we buy produce a “throw-away” culture where nothing, whether material or human, should be expected to endure for too long. Our restless quest for something or someone that seems more enticing and more exciting leads us to be always in search of greener pastures. It is hardly surprising that the material abundance found in consumer societies does not produce a sense of security or confidence about the future. What it does produce is a gnawing feeling of insecurity or uncertainty. There is a pervasive sense of the fragility of the world we have made. Nothing should be expected to last too long before it ends up on the trash heap. The ecstasy that is promised through our latest acquisition is followed by the rapid descent into ennui and dissatisfaction that is certain to come as what we have soon seems to lack the excitement, appeal, or novelty of a newer item or experience. We must expect not just material products but human relationships to suffer the same fate as their initial excitement quickly fades into the boredom of familiarity.

It is interesting that conservative critics of contemporary attitudes toward marriage, which, they say, often lack an enduring commitment by partners, do not look at the way such behavior mirrors values so thoroughly encouraged by the market. Advertising today,

as the social critic Zygmunt Bauman noted, emphasizes the pursuit of optimal experience. It is not enough for something to be good or useful; it must promise something that is awesome—something that is no less than sublime. Indeed, at least for the more affluent members of society, there is a sense that life must be lived to its full potential, and in as fully stimulating a way as is possible. In this sense there is the pressure to find the best and the most exciting of whatever is around: the ultimate Chinese restaurant, the most exotic vacation, optimal health and vitality, the most intense orgasm, the most alive sound system, and so on. A visit to the local bookstore provides plenty of evidence to support Bauman's point. Everywhere one looks are books that point us in the direction of not just being okay and living a decent life, but of being rich, of having the perfect marriage or children, of living without illness or pain, with bodies that are perfectly shaped, "peak" religious experiences, the most sumptuously prepared meal, the most fabulous getaway, and so on. The "everyday" is not good enough; it is a waste of one's earthly existence. We need to make every situation, opportunity, and experience an "ultimate" one. And flipping through the magazines in the supermarket checkout line, or watching the innumerable talk shows on TV, provides an endless cavalcade of experts willing to provide us with the knowledge and information about how one can live optimally.

What does all this do to our psyches? In contrast to all of those perfectly shaped, emotionally satisfied, materially secure individuals living lives rich with perfection and excitement, our own lives appear deeply flawed and inadequate. For many, the perpetual struggle to achieve the optimal state becomes a perpetual let down which in turn produces depression, anger, or a gnawing sense of constant envy—why can't I live their life instead of mine? The rate of clinical depression in the United States today is 10 times what it was before 1945. Widespread addictions to drugs, both legal and illegal, as well to alcohol, allow people to dull the ache of dissatisfaction and frustration about the course of their lives (strange how rarely we talk about this aspect of our addictive culture). We cannot forget that the core dynamic of the consumer world is the way we are encouraged to constantly compare ourselves with others. How do I acquire what others appear to have? The consumer world is one that relentlessly reminds us that we lack what another has, and that if only we could fill this lack, our lives would become a great deal happier or satisfying. We have become individuals who are increasingly driven by feelings of unfulfilled desire, and a jealousy for what others appear to possess. It can hardly be doubted that in such a world, anger, frustration, and even rage are never far from the surface. The more we emphasize the gap between those who have the secret to optimal living and the rest of us with our limited lives, the more the latter feel stupid, guilty, or angry for their deprived state. It is hardly surprising that when the streetlights go out, or the backs of those in authority are turned, many of us waste little time in taking advantage of the situation and grabbing some of what we desire.

Market values dehumanize human relationships. Here is not the place for entering into a discussion about whether we have any more effective or viable way to organize our economic life. It is clear that in the 20th century we witnessed some terrible attempts to create revolutionary alternatives to capitalism. At the same time, we in the United States have learned to see the issue of capitalism in black and white terms and, as a consequence, gloss over the important variations that exist in the world as to the extent that market values are permitted to dominate and shape people's lives (we have only to

think of the way countries in the EU deal with issues like unemployment and poverty as compared to the way we do in the United States). The important issue for us today, I believe, is to understand what it means for a society's values and meanings to be so thoroughly permeated and influenced by the marketplace. We need also to face up to the schizophrenic way we approach the matter of values. Few of us, for example, would willingly acknowledge just how much our culture is shaped by personal competition and envy. Perhaps this implies something good. Most of us share a moral or spiritual awareness that has taught us to abjure the idea of human relationships that rest on invidiously comparing ourselves to others. We know that this cannot be the basis of healthy, supportive, and caring bonds between people. And, however much we are drawn into seeing others as the object of our jealousy or competition, it is probably reasonable to assume that a part of each of us desires a very different kind of relationship with our fellow citizens and human beings. The same is true in terms of the way that market values relentlessly focus our desires and interests on money and the materialistic. At some level, most of us know that having and owning more stuff does not lead us toward more satisfying and contented lives. Perhaps this is the reason that our places of worship draw the extraordinary numbers to them each week as we seek to remind ourselves of this knowledge and find a way to affirm its truth with others. As we enter more completely into this universe of consumer desires, the bookshops fill up with more books offering ways in which we can transcend this materialistic world and focus on more meaningful or satisfying ways of living.

Still, however hard we try, it takes more than a visit to church or synagogue or early morning meditation to deprogram ourselves from the insidious voices of the consumer world. Those of us who are parents, for example, know the power of advertising and consumer appeal to children and adolescents. Television is arguably the real "educator" of our children. Measuring the amount of time alone that kids sit in front of the TV tells us a great deal about its power to shape attitudes and desires. Juliet Schor showed that the more TV a person watches, the more he or she wishes to spend. She went on to say that the likely explanation for this is that watching TV inflates our sense of the normal, of what it seems reasonable to expect in terms of our material possessions. Of course, this sense of what one should expect is often only remotely related to what one can actually afford. It is no wonder that life in our consumer-driven society is one of increasing indebtedness. John De Graaf and his colleagues noted that each year more than a million people—up from 313,000 in 1980—file for personal bankruptcy. This, they said, represents 1 in every 70 Americans, a number that is more than the number graduating from college. Indeed, it is no accident that one of the major shifts in consciousness associated with the rise of the mass production of commodities was the erasure of the puritan virtues of frugality and fiscal discipline—"cutting one's coat according to the available cloth." Debt came to be redefined as credit. It became a necessary and perfectly acceptable thing to spend far more than one took in. Indeed, the whole economic system with its outpouring of goods produced far more saleable items than most people could actually afford to buy. Thus it became vital to the survival of the system that people be encouraged to purchase far beyond their actual disposable incomes. Installment buying, leasing to own, and purchasing on credit all made possible a revolution in consumer expectations. Today we are implored to hold five or six credit cards and to spend freely on anything that catches our eye or our fancy. And it is certainly the case that with a



credit card in hand individuals do indeed become far less constrained about what they buy or the experiences they assume are available to them. Of course, such freedom leads many into the pit of debilitating debt with all of its misery and anguish. Consumer counseling has become a growth profession.

The sociologist Daniel Bell noted that along with credit and the phenomenon of unrestrained consumerism came other effects on consciousness. For example, there was the expectation of immediate gratification of desires. Why wait till tomorrow, warn the ads; life is short so why not indulge oneself now (regardless of the cost!)? Every whim and wish can and should be satiated, and with credit one need not postpone gratification till tomorrow. Such thinking required the transformation of the Protestant or Puritan mentality, which valued self-denial, and induced guilt as an internal mechanism of control. Buttressed by “third-wave” psychology with its emphasis on self-actualization (“being all one can be”), and the need to root out from one’s psyche the tendency toward the denial of one’s needs, especially those connected to our sentient life, the past three decades have witnessed an amazing shift toward the validation of pleasure as a guiding principle in our culture. Of course, not all of this should be seen as bad. It has fueled the idea that the desire to live well is the right of ordinary people, not just the rich. It has reduced the psychic misery of guilt in terms of our desire for sexual pleasure. It has undercut the hold of lives conducted along the principle of self-denial and self-abnegation. The latter points have been enormously relevant to women’s lives, as they have, in recent decades, sought to legitimate their expectation to live fully and pleasurably. At the same time, we cannot avoid the more deleterious implications of these changes in mentality. Our culture is one in which people become more and more monetarily stretched. The cycle of work and spend more and more controls working and middle-class people’s lives, as we must work longer hours and days to keep up with our spending. According to Juliet Schor, between 1973 and 2000 the average American worker added an additional 199 hours to his or her annual schedule—or nearly five additional weeks of work per year. Rather than producing freedom, the culture of material abundance produces an increasing sense of running in place, with all of its frustrations and often just sheer exhaustion. There is the widespread sense that we have of “never getting ahead”—of having to work harder to keep up.

The emphasis on the pleasure principle produces a hedonistic culture in which we have no responsibility beyond the immediate satisfaction of our desires. These desires are defined in terms that are overwhelmingly materialist and lead us to become gluttons in the use and abuse of our natural resources. The consumer world is one of astounding waste in the way that we voraciously chew up and spit out the precious natural resources that are available to us. Styles, fashions, and fads mark the consumer culture, as things that are at one moment “hot” rapidly lose their appeal and become replaced by the next wave of things that catch our eyes. The affluent world is one in which the disposal of waste becomes an increasing problem, as the detritus of consumer living fills more and more available space. Indeed, as available space in the developed countries is exhausted, we turn to poor countries as places to dump our ever-expanding garbage piles. In many ways, in our escalating greed for more and more stuff, the “silent” victim is the earth itself, which must be plundered for resources to keep this insanely profligate process moving forward. In *Natural Capitalism*, Paul Hawken and Amory and Hunter Lovins demonstrated the extraordinary cost of all this in the use of the earth’s resources:

“Industry moves, mines, extracts, shovels, burns, wastes, pumps, and disposes of four million pounds of material in order to provide one average middle-class family’s needs for a year.”

Meanwhile, back on the ranch we seek larger homes and more closet space to accommodate the things that increasingly clutter our homes. Indeed, we ourselves are expanding—becoming supersized—as we take in larger and larger portions of food in our restaurants creating, in turn, the need for larger vehicles to accommodate our increasing body size. “Space” planning and expertise is another growth profession. But the expectation of immediate gratification of desire has implications that go beyond credit cards and unrestrained wants in regard to material items. It also spells a way of life in which the immediate satisfaction of wants takes precedence over other values—responsibility, obligation, and a concern with long-term commitments. The consumer mentality is one of short-term perspectives; it is embodied in the teenager for whom the pleasure of sex obscures any concern for health risks or pregnancy. It is also reflected in the behavior of corporate executives for whom the major concern is the generation of short-term profits, or consumers for whom the enduring environmental affects of our wasteful lifestyles on future generations are something that can be ignored. In the pursuit of profit, fast food traders persuade young people to eat in ways that produce an unprecedented scourge of obesity that is horribly destructive of decent health. What matters is simply how much money can be amassed right now. All of this spells human behavior without the constraints of moral responsibility or a concern for future consequences. As the bumper sticker says, “If it feels good, do it.” A beer ad declares “Make every day a weekend.” Interestingly, it has often been conservative critics who have articulated the sense that the culture has become irresponsibly selfish and oriented to immediate wants rather than long-term responsibilities—although they typically shy away from seeing the connection to the marketplace and the greed for money and wealth. Still, one can detect the way that the usual left/right divisions of politics are confounded by this crisis of meaning.

## **CHILDREN AS A MARKET**

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Researchers have also made it clear that young kids are especially prone to the difficulty of disentangling reality from hype when watching TV advertising. The authors of *Affluenza* noted that a child may see a million TV commercials before he or she reaches the age of twenty: “There is more time devoted to them now—the .average half-hour of commercial TV now has eight minutes of commercials, up from six two decades ago. And there are more of them—faster editing (to beat the remote control clicker).”

Channels like MTV have entirely erased the line between programs and selling, although the phenomenon of “infotainment” is becoming more and more the norm throughout the culture. Items seen on TV by kids assume a magical aura that guarantees both their delight and power. No matter how hard consumer groups have tried to pull the plug on advertising aimed at young children, manufacturers resist any curbs, knowing the power they have to manipulate children’s fantasies and dream worlds, indeed, recent deregulation of the media has reduced the responsibility of broadcasters to be something more than peddlers of commodities. Teenagers, especially, are the focus of an extraordinarily powerful process to stimulate their desires as consumers. Whether

through TV, movies, magazines, or the ever available MTV, the message conveyed is always one that ties, or more accurately exploits, young people's concerns about sexuality, appearance, and social acceptance to the purchase of consumer items. Teenagers represent the largest consumer market in the country. This market is the object of a relentless campaign to convert the anxieties and dreams of young people into the taste for new fashions, cosmetics, cigarettes, fast food, music, or entertainment. Perhaps nowhere else is the pressure of the consumer world revealed so fully in its amoral character. Nothing is off limits here in terms of efforts to seduce the interests and desires of young people to exchange their money for a product of dubious value or utility. The advertising campaigns by tobacco companies to attract young people—especially those in minority communities—to smoke are documented in all of their greed and lack of social regard. The readiness of clothing outlets to do whatever it takes to sell their line of jeans is apparent (the soft pornographic campaigns by Calvin Klein or by Abercrombie and Fitch reveal that when it comes to selling to teenagers, anything that might attract attention is permissible). Reality television shows like *Elimidate* and *Joe Millionaire* have provided a new level of tastelessness in pandering to the sexual interests and romantic fantasies of adolescents. Of course, here we must pay special attention to the influence of the commercial media on the lives of young females. Feminist critics provide us with a devastating account of the way that girls—at a younger and younger age—are being taught to see themselves in the world. Magazines, movies, TV, video images, and so on conspire to produce a world that relentlessly emphasizes appearance and sexiness as the primary modality of girls' appeal and worth in the world. Although many girls now claim a hipness to the manipulations of marketers and their images, the increasing obsessions concerning weight and appearance, the desire to be ever thinner, the readiness to use clothing in ways that flaunt sexuality, all reveal the continuing power of the marketplace to shape female adolescents' concerns. Young girls are earlier and earlier inducted into a world in which the female body becomes the primary battleground for one's identity and sexuality. It is world stimulated, coaxed, and shaped by corporations in which enormous profits hang in the balance. Profit, not social responsibility, is their primary concern.

In all of this, we can see the process that the philosopher and social critic Herbert Marcuse drew our attention to many years ago. Commercial items, he said, compel us because they are made to stir in us a powerful emotional, even erotic, pull. In other words, in the consumer world of meanings, products are made to appeal to buyers not simply because of their use value, that is, the things they actually do, or the service they provide. Instead, they come to represent for us a means to fulfill some much more fundamental human need or concern. They become associated in our psyches with the possibility of love, social acceptance, fulfillment of sexual desire, acquisition of power and status, youthfulness, and vitality. In this way the object or thing takes on much greater significance for us than what it actually is. It becomes invested with emotional powers that—so we are promised—transfer to, and even *transform*, the human being who possesses it. This is, indeed, a kind of magic in which inanimate objects can change who we are and how we relate to others (as well as how others relate to us). As an example, we might notice the current enormous appeal of sport utility vehicles (SUVs). These vehicles are now the best selling form of private transportation in the United States, and enormously lucrative items for the automobile companies. Their selling appeal comes

from how they appear to fulfill for us a number of fantasized human attributes—being adventurous, control over our environment, power and self-sufficiency, virility, and strength. Although the \$50,000 Land Rover is most often found loaded up with kids on their way to after-school activities, or getting food items from the grocery store, its hold on the imagination is connected to its image as a rugged explorer of the wilderness, mountain ranges, or back country. If life is mainly a pretty prosaic business, ownership of an SUV allows us the immediate fantasy of escape and excitement. Of course, in selling them in this way, their demonstrated extravagance in fuel consumption and their danger to others on the road because of their size are obscured. Of course, we dare not forget that the extraordinary gas demands of this vehicle add to our overreliance on Middle East oil, with all of the political and military implications that go along with this. When considered in these terms, it becomes apparent that these toys are an expensive fantasy that adds to the cost and insecurity of our lives.

Elsewhere, we might think of how coffee is now sold as much more than a drink. In the hands of the advertisers it becomes the means to create intimate moments in a world where the increasing demands of jobs and the frantic pace of life leave us little opportunity to come together with our partners and share uninterrupted moments of emotional connection. We might also consider how soft drinks are used to evoke youthfulness and vitality (disregarding, of course, that they are major contributors to our obese culture). In short, amid the clutter of a world with its surfeit of material goods, advertisers struggle to gain our attention by turning wants into needs through the process of linking what we buy to our much deeper human concerns and drives. To purchase a product, we are taught, is to make us more lovable, sexy, socially effective, or successful. How else are we to explain the relatively recent proliferation of company logos on the things we wear or use? The ubiquitous swoosh sign of Nike, for example, is an immediate form of identification, telling others something about who we are, what we value, and the company we keep. Sneaker brands have immediate identification with race or with other social grouping. Fashion labels immediately convey to others the rung you occupy on the social ladder. Although students in my classes typically deny the power of advertising to shape their desires or interests, they almost always know the labels of the clothes they are wearing or that of others, and can readily indicate the social status of different labels. Of course, this is no great surprise. The type of cars we drive, the places we vacation, the furnishings in our homes, the shoes we wear, the places we shop, the colleges we send our children to, and so on are a running statement on how successful we are and how much respect we expect to be accorded by others. In short, labels and logos are about a lot more than who makes a particular product—they are a moving indication of your place in the pecking order. They also are a constant reminder that who we are depends on what we can afford, that our value as human beings is reflected in and reinforced by what we can buy. And of course all of this occurs in a way that makes the process insidious and without any significant conscious recognition.

## **WEALTH ANXIETY**

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When the stakes are so high, it can hardly be a surprise that people are ready to sacrifice so much of their time, energy, and creativity to ensure their worth and recognition in the eyes of others. They will also lie, cheat, steal, and kill to gain this recognition. Although

we rarely acknowledge it, in a society that places so much emphasis on success and its connection to money, it is surely to be expected that one of its consequences will be high levels of crime and violence. This is compounded by the extraordinary degrees of social and economic inequality that we have in American society, which mean that many individuals are foreclosed in their ability to participate, at least through legal means, in the process of consuming. The authors of *Affluenza* made the extent of this inequality clear:

In spite of America's image as a cornucopia of plenty, where the shelves of supermarkets are always fully stocked, ten million Americans go hungry each day, forty percent of them children, and the majority, members of working families. Twenty-one million other Americans keep hunger from the door by turning frequently to emergency feeding programs such as food banks and soup kitchens. On any given night at least 750,000 Americans are without shelter and nearly two million experience homelessness during the course of the year. That's the bad news. The good news is that nine million Americans own second homes. America's housing shortage might really be a distribution problem.

The relentless reminders that the "good life" means the capacity to buy and spend freely produce anger and frustration in those who have been excluded from this through the deeply unequal distribution of wealth and income. Nothing has made this clearer than the consequences of hurricane Katrina, in New Orleans. Of course, it is not just the poor who are driven to antisocial behavior to have a "piece of the pie." Consumerism means that whatever we have feels like it is never enough. However well off people appear to be, there is always the sense that we ought to have more. For most of us no amount of income is adequate. We always seem to spend more than we have, or arrive at the end of the month with little or nothing in our bank account. There is always someone else who has it so much better, whose home is so much nicer and whose automobile is so much more attractive. This constant sense of lack makes many resentful of the money that must be given up in taxes that are ostensibly for the public good (rather than for private spending). It also makes us resentful and suspicious of others who seem to have got more than they deserve (typically the poor rather than the rich, who, we are encouraged to believe, are "fleecing" us). It drives us to "cut corners" or even to cheat when we feel no one is watching and we can get away with it, like on our taxes or on business expenses. It feeds our preoccupation with get-rich possibilities and TV fantasies about average Joes whose lives are transformed by extraordinary luck and good fortune.

The drive to always want more is ultimately sustained by the way things seem to promise us happiness. After all, we are constantly looking and comparing ourselves to others because of our belief that those who are successful, and have more, must also live happier lives. Of course this is not a rational matter. Most of us know, at some level, that material things don't guarantee happiness—that life's most important qualities can't be bought. Even MasterCard acknowledges in its ads that the most important things in life can't be bought, that they are "priceless." Paradoxically, Hollywood provides a continuing hymn to the idea that true love and happiness can't be bought. Still, we are bombarded by messages that contradict this enduring wisdom. Indeed, there is a way that every commercial can be understood as a small parable in which all of our deepest human needs can be addressed and realized through the things we buy. There is, so we are

encouraged to believe, something out there in the marketplace that can help fill every human desire. Built into this parable is also the constant assertion that some dimensions of our lives are amiss. There is always some part of us that does not feel right, which results in our current state of distress, boredom, or anxiety, or sense of inadequacy or lack of respect. Indeed, we are surrounded by this constant refrain; we are deficient, inadequate, unattractive or lacking in some important dimension that needs to be made right. Of course, in creating this sense of deficiency or lack we can be far more effectively induced to desire something that, hitherto, might have seemed irrelevant to our lives. One consequence of being subjected to such messages is to turn us into people with a great deal of insecurity and uncertainty about our self-worth. Our lovability, our sense of value, and our confidence about our abilities and effectiveness are always depicted as in a precarious or questionable state. We are made increasingly fragile by this permanent assault on our sense of well-being and agency, with the warning that we are in need of a multitude of ever-changing consumer goods that can assure our attractiveness or respect. In light of this, it is easy to understand why the most popular shelves in the bookstore are the ones that promise to alleviate this constant sense of inadequacy and anxiety about who we are—that can lead through the techniques of therapeutic or spiritual practice to a place of self-acceptance and personal tranquility. The consumer culture, whose logo is the smiling face, might be better represented by the churning stomach.

## **A CULTURE OF HAVING, NOT BEING**

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A culture that manages so effectively to insert a material object into the place of human needs has profoundly reshaped the way in which we seek meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in our lives. Erich Fromm suggested that our culture is one in which “having” had become much more important than “being.” What he meant by this was that in our culture we had misguidedly come to pursue the possession of things, rather than the quality of lived experiences, relationships, and activities. So, for example, people sought jobs not as a vehicle for doing useful and satisfying work but primarily as a means to earn more money. High school and college students show an increasing tendency to think of careers in terms of how much they pay rather than the promise of doing good and creative work. Many students have told me this was their reason for choosing a business degree or going to law school. Weddings become an occasion to spend huge amounts of money on showy parties that have little to do with declaring and celebrating loving commitments. A recent best-selling book urges Jewish parents to “put God on the Bar-Mitzvah invitation list” as a metaphor for getting back to the ritual’s real spiritual significance. We mistakenly believe that the more we fill up our lives with things we can possess, the more satisfying our life will become. The psychologist Richard Ryan pointed to the many studies that make it clear that material wealth does not produce happiness. In the human species, happiness comes from pursuing intrinsic goals like giving and receiving love. He said, “Extrinsic goals like monetary wealth, fame and appearance are surrogate goals often pursued as people try to fill themselves up with ‘outside-in’ rewards.”

In America we talk about “getting” or “having” an education, a formulation that reflects our concern, not with the human quality of the experience (how much did we think, imagine, create etc.), but with what piece of paper do we possess at the end of the

process. All of this emphasis on things and possessions takes us away from what it might mean to encounter life in an authentic way. We come to believe that the path to lives that are joyful and nourishing to our souls runs through the marketplace of things, where we can exchange our life energies and intelligence for the fetish of inanimate possessions. The intrinsic beauty, wisdom, and satisfaction of how we might live and engage our world are lost in the frantic struggle to get and have more. It is, as Oscar Wilde once said, a world in which we know the price of everything, but the true value of very little. In the end, this materialism defines not only the value of what we do. It defines who we are as human beings. Each of us becomes, in the eyes of others, things (“consumers,” human “resources,” “human capital”) that are to be leveraged for their usefulness to us. Others become simply vehicles to the fulfillment of our own interests or desires: means to our ends. One is only of value to us if he or she is able to add sufficiently to our bottom line, make us look good by the way they appear, satisfy our sexual desires, and so on. In other words, our interest in oilier human beings is entirely instrumental. Martin Buber, the great philosopher, distinguished between human beings relating to others in two different ways: as a “thou” or as an “it”. In the former we regard the other in the fullness of his or her humanity—as a precious and infinitely valuable being. In the latter, a person has become nothing but an object, one that is viewed in terms of a very limited set of capabilities that might make him or her useful or of service to us. It is easy to see how a world that has put the acquisition of things at the very center of our social existence also produces human relationship in which people are themselves viewed as things that can be bought, sold, and disposed of as our own needs dictate. We see this every day in the ruthless way in which workers are thrown out of work as companies figure they can make more money by relocating to somewhere that would increase their profits. There is, here, little concern for the terrible destruction that this does to the lives of individuals, their families, and their communities. We see it, too, in the sweatshop conditions in which so many people labor around the world—long hours of exhausting work in conditions that are damaging to the physical and mental well-being of human beings. We see it in the exploitation of thousands of women who are forcibly used in the slavery of the sex trade, coerced prostitution, and pornography. And we see it in the abuse and exploitation of so many children who work in fields and factories under brutal and violent conditions, or who are forcibly recruited to mercenary armies.

Of course, we probably don’t have to go far from our work places or communities to see human beings treated as “it.” We may only need to look around and question whether all those who live and work in our towns and cities, and whose children attend our schools, are treated humanely and compassionately, or whether they are mainly regarded as tax burdens, means to a quick profit, or a liability to educational leaders who want to demonstrate their schools’ success in the latest round of standardized tests. Perhaps we do not even have to look at others’ lives. The feeling that we live in a world in which each of us is treated in manipulative and instrumental ways edges closer to all of us. We feel the vulnerability of living in a world where so many of us feel we are used and then easily disposed of, or where we must learn to market or sell ourselves, or where we must concern ourselves with the management of our appearance and the impression we make on others. No matter whether it is in the workplace, in the care of those who are charged with taking care of our health, in the legal system, or even in our intimate personal relations, there is the same sense of vulnerability as human relationships feel more

predatory and manipulative. In a world so pervaded by calculating and instrumental attitudes, who can I really trust or rely on? Will I be treated as a person, rather than as a thing to be used to satisfy another's greed, desire, or need for control?

## SCHOOLS AND THE CRISIS OF MEANING

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We must ask ourselves, then, whether schools prepare children and young people to face the crisis of meaning that increasingly engulfs our lives. The **short** answer is that they do not. Not only do they fail to address this crisis, but they add to it in a number of ways. Briefly, I want to sketch out here some of the things that schools do, or do not, that fuel this crisis. In subsequent chapters I return to the concerns raised here and elaborate on them. My intention is to look more deeply at the ways schools contribute to the crisis of meaning, and also to offer a way of re-envisioning education's place and purpose in the contemporary culture. **How and what should education do in a culture whose moral axis is now, so blatantly and destructively, one of materialism, money, show, unbridled individualism, and celebrity?** I suggest here five ways in which schools are a part of the problem, rather than the solution.

### 1. The Culture of Selling

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First, we need to recognize just how much the culture of selling has invaded the school space. In one sense this is hardly surprising, given what I have just said about the continued expansion, into all areas of our lives, of the influence of the market. At the same time, it is a profoundly disturbing change in the manner and extent of the way that our children's values are being shaped. Schools have now become primary vehicles for drawing them into the culture of possessions and materialism. They have become important sites for shaping and manipulating their assumptions about the role of corporations in every area of our lives from candy bars to pizza, and from care of the body to nuclear energy. Alex Molnar is a writer who has studied this phenomenon in depth. He noted, for example:

It was not long before a commercial wave broke over the schools. In homes across America, parents may have discovered that their daughters and sons had been given a "Gushers" fruit snack, told to burst it between their teeth, and asked by their teacher to compare the sensation to a geothermic eruption (compliments of General Mills). Children were taught the history of the potato chip (compliments of the Potato Board and the Snack Food Association). Adolescent girls learned about self-esteem by discussing "good hair days" and "bad hair days" in class (compliments of Revlon). Tootsie Roll provided a lesson on the "Sweet Taste of Success." Exxon sent out a videotape, "Scientists and the Alaska Oil Spill," to help teachers reassure students that the Valdez disaster was not so bad after all. And Prego spaghetti sauce offered to help students learn science by comparing the thickness of Prego sauce to that of Ragu.

Molnar points out that the attempt to mine children for commercial advantage is neither new nor surprising, given the fact that elementary school children are estimated to spend around \$15 billion a year and teenagers around \$90 billion. Henry Giroux, another



prominent education writer, suggested that with so many public schools strapped for cash, schools have begun to lease out hallways, buses, restrooms, lunch menus, and school cafeterias as billboards to advertise everything from Coca Cola to Hollywood films. Channel One offers to provide Schools with \$50,000 in electronic equipment if they will agree to broadcast a ten-minute program of current events and news material along with two minutes of commercials.” Giroux noted that “corporate culture targets schools not simply as investments for substantial profits but also as training grounds for educating students to define themselves as consumers rather than multifaceted social actors.” Of course all of this promotion of such things as junk food, soft drinks, and high-priced sneakers raises profound ethical problems about the abuse of parental trust by educators. More shocking is the fact that the widespread practice of surrounding young people with messages, images, and activities designed to sell to them in this supposedly protected space hardly raises an indignant voice among those entrusted with our children’s lives. The school is becoming an extension of the mall, and we are, it seems, expected to see this as an entirely acceptable aspect of the “education” of young people. It is clear that the crisis of meaning is not something “out there”; the school itself has become a morally compromised environment.

## 2. A Capacity to Question

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Second, it should be clear from the things I have already said that any attempt to educate young people about the influence and effects of the marketplace on our attitudes, desires, and interests requires a commitment to developing their capacity to question and think in a critical way about the culture. I have already noted just how much school is dominated by an instrumental mentality (it’s all about grades, test scores, point averages, SAT results, and diplomas) that takes students far away from the point of any real education, which is, at a minimum, to enhance our ability to think and to question. Thinking and questioning refer here not to how smart we can be at playing the school “game”—figuring out what we may need to “beat” this quiz or exam, or convince a teacher we know something that we actually think very little about. I am talking here, instead, about enhancing students’ ability to question deeply the motives, purposes, dynamics, values, and effects of our way of life. What does it mean to live in a society in which material possessions are so central to how we live? How did our society come to be this way? How does the emphasis on status, success, and wealth affect us emotionally, spiritually, and in terms of our physical health? Who are the winners and losers in this kind of world? What are the implications for the environment and the earth of our unrestrained pursuit of material wealth? These are, of course, only a sampling of the kind of questions that might arise in classrooms concerned with teaching young people to think critically about our crisis of meaning. Yet I believe that to a large extent they are questions that we do not ask now. Our classrooms are overwhelmingly places where there is a stultifying deadness in regard to teaching kids to question their world. Our obsession with getting the right answers on quizzes, tests, and exams encourages in young people a mindless conformity in how they think and seek answers to questions. To take seriously our responsibility to educate at this time means that we will have to encourage young people to ask those dangerous questions about the meaning and purpose of the world in which they will spend the remainder of their lives. There will, it is certain, be many in our

society who would bitterly resist an education that takes seriously its mission of educating young people to think, question, and challenge in this way.

### 3. The Hidden Curriculum of Status

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Third, we need to understand the way that school educates our children into the culture of status and success that is an integral part of a culture that worships at the altar of celebrity. We need to keep in mind here the fact that what we learn in school is much less about the content of the curriculum (math, English, social studies, etc.), than about the content of the “hidden curriculum.” The latter is the name that educational theorists give to what we teach young people through such things as the social relationships in a school, the values that are implicit in what we do (such as the importance of competition), and the things that we emphasize in the day to day life of a school (such as the importance of technical knowledge vs. aesthetic expression). **It is in these implicit, informal, and often unstated aspects of school life that students are most influenced.** It’s interesting that we spend so much time talking about the curriculum rather than the things that actually have the most impact in shaping what kids value and assume about their world. In this context, one of the most powerful lessons of schooling is the tremendous value placed on success and status. The motivational energy of education comes overwhelmingly from the inculcated desire to “get ahead” (of course, of the next person), and to stand out from the others in one’s class or school. This is taught and emphasized in a hundred ways, from grades to class rank, from the kind of academic track one is in (AP, IB, Honors, general, vocational, special ed.), to athletic prowess, social celebrity, and the recognition of one’s college acceptance and scholarship award. It is a process that starts from the moment one steps into a typical classroom and kids are placed in differential groups for reading, or treated by teachers with quite different amounts of respect and value depending on how they look, speak, or perform on assigned tasks. We return to this process later in the book. Suffice it to say now that school is a place that conveys, and endlessly reinforces, the idea that people are necessarily and inevitably to be ranked in ability and worth, and that those who are deemed of most worth are recognized and celebrated (whereas those of least worth are often treated with disdain, hostility, or avoidance). School is one of the most powerful engines of socialization in our culture, one that prepares us for a world that emphasizes the importance of superior status, success, recognition, and celebrity, and the importance of doing whatever is necessary to attain them.

### 4. Education as a Commodity

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The fourth thing schools do, in contributing to the crisis of meaning, is in the way that they treat education as primarily a commodity. I have already talked about the way that more and more dimensions of our lives have become reconstituted as things that are valued primarily in terms of their monetary potential. The issue here is not whether a market economy is a good thing, but what a market society is. It is apparent that there is now hardly any area of our lives that remains outside the market mentality, in which we see things primarily in terms of their potential to provide a cash return. The value of something becomes more and more synonymous with its dollar worth. Whether we talk about the value of an artistic venture, such as a film, primarily in terms of its “box office

gross”, talk about trees and forests as valuable essentially because of their exploitative potential as timber, or regard athletes and their teams as mainly lucrative profit-makers for owners and sponsors, the meaning is the same. **Monetary return, not its aesthetic, spiritual, or communal meaning, decides something’s value or worth.** Even love itself is reduced to its most tawdry and dehumanizing aspects in “reality” TV shows that make the most cherished of human relationships one that is about little more than “gold-digging.” Education is a primary experience in this regard. We are told, repeatedly, as we grow up, that education’s real value is not in its capacity to draw us toward wisdom and understanding, or to make us thoughtful and socially responsible citizens, or to develop our potential as creative and imaginative beings. **The overriding purpose of education is that it that provides us with a commodity that we are able to exchange for a place in college, a better job, a promotion, a mortgage, a car loan, and so on.** In other words, it is not the intrinsic experience of education that we value—what it offers to us as human beings and as members of a community. Education, instead, is something we “get” if we do what is required of us so that we can then cash it in for the pleasures and relative security of a middle-class life. This is a lesson we learn early on when our parents promise us an especially appealing gift if we can bring home a superior report card, or via the pizza we can “earn” if we can show we have read enough books. It continues into that time when we look for the “best” (i.e., having most status) graduate program that will guarantee us a competitive advantage as we make our way in the job market. No matter the exaggerated rhetoric of educational discourse—realizing individual’s abilities and developing them as “rounded” beings, and soon—we all know why we really worry about school, and demand improvements from it. It is, after all, the place where our children’s “tickets are punched.” The concern we have or ensuring that our children have that ticket is understandable. It is necessary if they are to attain the security and opportunity that any decent life must have. Yet we must also understand what is lost when the value of schooling lies almost entirely in the marketable value of a diploma or a degree. Corporate campuses, technical schools, distance learning, and online universities will ensure that in the coming years anything in education that does not directly translate into job or career purposes will seem more and more irrelevant to schooling. Education concerned with the moral, spiritual, aesthetic, and communal aspects of human lives will likely seem like an ornament from a distant past.

## 5. A Prophetic Imagination

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Finally, schools fail to address the crisis of meaning through the way they neglect to promote a sense of possibility. I do not mean here the sense of personal or individual possibility. That is one aspect of schooling and American culture that is, indeed, promoted with great gusto. “Be all you can be,” “realize your dreams,” and similar slogans express a central theme in our national ideology, one that is an important source of the creative and entrepreneurial energy that distinguishes this country. It is certainly a ubiquitous message of schools, found on bulletin boards and in graduation speeches up and down the United States. No, here I mean the sense of possibility that is related to the interest and hope in changing our culture in a profound way, so that our world and our nation are more socially just, compassionate, environmentally sensitive, humane, and peaceful. For students to have this sense of possibility, education will have to offer things

that are the antidote to the cynicism and self-indulgence that are so much part of popular culture. Possibility, here, is grounded in a concern for the future, but starts with a serious questioning of our present world: what it is we value, and how we behave toward our fellow human beings. However, the capacity for critique is not sufficient. It requires, too, an attitude of hope, strong commitment, and the capacity for imagination and re-creation.

Change is not a gift brought to us on silver platter. It requires that we have the courage and will to persist in the struggle for a better world. These characteristics, as Studs Terkel showed in a recent moving book on the subject, are the universal character traits of those whom we celebrate for their dedication and commitment to making a difference in the world. We will need to ask ourselves what sort of education can produce such human beings. We may certainly assume that some aspects of people's lives and experiences and what these have taught them are responsible for their persistent commitment to making a better world. Change also demands that we have the imagination to see within the present reality other ways of being and acting. The enemy to such imagination is the kind of conformity, moral timidity, and intellectual obedience that is so pervasive in our classrooms today. Walter Brueggemann talked about a prophetic imagination, which brings together determination, and willingness to conceive of our shared lives in radically different ways, as things that are essential to a sense of possibility. David Purpel also wrote about the need for educators in our present culture, with its vulgar excess and waste and unsupportable social injustice, to bring this prophetic stance into the classroom.

The prophetic imagination is also sustained by hope. Without hope we must assume that each day will be no better than the previous one. Life will appeal as simply the recurrence of what is already present, and human efforts seem useless. Perhaps encouraging hope is a matter of teaching the history of human struggle with its defeats but also its shining achievements. Perhaps hope is found in the very act of challenging and changing the world, serving others, and getting involved politically as citizens. Or perhaps hope requires a reaching into the spiritual roots of the human condition, connecting to the timeless and mysterious impulses that seem to be present in all the great faiths of humanity, reminding us of the abiding need for justice, for love, and for peace. Educating for hope, I believe, is best achieved when we can blend all these: school as a place that attempts to connect the young to the passions and struggles of past generation, where learning is not just about books but actually engaging in communal healing and improvement, and education is a process of human development that reaches both into our intellects and also into our spirits.