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Philosophers of Education  
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“He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.”

—Victor Frankl, quoting Nietzsche,  
in *Man’s Search for Meaning*.<sup>1</sup>

It seems a month doesn’t go by without a new cheating scandal arising somewhere in America. From Stuyvesant High School to Harvard and Stanford, it is often our “best and brightest” that are most willing to copy homework, crib exams, and plagiarize. As Rutgers business school Professor Donald McCabe points out, “[t]here have always been struggling students who cheat to survive...But more and more, there are students at the top who cheat to thrive.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, any realistic teacher must admit that boredom is common in our schools, one which Amanda Ripley argues is “related to depression, poor grades, substance abuse, hopelessness, and loneliness. In one survey of 467 recent high school dropouts, nearly half said boredom was a major factor in their decision to quit school.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the mental health of students, as measured in anxiety, stress, and suicide, which “tripled between 1950 and 1994”<sup>4</sup>, is deteriorating. Usually these phenomena are seen as ancillary obstacles to the putative business at hand—developing young men and women

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<sup>1</sup> Frankl, Victor, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/08/education/studies-show-more-students-cheat-even-high-achievers.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/08/education/studies-show-more-students-cheat-even-high-achievers.html?_r=0).

<sup>3</sup> <https://newrepublic.com/article/115928/twitter-shows-epidemic-school-boredom>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.economist.com/node/898176>.

with intense interests, civic virtue, and as much wisdom as smarts. But educational bugaboos like cheating and boredom have become so common, so widespread, that they can no longer be seen as the unfortunate but rare fall out of an otherwise effective educational system.

Cheating, plagiarism, ennui, and unwelcome and unfocused stress and anxiety are *exactly* the results one would expect in a school system that, against the advice of educational philosophers from Aristotle to Gardner, have confused means and ends. Like a snake eating its tail, our schools, especially our putatively best, have become so caught up in the unreflective *process* of education and the fuzzy metaphors of grades and college admissions engendered by our bureaucratic penchant for sorting and labeling children—that we have forgotten the only philosophical question that really matters, which is Why? It is our failure to articulate for students *why* to study rather than to cheat, why to read rather than to pretend to have read, why to discuss rather than dig in, think rather than preen, and question the academic contest rather than to win it. In his book *Why Children Fail*, John Holt asks: “Where are you trying to get, and are you getting there? The question sticks like a burr. In schools—but where isn’t it so?—we so easily fall into the same trap: the means to an end becomes an end in itself.”<sup>5</sup> Our educational system is too often little more than a Darwinian struggle disguised by pomp and circumstance. Unless students are taught to connect their learning to long term meaning and autonomous agency; unless students learn to take themselves seriously as purposeful actors in a world that, for all its imperfections, makes sense, we will continue to produce clever cynics and paper scholars instead of visionary intellectuals, and heroes of change.

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<sup>5</sup> Holt, John *Why Children Fail* (230).

Historian Peter Gibbon correctly recommends the flawed but real heroes of our past not as the random filler of AP exams and SAT reading comp passages, but as exemplars to inspire students to be the best version of themselves.<sup>6</sup> But the opposite of a hero is a villain, and, as Chuck Klosterman has said, “The villain is the person who knows the most but cares the least.”<sup>7</sup> Nothing could better describe system of education we have established in America today. Our best students “know” exactly what we have asked them to know, do exactly what we have asked them to do, but where they have succeeded, we have failed. In *Education for Freedom*, Robert Hutchins writes: “The question most often put to me is: ‘What is wrong with our educational system?’ The answer to this question is ‘Nothing...’ There is never anything wrong with the educational system of a country. What is wrong is the country. The educational system that any country has will be the system that country wants.”<sup>8</sup> What might be called the school to Wall Street pipeline will continue unless the entire purpose of education for the “talented twentieth” is reconsidered.

Such a focus on the “haves” of our country may seem odd when most people consider inequity the number one educational problem in the United States. It is true that the discrepancy in educational achievement or, more accurately according to Diane Ravitch, the discrepancy in *opportunity*,<sup>9</sup> is a slow motion, centuries old, catastrophe that has been endlessly measured, poorly addressed, and never remedied. One might ask that,

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<sup>6</sup> Gibbon, Peter *A Call to Heroism: Renewing America’s Vision of Greatness*.

<sup>7</sup> Klosterman, Chuck *I Wear the Black Hat: Grappling with Villains* (18).

<sup>8</sup> Hutchins, Robert *Education for Freedom* (48).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/24/opinion/sunday/the-common-core-costs-billions-and-hurts-students.html>.

given the opportunity gap—the single most important and perhaps the only remediable civil rights issue of our time, why cavil about white middle class stress and the effects of the college arms race on people with the luxury to worry beyond the essentials. But this is why a reckoning between means and ends in the education of our elites is so important. It is because of our failure to properly educate the elites that the neglected children of our country, disproportionately black and brown victims of the educational apartheid that marks all of American history, are forced to rely not on the educational equivalent of the Marshal Plan or Space Race, but on the kindness of strangers who are the direct beneficiaries of the very system they are putatively trying to render more just. Whether they are young, well-intentioned, and mostly well-heeled Teachers for America, or fabulously wealthy entrepreneurs turned putative saviors like Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg, these moral dilettantes have somehow become acceptable replacements for the national will, brave policies, and visionary leadership that an education based on meaning, not metrics would inspire. We teach students to mouth the words of the founding documents, while continually abdicating their spirit. Imagine Eisenhower or JFK relying on the easy grace of private sector idealism and the fleeting charity of the upper classes to liberate Europe or realize the New Frontier!

In her book *The Prize*, Dale Russakoff recounts the founder of Facebook's failed foray into educational reform in New Jersey. "[Mark Zuckerberg] told me later that he thought he was doing what the people on the ground in Newark wanted...But no one on the ground had been consulted."<sup>10</sup> Where would that kind of arrogance come from? The Gates Foundation's CEO, Sue Desmond-Hellman, admitted after early failures that "It is really

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<sup>10</sup> <https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/why-did-100-million-new-jersey-school-reform-fail>.

tough to create more great public schools” and, after Gates rolled out the Common Core too quickly, Desmond-Hellman said that the foundation “missed an early opportunity to sufficiently engage educators — particularly teachers — but also parents and communities, so that the benefits of the standards could take flight from the beginning...[t]his has been a challenging lesson for us to absorb, but we take it to heart. The mission of improving education in America is both vast and complicated, and the Gates Foundation doesn’t have all the answers.”<sup>11</sup> But perhaps no celebrity education reformer better reflects the bankrupt values of our schools, values that put process and metrics over meaning and action, and the hopelessness of relying on our current system’s winners, than Wendy Kopp, founder of Teach for America. In her memoir *One Day All Children...The Unlikely Triumph of Teach for America*, Kopp describes how she came to start Teach for America. It was *not* a meaningful Princeton education that fostered a moral epiphany about injustice, and it was *not* her high school lunge for the Ivies that gave her the motivation to act on it. TFA arose from her need to fulfill an academic requirement she found burdensome, as well as to help her exit the personal malaise that surrounded her as graduation approached. “What was I going to do after graduation? To this point my life had always been driven toward some academic or extracurricular goal...I felt uninspired...as I ran around the town of Princeton, I felt only more lost...my frustration grew...as I...tried to listen to lectures...I was in a funk.” Kopp describes her fellow seniors as equally uninspired, as most of them apply for “two-year corporate training program[s], most with investment banks and management consulting firms” because they “just couldn’t think of anything else to do...Meanwhile, as a

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-gates-education-20160601-snap-story.html>.

senior at Princeton, I was obligated to write a thesis.”<sup>12</sup> TFA’s origins in the school to Wall Street pipeline would eventually come full circle when, in 2010 “TFA ...established a very public partnership with Goldman Sachs...Under the terms of the partnership, Goldman will grant deferments of full employment for certain interns who are accepted to TFA, and also recruit “Teach For America corps members for summer internship opportunities.” The official release doesn’t say what TFA gets out of this deal, but I’d be willing to bet that it comes with a dollar sign and lots of zeroes. But it’s crystal clear what Goldman gets: improved recruiting access to a pool of some of the best-educated and most successful college graduates in the U.S.”<sup>13</sup>

The trouble with relying on the supposed good intentions of the well educated is that they have “proven” their mettle, and fostered their worldview, in a system predicated on values and goals that not only preclude the very solution they are supposedly seeking, but actually caused the problem. In our current educational system, students who have won the academic sweepstakes have not proven themselves educated in any real sense that Aristotle or Thomas Jefferson would recognize, but have simply become adept at what Dr. Robert Fried has called “the game of school.”<sup>14</sup> For these students, school is too often the simplest way to ensure the socio-economic level of their parents, or more likely, to stave off the short-term boogeymen of parental stress and peer ridicule. Thus, those who pretend to represent solutions to America’s opportunity gap, from benighted millionaires throwing

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<sup>12</sup> Kopp, Wendy *One Day All Children...The Unlikely Triumph of Teach for America and What I Learned Along the Way* (3-8).

<sup>13</sup> <http://stanfordreview.org/article/teach-for-goldman-sachs/>.

<sup>14</sup> Fried, Robert *The Game of School: Why We All Play It, How It Hurts Kids, and What It Will Take to Change It*.

not quite enough money at problems that have been entrenched for centuries and tainted by generations of their forbears privilege, to idealistic young trust funders who dirty their hands for a few years in an urban school, are just band aids that mask, rather than heal, the wounds of injustice.

Although many humane educational reformers hearts are in the right place when decrying the inequity and deep-seated injustice of our schools and our economy, their bottom up approach to educational justice has not succeeded because the gatekeepers are not truly in the fight. Any solution to educational inequity depends on the people with the power seeing a meaning in their lives and studies beyond academic accolades. The answer, if there is one, will only come from reforming the education of the academic “haves” of our schools, whose image of a successful education must shift from the academic equivalent of a randomly created sports competition to a life of the mind that is meaningful—one that sees the approval of peers, teachers, parents and college admissions officers for what it is: the contrived proxy for a real life. Students need to understand and appreciate the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, who walked with Martin Luther King at Selma: “The excruciating, heart-rending problem is meaning. It is upon the intuition or affirmation of meaning that the sense of significant being—the sign of mental health—depends.”

Whether we like it or not, given the way politics, national policy and educational reforms work in our country, it is only through the reform of the education of the best students, the ones with the most access to educational accolades and thus systemic power, that the inequities suffered by the have-nots can be remedied. By fostering motivated, autonomous heroes instead of sophisticated sophists, the nation that put a man on the moon and imagined the Constitution can make the crooked record of educational injustice

straight. Plato argues that “Knowledge, when separated from justice and virtue, is seen to be cunning and not wisdom.”<sup>15</sup> If we constantly mistake means for ends, and scholastic gymnastics for wisdom, how can we be surprised by the students we have wrought?

The sad thing is that educational philosophers have been arguing for purpose and meaning as the sine qua non of education for hundreds of years, and even as far back as Plato and Aristotle. Thinkers as disparate as Locke, Rousseau, Jefferson, Montessori, James, and Dewey felt that education severed from meaning in a child’s life was not only not effective, but the origin of much that is wrong in society. Looed at this way, our society, for all its ills, from cheating and boredom, to inequity and brutishness, makes perfect sense. As Emerson said: “Our culture has truckled to the times...It is not man-worthy. If the vast and the spiritual are omitted, so are the practical and the moral. It does not make us brave or free. We teach boys to be such men as we are. We do not teach them to aspire to be all they can. We do not give them a training as if we believed in their noble nature...We exercise their understandings to the apprehension and comparison of some facts, to a skill in numbers, in words; we aim to make accountants, attorneys, engineers, but not to make able, earnest, great-hearted men.”<sup>16</sup>

Instead of relying on the kindness of strangers who see the inequity in education either as just another resume bauble on their road to the American cliché, or a way to salve their guilt, we need to completely re-compass the “talented twentieth” toward a life of the mind and heart based on an education driven by meaning, and leverage them into an educational revolution that can actually work for everyone.

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<sup>15</sup> Plato, speech of Aspasia, recounted by Socrates, Menexenus 246e, *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (1961), (196).

<sup>16</sup> Emerson quoted in Van Doren, Mark *A Liberal Education*.

