

The School Crisis Solved at Last

More Corn, Squash? And What Do You Think of God?

Please Pass the Salt

WHO CAN RESIST an appeal to explain oneself further? So, when Editor Sternlieb asked me to elaborate on a question I asked at *Maine Progressive's* School Symposium, I (modestly) agreed to give it a try.

My question was this: how can we "improve" the schools, no matter what energy, intelligence, expertise, money, or goodwill we pour into them, so long as the schools are at war with the prevailing culture?

I want to make clear, at once, that I'm not talking economics or government spending. I'm not talking about a battle over funds: the price of one megaweapon vs. text books; the price of one Inaugural Ball vs. teachers' salaries. We know what those figures look like, and we know what they say about values. I'm talking about a more invasive, nearly invisible, insidious force I'm calling the "prevailing culture." And by that word I mean something big and vague like "the spirit of the times: or "this day and age," that sort of thing.

I'll define "prevailing culture" as swiftly as possible. It is, by and large, a culture of waste, sloth, indulgence, silliness, ugliness, inequality, vulgarity, and muddle. It promotes the worship of noodnicks, lovable wimps, media stars, fast bucks, slick deals, cheap thrills, cheap laughs, cheap slogans, cheesy questions and easy solutions, thieves, charlatans, steroid-inflated winners of either sex, heartlessness, deadpan values, narcissistic self-involvement, and mountains and mountains of trash. Need I go on? No litany is needed here, not for any reader of this publication.

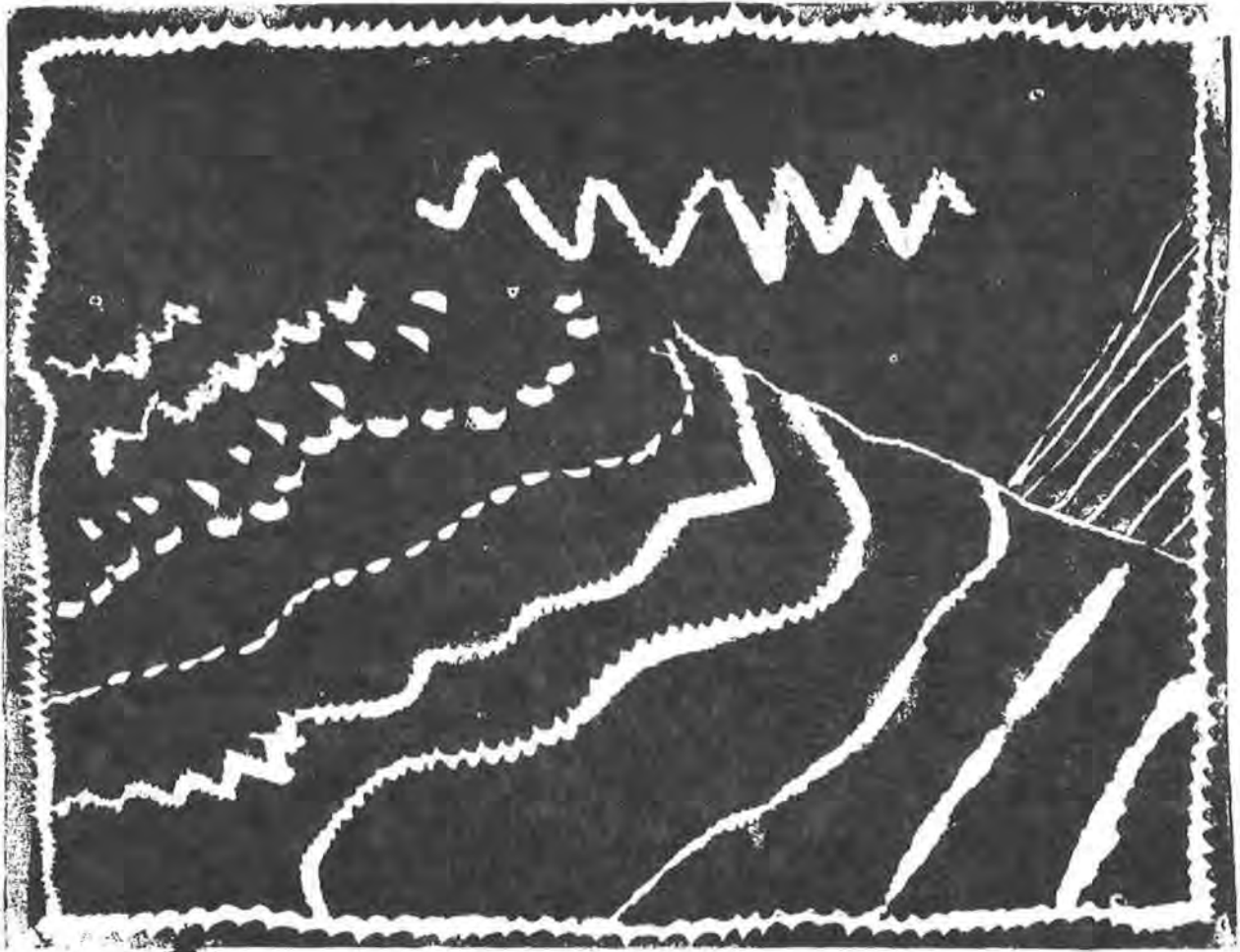
Our schools cannot be "improved" until we, as an entire country, admit that although we apparently value schools, we do not value mind. If we valued mind, our daily culture (which, if we do not actually create we at least allow) would not be mindless. It would neither create, promote, advertise, laud, encourage, laugh at, reward, dignify, nor pay so much as a penny for mindlessness. If we believed—up and down and across the board—that intelligent life mattered, we would not tolerate what we and the children are given as daily fare in politics, popular films, TV, newspapers, magazines, best sellers, styles, or promotional hype for any of the above.

Not so bad as all this, you think? I want to be reasonable here. Take a test. Buy six popular maga-

zines and read them, page for page, straight through at a sitting. Or watch six straight hours, any night, of NBC, ABC, CBS, or the stuff on cable. Or get the six American box-office hits of last year from your friendly Video Outlet and watch them with nary a break. If you pass this test, you will feel as though you've (A) just eaten a mattress; (B) been through Oriental water torture; (C) spent a weekend in Hell; or (D) all of the above. Congratulations. You just overdosed on "prevailing culture." Eat a microwave-zapped snack while doing any of the above, and while it's heating try to catch Tom Brokaw explaining what Pres. Bush just thought he might have tried to say if he thought about it, and you graduate with honors.

"Improve" the schools all we like, stamp and shout. Whatever and however the schools teach, they cannot compete with this. We can't promote one value (love of Shakespeare, say) in the school room, and expect that to compete with a louder, richer, cuter value (love of "The Cosby Show," say) in the culture. Wherein lies the glitter, the money, the repetition, the laughs, the excitement, the stardom, the applause, the sponsorship, the glamour? What do we reward? No one, least of all any child, is stupid enough to make a mistake about this.

We are all taught, every minute, hour, and day, by the culture. Whatever else we learn is going to be, right now, in weak opposition. The culture instructs us more thoroughly and persistently than anything "formal" education can possibly do. Our culture doesn't even second education. It supports education in no meaningful way whatsoever. A few gestures: "educational" TV; school summits; special issues of *Newsweek*. So what? What's it like to try to get gas money for the minibus to transport local winners to the county spell-off? You'd think you were asking for enough fuel to play golf on the moon. Should we continue to struggle, at P.T.A. level, to help inaugurate a "Save Our Planet" project at the expense of what hard-earned (bake sale, calendar sale, etc.) nickels and dimes, and encourage third graders to recycle tablet paper when today, I alone, one beleaguered post office box holder, received seven slick and colored paper, therefore non-burnable, non-recycleable "holiday" catalogs offering, among zillions of must-get items, Pilgrim-shaped salt & pepper shakers, the World's Largest Macadamias, Hallowe'en Wreaths



(Hallowe'en whats?) and, in one, a wee sequined evening bag in the shape of a watermelon slice with a tag of \$1,450.00. Plus tax. Plus delivery. According to our Postmaster, nearly every one of the local 800-something boxholders received the non-recyclable catalog offering the sequined watermelon-slice evening bag. (Made in Taiwan, as most things are.) Meantime, a hand-lettered poster urging everyone to help the third graders save tablet paper hangs in the post-office lobby.

"The times" are bizarre. Evidently the left hand hasn't been coordinated with the right hand for quite some time. The list of daily absurdities and contradictions, which we barely register but keep trying to bridge, is getting to be truly medieval. I see this tiny struggling band, on foot, wet, hungry, but undaunted; pilgrims with some unholy holy urge: Culture. Youth. Education. The Planet. The Life of the Mind. Science. Poetry. Philosophy. Hey, try Charity. Other Ancient Virtues.

While overhead, like fat lords in a snug castle, thrilled consumers with millions of channels and billions of dollars and trillions of laughs, heroes of deals and heroines clutching watermelon-slice evening bags, jet back and forth, one destination per minute. I conclude that our capacity to tolerate irony is just about stretched as far as it can go. What to do? How, in other words, to support the schools? How to make them important, whereupon I believe that whatever "improvement" was needed would be a matter of clear-headed, good-spirited tinkering? (And a bit more money, of course.) I hereby offer two solutions. One of them is insane; the other is utopian. I like them both, and think that either would work.

The first is this: find the Big Plug (this may be somewhat difficult) and pull it. Keep in mind the indisputable fact that Real Culture has been around thousands of years longer than the Plug.

The second is this: keep learning (and teaching) yourself. Real Culture depends on All Adults. Yes, all of us. Real culture, I am convinced, is found at any kitchen table. Provided. It is a by-product of every sensible, interested, curious adult, and in the example which that adult sets for any child. Education is in that fallout; education is an infection. Even if the schools, in my utopian vision, were suddenly deemed important and no longer had to fight for their lives and their messages, they still couldn't do it all. Hire only Master Teachers. Pay everyone gorgeous amounts. Reform everything in sight. Do this, that, more, or otherwise. Argue till Doomsday. Schools can't do it all. They never have before. At their finest, they can do a little bit.

One child, "educated," takes an infinite number of adults. Adults (let's really bring this solution home) around the kitchen table: talking, gossiping, reading, looking up definitions, arguing, making music, making hay while the sun shines, discussing the planting of seeds, our policy in Kuwait, the feeding of cats, how to cook a squash, write to Grandma, read Tolstoy, spell

"culture," and what do we think about the existence of God? The scandal of the current Road Committee? The meaning of Life? Pull the household's plug and talk all night. Force the children to stay up late; they can listen. I don't mean turn your household into Cranks on the Mountain; we all have to live, somehow, in 1990. But the great basis of all education has been the campfire; or its modern version, the kitchen table. The best questions, talk, pursuits, engagements, curiosity, aliveness, and education-by-fallout will come unforced and spontaneous and through a contact-high out of any adult's ongoing love of his or her own wonderful mind and the various world. (If children don't have that spirited example, and if this is not going on as a general thing around every kitchen table, then I think the important question is this: did the "schools" fail 30 or 40 years ago?) What can combat the "prevailing culture?" We can, in each house. At least enough to make a household's worth of difference.

—ALICE BLOOM

In My Mind

I had a vision
Of deer in my mind.
Dare I tell you?
I had an antler in my eye
And there in the bushes
Where I thought I saw it
I fired at his creamy ass.
Two mittens fluttered up,
Dreamy and white.
I had a vision
Of deer in my mind.
I begged her not to die.

—GLENN FRANKENFIELD