Chapter 4

SCHOOLING AND EDUCATION: LESSONS LEARNED

When I look back on all the crap
I learned in high school,
It's a wonder I can even think at all.

- Paul Simon, "Kodachrome"

Don't know much about history...

- Sam Cooke, "Wonderful World"

In the end, what I learned from my secondary school years was largely negative, an education gained in spite of and through confrontation with the system. For starters, I learned never to get drunk on trains. I also learned never to let the enemy count the ballots. In ninth grade I was voted to be one of two finalists for junior high president. After he discovered me writing "campaign" passes for my friends to leave class and go overtown to the College Spa for hamburgers and cokes under the rubric of shopping for campaign supplies, principal Richard Backer asked me to drop out of the race. When I refused, he decided that he, rather than the student council, would tally the votes. Despite a platform of free ice cream sandwich and coke machines, I lost. I learned more generally that the schooling system has a sheer momentum from the compounded interests of those who rely on it for a living and a life. It must grind on, crushing anyone who gets in its way, let alone anyone who actually threatens its underpinnings. Schools can be no less vicious in defense of perquisites and egos than street toughs. Challenging them is like tugging on Superman's cape; you'd better be ready for a memorable response.

My romantic image of Cornell's faculty made me expect that teachers on Westminster's similarly leafy campus would play me straight, but I had that myth shattered by assistant headmaster Werner. Despite our antagonism, I asked him to write my recommendations for college, because I felt that from our heated

discussions he knew me better than the other teachers did. My friends were aghast, but I insisted that his sense of honor would prevail over his animus. How wrong I was became clear when he called me into an office a few months later, and with dry satisfaction said that in order to preserve Westminster's reputation with my colleges he had written them a second time.

He had felt compelled to tell them that I had just been put on "final" probation for a boycott of some required event, and had defied the faculty by putting up flyers and writing an article in our alternative mimeographed newspaper, Peace and Victory, calling for a student strike. All my four choices for college had substantial student unrest that year, and none accepted me, although I had one of the school's highest scores on the standardized "college board" tests and a very high class rank. My friends were sure that the spite that motivated this letter had dripped into the recommendations as well. I had challenged Mr. Werner's world, and he had taken his dull revenge.

And what was that world, the world of my secondary schooling? It was a privileged world, all about preserving rather than challenging injustice, and an anti-intellectual world, all about feeding the great beast of college rather than nurturing the great quest for learning. It might be argued that because I was a difficult child, one who because of abuse at home had to revolt at school, my experience reveals little about the system in general. To the contrary, I believe that because I was a hard case, my treatment revealed more clearly my schools' primary purpose, which was to package large numbers of children of my social class according to colleges' specifications. As someone nearly unteachable, I showed that the system wasn't concerned with teaching.

The system's inability to address personal dissonance paralleled its inability to address national dissonance. This was the sixties, the time of the war, the draft, and the civil rights movement, the time of questions about American power and poverty. The schools I attended just ducked it all, and made themselves worse than irrelevant by continuing to spit kids out into those two bins: working class and draftable, and college class and not. It was a time of re-examination of the individual as part of a group, but Westminster kept right on posting the ranking of the average grade for each student each marking period, as a spur to greater achievement and subjugation.

Ithaca High similarly kept right on calculating "class rank" for colleges, multiplying the grades in higher "tracks" populated by kids from the "gown" families of the university by a higher factor than those of the lower tracks of the supposedly slower townies. The tracking in Ithaca and the exclusivity of Westminster were class-based protection. Test results were the method of placement and admission, unless a poorly-testing child was from an academic family in Ithaca, or an alumni or blatantly wealthy family at Westminster. Then, the counselor or the admissions office would divine the student's hidden potential.

The dirty little secret of all my busy administrators and teachers was that they had little concern for the injustice being perpetrated by the American dream, and less idea what to about it. I didn't show them respect? What had they done to deserve it? They were hoping that the big issues of our time would simply go away. The facade of America they were standing in front of was crumbling, revealing presidents as liars, wise men as fools, and self-congratulatory tradition as apology for avarice, yet they carried on as before.

When I returned to Westminster for my tenth reunion I found that because it had been my enemy, I had exaggerated its role. This was no Exeter, a gleaming factory staffed with gifted laborers stamping out little Cadillac-students for the financial class and the intelligentsia that together guide the American empire. This was the plant where the replacement Fords were made, the insurance sellers and small merchants who keep the American machine running from below. While we had a smattering of the children of the super-rich, they were mostly destined for indolence, not leadership. None of us was dared to rise to the top; we were simply expected to go along to get along to our mid-level slot in life. And if we didn't go along? Troubled children were simply expelled the second a sufficiently serious infraction was found. More than twenty years later, the school still had its "zero-tolerance" policy on drugs. If you are caught, you are gone. Then what happens to the child? That's somebody else's problem. This is one school that doesn't want any interference with the business at hand.

Our teachers were an uninspiring lot, like their students aping the form of colleagues at more exclusive schools but lacking the substance. The intellectual level of conversation at our

dinner table at home contrasted too sharply with the self-satisfied mush I was served at Westminster for me to respect teachers who claimed to be founts of knowledge, but didn't produce the spontaneous intelligence to validate those pretensions. At the reunion I realized that some teachers who I had thought were cryptically wise had only been drunk. All in all, Westminster was the leftovers, pretending by its bucolic surroundings and stiff traditions to be the main course.

In general, the institution of the prep school strikes me as an anachronism that is sustained only by wealthy America's fear of the "others." These schools, no less than the all-white "academies" of the South, are bastions of unfair and uncaring privilege. At their best they aspire to their model, the idealized Rugby School of the 1830s depicted in Thomas Hughes's Tom Brown's Schooldays, where the boys were taught to mix pluck and honor with tradition and obedience, but the ends these means were to serve went unquestioned. Those ends were, of course, domination by the British empire abroad and by the English ruling class at home. The little Browns and Easts were being trained to run the regiments and the estates, so even Rugby was wicked, a good school assisting a bad empire.

America's prep schools are a less blatant form of Rugby only because today's schemes of international oppression and domestic power are less blatant. By definition, could any German school under Hitler be a good one, since criticism of the Reich was not permitted, and the graduates would go, uneducated to the evil of their country, into its service? Can any school whose purpose or effect is to perpetuate national and class rule call itself good if it doesn't examine its own role?

Although their more inclusive nature is a natural barrier against serving just the wealthy classes, public and Catholic schools aren't exempt from this crime of silence either. Human beings dislike dissonance and rarely choose to introduce it to their own selves and institutions, so prep schools are hardly alone in not questioning their purposes. Where prep schools are particularly at fault, and why they ought to be disbanded and their teachers scattered to the public schools, is that by separating themselves from the problems of society, by eliminating from their ranks the poor, the halt and the lame, so to speak, they are teaching elitism

as a way of life. And that is a deadly lesson our divided country doesn't need.

The very concept that group schooling, public or private, must move along a predetermined axis in time and content rather than follow the interests of students is inherently anti-educational. People remember what they figure out for themselves and not what they are told. Good teachers teach you not facts but how to learn, and they do that in spite of the demands of the system. For all my complaints, I had a few of them myself. The movement of millions of students and billions of dollars, however, usually washes their influence away. The schooling system, like most complex machines, tends toward entropy as its drippings accrete over time into a hardening of the arteries.

In my twenties I had a flash of unintended insight into the schooling system while pondering a question on my graduate record examination, the older sibling of the college boards. Just the fact that I had to take the test was instructive: supposedly an admissions exam, it was required by the university I was attending only for graduation, with no minimum score! Cortland, (NY) State was a former teachers' college, and it accepted anyone who was trying to earn the master's degree that would make their teaching certificate permanent. Cortland simply wanted to claim that all applicants for admission had taken the exam, even though they took it long after admission.

Mid-way through the exam I came upon a question that stopped me in my tracks: "If Plato could see the modern high school, what would he say?" The question was followed by multiple choices in the nature of "It was too structured," or "It focused too much on the sciences." I sat in the quiet hall filled with adults sweating over the test, many of whom I recognized as Cortland students for whom the results were irrelevant, and I wondered what old Plato would have thought about this group being gathered for sifting by a system that called itself educational, and being asked this question in multiple choice so that a machine could pick up the "correct" markings of the number two pencil.

The setting and purpose of the question would have been enough in themselves to shatter whatever ideal of education Plato had reasoned out, but the thought of the horror that would come to his face as he wandered the halls of Ithaca High and saw the

students scurrying to their tracked classes with their committee-dulled textbooks to hear their teachers drone on for a regulation 40 minutes made me laugh out loud. I drew an arrow from the answer boxes to the top of the form and wrote: "If Plato saw the modern high school, he would shit!"

It was years before I saw a more inappropriate juxtaposition of old master and modern reality, when I visited Walden Pond in the late-1980s and found a notice by Massachusetts's Department of Environmental Management posted in the ice in front of the remains of Thoreau's cabin. It was both an ingenuous summation of his insistence on personal responsibility and a catalogue of the banal regulation and bad writing that drove him to pore over his drafts in his wilderness hut each morning (before his mother would come the few yards from her civilized home with a bowl of steaming soup for his lunch):

ICE REGULATION

Per 304 CMR 16.01 (2): ...A PERSON UTILIZING SAID BODIES OF FROZEN WATER DO SO AT THEIR OWN RISK AND THE DIVISION ASSUMES NO RESPONSIBILITY EITHER IMPLIED OR EXPRESSED FOR THE SAFETY OF ANY PERSONS WHO VOLUNTARILY ASSUME A KNOWN AND OBVIOUS RISK INHERENT IN SUCH OVER FROZEN WATER OPERATION.

The fact that "the division" could produce such a statement and stake it on Thoreau's domain tells me that any bureaucracy poses a danger to free thought. A giant one like America's schooling business, with its class interest, standardized tests, and homogenized mission, amounts to a lethal dose.

It might fairly be asked what schools can do with kids like me who are too angry to sit in any class and take part in any system. The first, rather than the last, recourse should be just to relax the program. Neither the round peg nor the square hole benefit from trying to pound the mismatch away. This surrender to reality could then be followed by trying to find out, Lord help us, what interests the students. In my case, if a teacher had tapped into my love of music, I would have been there for the taking. I

could have learned labor history through folk songs; race relations through the history of jazz and blues; poetry and writing through a study of Bob Dylan; how to cooperate through a production involving different kinds of music. This type of education requires better and more teachers, and hence more money, but it can be done. There are many schools with a clear mission of individual growth, mostly “alternative” schools in public systems that realized that both they and their malcontents and free spirits would be better off with a change.

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A final lesson I learned from my schooling was the disappointing one that racial lines (actually, ethnic lines drawn starker with the cultural legacy of slavery) are hard to cross. It was difficult enough to reach across class lines to make friends; my friends from the flats and I succeeded only because our mutual frustration with adult society overrode the unintentional slights we would inevitably give each other. It was almost impossible to reach across the boundary of race.

Almost all the few score African-American families in our county lived in two small areas in Ithaca. We were as segregated as the deep South in our own calm way. It would have been tense for kids to go to each other’s areas. I can’t remember, outside of civil rights meetings in which the entire purpose of the visit was built around race rather than normal friendship, ever hanging out with the black boys I was on cordial terms with in school. The black girls kept to themselves as an especially secret society, and I don’t think I so much as talked to a single one while I was at school in Ithaca.

Due to tracking, the few non-whites in my academic classes in public school were the children of Asian-American professors. Ironically, it was at the elitist prep school and not the public secondary schools where I had reason to, and so was able to, form friendships with African-Americans. I had close friendships with two blacks, a boy and a girl, which were forged in genuine attraction and a shared sense of being put upon by the world. We never discussed race, pretending that it didn’t exist in the hopes that it wouldn’t, but it was always a cloud hanging over us, and in both cases it had to break.

The boy was Lionel Holder, who became my roommate soon after I arrived. My original roommate and I didn’t get along,

so with the logic of the selfish young Lionel and I decided to cut the misery level from two people to one. One afternoon when he was out, we moved his stuff into Lionel's single room, politely putting his posters on the walls and clothes in the dresser, and moved Lionel into my room. We were inseparable for about the next year and a half, playing sports and chasing girls, going on weekends to parties in Hartford and to his house in Queens, where he introduced me to the basement dance party and records with a beat so slow you could get in a full, lengthy grind with each bump. Then during our senior year I began to spend a lot of time with other friends who were, if not overtly racist, inaccessible to Lionel because of their insularity and wealth. I would go off on New York weekends with this crew and Lionel would demur about coming. He knew, and I didn't, that most of the places they would go would be at least tense and more probably ugly for him.

Lionel would try to explain that to me, and even use as proof my own story about the time one of my closest friends from home and I had gone to Tenafly, New Jersey, to visit my girlfriend Barbara Epstein, who had attended the summer vacation school. Ronny and I had been riding partners for the two or three years we both worked at the school. His was the only African-American family in a little country town about 20 miles from Ithaca. His father and mother were the chefs at the school in the summer and at a Cornell fraternity during the school year, and Ron and his six brothers and sisters worked in the kitchen and at various other tasks for the school, saving money to supplement the athletic scholarships they usually received for college. We bussed down to New York at the end of one summer and made plans with Barbara to go across to Tenafly and lounge with her at her country club. When we met Barbara on the New Jersey side of the George Washington bridge, though, she took me aside in embarrassed fashion, and said that her father has said that I could come to the country club, but that Ron would have to go back to New York.

I thought at first that there was some rule against having two guests at a time, so I offered to be the one to go back to the hotel. Barbara then made it clear that no blacks could come to their club. I told her that she had to be joking, that this was 1968 New Jersey, not 1963 Alabama, but she stood up for her father and said that Jews couldn't join other country clubs, so they had a

right to make their own rules at their own. Ron and I got back on the bus for New York, and although I told him that we were leaving because Barbara and I were breaking up (and that was true enough), I imagine he guessed the reality. Lionel said that every restaurant and party he went to with the moneyed set from Westminster would be peopled by Barbaras, people who wouldn't go out of their way to make him comfortable, let alone stand up for him if he was excluded. He never came along on our forays to test his prediction, and we soon began to drift apart.

Lionel must have felt betrayed when I began spending time with people whom he believed were racist: that was precisely my reaction when he began to do hang out with the growing number of younger black students on the campus. As Lionel became more pointedly black in his mannerisms and his disdain for the system, our room became a haven for every little geek of a black kid, so that I could never tell how many uncommunicative strangers would be there when I came back from class, invited by Lionel and often without him even being there. Instead of the cool hangout for seniors our room had been, it became a meeting place for kidlets, so I moved down the hall to a smaller room. Lionel and I still remained open, if distant, friends, although he became a bit more wary after I refused to explain away a bag of bras, slips, and panties he found in my desk — hey, in his place, I'd have been a lot more wary!

The spring before our senior year, I'd been tapped to join the school's often-rumored but never-confirmed secret society. Its purpose, revealed to us by the 40 years of ladies' undergarments strung up in the basement of the gym during our midnight induction, was to pilfer one intimate sample a year from each faculty wife or other woman who lived on campus. Freud would have had a field day with this one! Violation of our mothers' femininity...intimidation (since we were supposed to leave a hint of the theft)...mock gang rape...elite power (the induction ceremony took place in formal dress)...repressed homosexual bonding...it was an Iron John workshop without a fee. I had been sworn to secrecy by the same oath, as I could see from the list of past members, that my Uncle Bill had taken 30 years before. All I could tell Lionel about the bag of goodies was that it wasn't what it looked like, that is, weird behavior. Of course, it was weird behavior, whether one person dreamed it up on their own or a group did it

because another group had told them too, but that irony escaped me at the time.

During our senior year, Lionel began to wall himself off from the white world that claimed to be so eager to embrace him. It showed openly at sports, particularly at basketball, which was coached by the ubiquitous Mr. Werner. Most of the African-American students detested his patronizing manner and jibes even more than white students did. It was one thing to bust your gut for a white coach, as Lionel had for the gruff, rotund Dave Hovey in football and lacrosse, if you felt that he was dedicated to you and pushing you for your own good; it was quite another to hustle for someone you felt was just trying to aggrandize himself, especially if he took his razor tongue to you, publicly showing his disgust with each error to the tightly-packed audience in the arena.

To avoid having to be ordered around within everybody's earshot by Mr. Werner, one African-American student, a tremendously talented athlete named Jim Henry, simply refused to play basketball for him. In his first year of school Jim played with me under Mr. Hovey's tutelage on the second basketball team, which brought complaints from opposing coaches, because despite being a sophomore, with his size and ability he so clearly belonged on the varsity. The next year, when Jim had gotten even bigger and better and it would have been ludicrous to put him out there again with us pygmies, he refused to move up to the varsity and instead joined a group of unathletic or disaffected students who broke school tradition by refusing to play competitive sports that winter, and instead formed a work-out club. Lionel, who was an excellent basketball player, achieved the same result by playing so lethargically that it embarrassed the coach into putting him on the bench. Like the hero of the film "The Loneliness of the Long-distance Runner" who loses on purpose so the warden can't ride to reflected glory on his back, Lionel preferred to play badly rather than show enthusiasm for his overseer's orders.

During the period when Lionel and I were drifting apart an incident occurred that showed us how differently we were treated because of our races, even within our artificially safe little campus. I was called into an office one afternoon and was surprised to see Lionel sitting unhappily between two big beefy white men and a teacher, whose identity I am sorry to say I've forgotten. The men, the teacher explained, were detectives. I looked at

Lionel and sensed that behind his cool veneer he was angry and scared almost to the point of tears. What was this all about? Earlier in the week, a woman at a shopping center in Simsbury had reported that a tall, young black man in the company of a short, young white man — the detectives kept saying the "accomplice" — had exposed himself to her. The police assumed that any young black man had to come from Westminster, and so had come to the campus and somehow, perhaps through photos in the yearbook, latched onto Lionel as a likely suspect.

My first reaction was to laugh, because the allegation was so absurd; my second, since I'd seen lots of TV shows where tough guys refused to talk with cops, was to tell Lionel that he didn't have to say anything without a lawyer; my third, since he just sat there seething and said nothing, was to tell the truth, which was that I had been with Lionel during the afternoon in question and that we hadn't gone downtown. After a few more hours, the police decided that Lionel wasn't their man after all. We all laughed about the incident for days afterwards, trying to decide just how I could have been an accomplice (perhaps by unzipping his fly?), but it was clear that Lionel had been thrown to the wolves in a way that no white student would have been. The school cooperated with the police on a fishing expedition for a black face, and then violated Lionel's right to counsel. He was as helpless and right-less at this genteel school as he would have been in the toughest ghetto in America.

In these and myriad, less outrageous ways, race kept intruding on our friendship as an overriding fact of American life. Lionel's entry in the senior yearbook was all about this fact and our friendship. It told of his having learned to his "despair" that the black man and the white man could not live together even in a closed community, and it advocated that they not "go out of their way" to make friends or enemies, but instead be "impersonal" yet respectful toward each other.

The disappointment of losing my best buddy in a haze of racial misunderstanding was matched by my confusion over losing a girlfriend the same way. Vanessa Berrabeano was a small, quiet, beautiful girl from New Orleans who had somehow ended up in the cold white north and a girls' prep school. I was set up with her by that most hallowed of prep school institutions, the dance committee. The committee consisted mostly of the wealthi-

est boys, since they spent their vacations at places with rich girls who themselves ran their schools' dance committees. It rated on a scale of one to five the participants for the group gropes that would occur every few weeks when students from girls' schools would be bussed into our lair. Of course, the members of the dance committee always used this inside information to assign themselves the best-looking girls, whom they then shared by signing each other's "dance cards" — the listing of the five boys who would take turns dancing with a girl before she was deposited back with her original date.

The farther away you were from the circle of the rich kids, the uglier and fatter your date and your five other dance-partners would be. My friends on the committee always tried to do me a favor by identifying the most radical girl and, if she was also cute and loose, letting me fill up my whole card with her so I wouldn't have to part with this soulmate. We would hide on the dance floor behind taller couples so the roving chaperones wouldn't see us as we rubbed our pelvises together. After necking ferociously on numerous walks outside, we would part at the bus, never to talk to each other again because we, or at least I, didn't know what to do next.

It was so impersonal that after a few dances I surprised everyone by just not going, probably out of the same puritanical instincts that made me the only boy in the class to boycott the porno flicks Petey Platt would bring back from his raunchy hometown of Amsterdam, NY I sure didn't know the words "objectify" or "sexist" in 1969, but rutting on a total stranger or sitting with a room full of guys watching women get fucked by dogs struck me in my gut as just too demeaning a thing to do, to me and to the women...although I did my unfair share of such things later, so maybe I just wanted to avoid doing them in front of people I was trying to impress with my social conscience.

Along with the rich kids, there had to be one black boy on the dance committee, to interact with the one black girl who would be on the girls' committee. This wasn't because there was segregated dancing, since only a few whites and no blacks demanded that all their partners be of their race, but simply because the whites on the committees didn't know how to rate their black schoolmates. The token black on Westminster's dance committee my senior year was Obie Baker, a bubbly guy the faculty considered a

dedicated servant of the less fortunate because he had set up the Big Brother tutoring program. Of course, the primary purpose and effect of the tutoring program was to get us down into Hartford and close to the high school girls who were trying to prepare for prep school exams: we did a lot more dancing than studying in Obie's program. He begged me to make an exception to my ban on dances for Vanessa, who had told her committee that she didn't want to be passed around like a hunk of meat. Obie said that I was the only person who would want to spend the entire evening with someone described as radical but shy. I acceded, but only because he assured me that in addition to being shy, she was fly. And she was. She looked like a miniature Diana Ross, and my reaction to this white look was everything Berry Gordy of Motown knew it would be when he put Diana and her processed hair up in front of the Supremes. We hit it off perfectly, and did more talking than groping. She was the first girl at the dances I felt really comfortable with, with whom I didn't have to ask myself what I had to do next. After a lot of calls and letters, I asked her to be my date for the senior dance weekend, an event I had previously planned to skip. There didn't seem to be any resistance among my friends, black or white, to us being the school's first interracial dance weekend couple, so I assumed race wouldn't be a factor in our relationship. I was very wrong.

When I went down to the common room to meet Vanessa when she arrived, I didn't recognize her at first, and I almost walked right by her before turning, uncertainly, to say her name in a questioning tone. Diana was dead and Angela Davis was standing before me in all her negritude: Vanessa had changed her hair from processed flip to bushy Afro. A giant balloon of hair dwarfed her tiny head, and she was wearing a bright orange dashiki. She was clearly interested in my reaction, and she couldn't have liked what she saw. Even though I didn't say what was on my mind, which was that she looked like Bozo the Clown, I'm sure she sensed it, and the gap of mistrust that opened between us in that instant never closed over the three long, quiet days of the weekend. I tried to close it by claiming that I was just surprised by the difference in her appearance, and not turned away by it, but the damage was irretrievably done: the hidden complexities of race had sabotaged another friendship. I never saw her again.

In their actions, Lionel and Vanessa had been trying to say something to me about being black in white America, something they had to say to retain their sense of self against all the confusing odds. I simply couldn't hear them, because I had taken my parents' egalitarianism and Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream to mean that the right thing to do with race was to ignore it politely, and not let it be a factor. But race — our peculiarly potent form of ethnicity — is always a factor in America, in all personal and institutional relationships, and ignoring it simply deepens one's ignorance.

My schools couldn't acknowledge this and help us address race on a personal level, because they had a vested interest in clinging to the myth that ending overt discrimination was all that was needed in race relations. Moving past that truism to an understanding of how structural discrimination and racism are imbedded not just in individuals but in the ladder to a decent life in America would have opened up a debate about the function of the schools themselves in that ladder. That was a debate they wanted no part of, a self-examination they instinctively tried to avoid when race threatened to trigger it. But as the following chapters on Cornell University's melt-down in 1969 show, it was often to no avail. To paraphrase Muhammed Ali, when it comes to race in America, we can run, but we can't hide.

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