

EDUCATION AS AN ART

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PRESSURE AND THE SPIRIT OF PLAY

By John F. Gardner

Every school represents a continuation, but also a critique, of the society of which it is a part. Teachers are partly transmitters, partly reformers, of their culture. So it is, too, with Waldorf and Rudolf Steiner School teachers. At times some of us may seem critical, causing uneasiness in those who would like to feel that our civilization is progressing satisfactorily. Yet, although our criticisms must occasionally stress the negative, their intent is positive. We do think reformation necessary, but our goal is renaissance.

I have on other occasions spoken about the fact that our age lives under heavy pressures that exploit man and nature alike. A man from another planet, by observing conditions in an average school, could easily guess the state of the culture at large. Perhaps most notable about American students just now is the fact that their childhood is being shortened. Their teeth are changing earlier than they used to; they are maturing earlier sexually; they adopt grownup modes of dress and behavior sooner; and they are playing serious baseball, football, and basketball before they reach their teens. It seems generally true, too, that the aptitude for abstract thinking is developing precociously.

The curriculum of the modern school is partly following, partly causing this trend to abandon childhood as soon as possible. Witness the demise of fairy tales and the introduction of reading-even of arithmetic and science-in kindergartens. Witness high school subjects shunted into the elementary school, and college subjects into high school. Consider the tactics of advanced placement, the ungraded high school as newly proposed, and the lengthening school year. Many of these impatient schemes betray the feeling that carefree youth, which would live for the sake of living, must hasten to leave its toys and joys, and take up tools for a life that is Serious Business.

One symptom of modern education is especially striking. This is the mania for swift reading. Children are encouraged, not to say harassed, to read ever faster and faster, as if academic progress were primarily a race with time, and speed of reading the very key to winning this race. In many thousands of children and parents the academic race is inspiring near-panic.

There is no doubt that the pressures of adult anxiety are shortening childhood, and squeezing it besides. These pressures move down from the level of national policy, which insists upon a moon-shot day after tomorrow, to the nursery level, where parents with an eye on college insist upon their children 'learning' something. The child is asked to absorb more knowledge, and absorb it faster, regardless of his appetite. He must appear to be a thinker, long before experience can have ripened any real kind of thinking in him. Can we wonder that the knowledge of such children is joyless, and their thinking is powerless, when the children themselves have had so little part in developing either?

But now I would speak of that which is capable of withstanding every pressure: namely, the spirit of play. The curriculum and methods of the Waldorf schools have the avowed purpose of fostering this very spirit of play, for in it we see not only the great need of young people today, but an antidote for the distemper of our age.

We know that play characterizes childhood. Less often do we think of it as being also the signature of maturity. Yet Christ was speaking of the mature human being when he said, "Except... ye become again as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." Reflection upon this saying can bring one to the thought that Christ's admonition might be paraphrased: "Except in the spirit of play

man will not realize the divine in himself, find the divine in the world, or participate worthily in the divine work of creation."

The child at play, the mature man who has risen to childlikeness, is 'in the world but not of the world.' He is close enough to shape things, yet free enough that his shaping fantasy may remain true to its own promptings. Nietzsche said that man passes, on his way to freedom, through three stages: the camel that asks to be heavily laden with rules and plans and duties given by the world, the lion that fights against the world for his freedom, and finally the child, who in mastery of the world possesses freedom and knows what to do with it.

Schiller in his Aesthetical Letters put the matter drastically but truly when he said, ". . . man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays." Schiller saw the thinking man bewitched by logic, the feeling man tossed by passion, the working man chained to fact. All these functions must be performed by man, but they are not exercised freely until the spirit of play finds its way into them. Play transforms the logical faculty into creative imagination. Play makes work that deadens, into art that enlivens. Play sets aside the storm and stress of passion for the quiet sense of freedom in which love unfolds. The power of play mediates in perfect freedom between inner life and outer life. As the heart beats between the upper and the lower body, the spirit of play holds forth between conceptual necessities in the inner life of thought and practical facts in the outer life of action.

It is often assumed that while play occupies itself with unrealities, coping with reality requires work. Our habit of thought assigns play to children, work to adults. Were grown men and women permitted to regard life as, in the last analysis, a matter of play, we fear they would cease forthwith to be responsible. The exact contrary, however, may be argued. For the ideal of play which childhood holds out to the mature man is actually more serious than work. Play, as Schiller conceived it, is a whole-souled exercise of the human entelechy, whereas in work much of the soul may remain unenlisted. Play is a more complete undertaking than work, for play uses all our faculties, work only some. In play we ourselves lead. In work we are being pushed.

A man's work becomes play to the extent that his own initiative completely cancels external pressure, and his love of action makes light of duty. The art of life, therefore, consists in transforming work into play. We should 'play the game,' not in the sense of 'playing along,' but in the sense of knowing the rules, accepting them gladly, and then plunging into the sport for the joy it gives. Under these circumstances we see that true play develops a more complete sense of responsibility than work, since in play we say 'I will,' while in work we can only say 'I must.'

Play enriches life, work impoverishes it; for in play, being is fulfilled; in work, being is frustrated. The energy for play is self-sustaining and self-renewing; for work, the energy that is spent must be drawn from somewhere else. Is it not clear, then, that the enjoyment, gratitude, and free activity which we have been calling play stands closer to a sound education, sound health, and sound economy than the unloved necessity, the pressure, which goes by the name of work?

Waldorf School methods in nursery and kindergarten try to establish the fully active, fully creative spirit of play so firmly that it will set the tone for the rest of life. Waldorf parents know how in the early years letters, numbers, and skills, literature, science, and history put down their first roots in the spirit of play. They are presented imaginatively. They awaken free interests. They lead to creative art. It is not my present purpose, however, to review Waldorf School methods, but to stress values that should be honored in every school. Does not the very health of Western society ask us to remit the pressures of selfish purpose and materialistic desire that now exploit men and nature? Could not happier, more lasting contributions be made from the spirit of play? Society would undoubtedly prosper, were ordinary men and women educated to live their lives more creatively, with more fantasy, which they can do when they are not too abstracted from the earth as intellectuals, nor too gripped by it as breadwinners.

One can believe that the intuitive sense so closely bound up with the spirit of play is able, if given the chance, to bring about many changes. For example, the farmer who began to imagine how things look from the viewpoint of his apple trees and earthworms, his cows and his chickens, would surely move away from many practices that the short-sighted profit motive has introduced into agriculture. And the spirit of play appearing in such imaginative identification would not only enhance the life of creatures on the farm: how it could improve relationships between human beings, too between age and youth, man and woman, black and white, Easterner and Westerner!

Imagine for a moment an injection of the spirit of play into business. What is closer to play than the making, transporting and trading that we call 'the economy'? These actions and transactions are said to be done to earn a living. But they already are living. They spring from zest for life. Wages are necessary, but work is done by a healthy man in any case. He cares primarily for the pleasure of being active at tasks that interest him. He wants the humor, the warmth, the vitality, of companionship with his fellow-workers. He loves the sense of an importance, however modest, in the scheme of things. He looks forward to testing himself against life and bringing forth his resources to meet its challenges. Were the mainspring of all this adult busy-ness recognized as actually the instinct for play, the game would find ways to make itself more clearly worth playing for its own sake. Then wages could find their proper place. We may expect that when management no longer sees profit as its main goal, labor will not fight so single mindedly for 'more'.

Again, if scientists were to pursue their studies in Schiller's spirit of play, would not the methods and the findings of science change remarkably? It seems to me that a more heartfelt wonder would replace our mental curiosity. Also, the using of knowledge solely for the purpose of capturing material power would decline, as the spiritual power of being flowed from nature to the natural scientist in his cognition. The perceived world, which has grown so absolutely material only because we are so positively hard-headed in our search for knowledge, will begin to relax, letting us feel the being within the seeming. New powers of inquiry, indeed, could arise, able to roll the stone of dead fact away from the grave in which we have for a long time now laid the world spirit.

If our scientists would hold to the fact that true science is but a form of play, they could begin to lift their noses from the grindstone of analysis. They could look up and about them, drawing together things far and near, subtle and obvious, inner and outer. The multiplication of exclusively physical detail, which is exhausting our capacity for wonder and blockading our path towards wisdom, would be subdued and contained within a stronger sense of the whole.

The spirit of play could bring light again into religion. In this spirit men and women would feel closer to the all-fashioning Creator than they can do when their concept of God is based upon speculations that ask too much after judgment and purpose. What is the 'purpose' of trout in a mountain stream, of birds that give voice to the crystal air, of jungle tigers burning bright? Nature is a work of art; its forms are all fantasy. Is it not difficult to conceive that pheasants and woodchucks, dandelions and geraniums could be the handiwork of a deity motivated by what we call purpose?

What is true of the religious feeling for nature may be true also of the religious sense for destiny. Shakespeare is echoing what we know of destiny from our own dreams, when he says that "all the world's a stage" whereon we men play parts. Melville imagined the Fates as stage managers. One may venture, therefore, that a role-playing imagination will be of more help in answering the questions of destiny than will legalistic ideas of punishment and reward. Fate may unfold according to necessities better sensed by the playwright than by pedagogue or judge.

Speaking of jurisprudence, I must say that I have wondered at times whether justice could not be meted out to criminals more imaginatively, or as I might say now, playfully. At present we seem so often to ignore what no playwright or child at play would overlook: namely, the actual relationships

of destiny between the criminal and his victim. Judgment rendered out of a feeling for dramatic justice could certainly touch the heart of the wrong-doer in ways inaccessible to legal judgments.

I cannot leave out of consideration the benefits to be expected in a culture that would rightly value play, without alluding to what has happened to recreation and amusement in our present culture. By subordinating the play motif so conscientiously, we have arrived at a situation in which life has lost its savor. We try to renew this savor through sensation, but the thrills available to our mundane spirit have lost their innocence and do not satisfy. How could they?

It is really not thrills we desire, but fun; really not escape, but buoyancy. But the conversion of adults, who should know better, into playboys will not really be checked by anything less powerful than the spirit of play.

In conclusion I should like to say a word about one of many ways in which a rightly-cultivated sense of play might affect human health. Let us look at the heart.

It is well known that diseases of the circulatory system, particularly of the heart, constitute in our country the greatest single threat to health. The World Book estimates that this type of ailment doubly outweighs, as a cause of death, the next five diseases combined. According to Dr. Paul Dudley White, the statistics show that, for heart disease, America has the distinction of being about the most unhealthful country in the world. Mortality from this cause is still increasing and is said to be appearing some ten or twelve years earlier in each successive generation.

What have pressures and play to do with the heart? Among the causes of illness usually mentioned is the swift pace of modern life. This it is that brings disorder into the circulatory system. Remedy: we should be less active. But on the other hand, we hear that the trouble results from our sedentary habits: we should be more active. Or again, diet is to blame: we should eat less of animal fats. Worry is bad: we may require tranquillizers. And, of course, since the disposition to heart disease is to some extent hereditary, those who wish to avoid this kind of thing should use extreme care in the selection of their grandparents!

Dr. Hans Selye's famous research into the effects of stress on the human organism seems to support what we could guess: namely, that in a culture where freedom and fulfillment, love and joy, harmony and peace are prospering, there will be no epidemic of heart attacks. Where initiative is cramped, where pressures crowd in, where enjoyment is superficial and fulfillment is indefinitely postponed, men and women will find their burdened hearts faltering.

It seems to me that our American hearts are being squeezed from above and below. The drive towards intellectualism that starts to speak only of the effects of formal education—in most elementary schools with the very first grade must surely tighten our children and stiffen them at the same time. The ever-increasing mechanization of the environment must contribute its further share. And then, the urgent hurry, the bitter competition, that would have us force the blood past vessels already tightened!

It seems to me that we are living harder and enjoying it less as the years go by. But blood springs to its tasks when the inner man feels free and in his freedom conceives enthusiasm for life. That students today are falling short of such vividness may be read in the voice that can no longer reach the high notes, in the gait that drags, in the slump that has replaced sitting, in the sunken chests found even among athletes, and in the general inability shown by young people on the stage to portray characters of abounding humor, magnanimous spirit, or marked vitality.

Reform that leads to renaissance must start in education. Many a teacher today would be glad to pioneer in replacing extrinsic with intrinsic values, and in the Waldorf School we have already gone comparatively far in this direction. But teachers need the support of parents. Parents could scarcely be

better placed than they are, to understand why a revolt against pressure is overdue, and why the spirit of play should lead this revolt. They need only look around and into themselves.

Mr. Gardner is Faculty Chairman of the Waldorf School of Adelphi College, Garden City, New York. His article is reprinted with the kind permission of "The Waldorf School News."