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# A Childhood Confined

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**John Taylor Gatto**, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (2nd edition, New Society Publishers, 2002).

John Taylor Gatto has written and spoken himself into a unique position. As a thirty-year veteran of the New York City public school system, and recipient of several “Teacher of the Year” awards, he quit his job and became an acerbic critic of the American public education system. With experience in both affluent and struggling schools, Gatto’s voice is confident, unapologetic, and laced with enough hyperbole to turn heads and get people talking. “School is a twelve-year jail sentence where bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned,” he pontificates (19). In an award acceptance speech before the New York State Senate, he lobs the fiery assertion that “well-schooled people are irrelevant...[H]uman beings...useless to others and useless to themselves” (23). For Gatto, education and schooling are vastly different propositions; the former happening very little in the context of what he calls “government monopoly schooling” and the latter serving mainly to squash curiosity and any aptitude for true learning.

Gatto’s perspective as a well-intentioned and skilled teacher who worked “within the system” is what makes his diagnosis of the concrete difficulties faced by students and teachers both convincing and worth reading. He knows of what he speaks. At the same time, his perspective is markedly individualistic, with a strong libertarian flavor. He holds any authority in intense suspicion, whether it be the state or the church, and asserts that truth is best learned through a dialectical model of trial and error amongst unguided individuals, unfettered by predetermined laws proscribed from above. For the Catholic educator, such a perspective is certainly problematic. But there is much in Gatto’s book worth considering. And while the paths of a purely-Gatto inspired educator and a Catholic educator will of necessity diverge, there is much common ground to cover in discerning a creative response to the problems of state-run schools, and, by extension, the private schools whose structures echo those of the public.

## *What do we really need?*

The question of what’s wrong with the public education system is best approached by asking what it is that we as people, members of the human family, really *need*. Only then can the purpose of schooling, and its form, be properly determined. Gatto boils this down eloquently into a question of meaning and purpose, with a side note of connection-with-place and family:

Most of us who’ve had a taste of loving families, even a little taste, want our kids to be part of one. One other thing I know is that eventually you have to come to be part of a place-- part of its hills and streets and waters and people-- or you will live a very, very sorry life as an exile forever. Discovering *meaning for yourself* as well as discovering satisfying *purpose for yourself* is a big part of what

education is. How this can be done by locking children away from the world is beyond me. (61)  
[Education] should make you spiritually rich, a person who loves whatever you are doing, wherever you are, whomever you are with; it should teach you what is important: how to live and how to die. (68)

Life in one's family, joy and satisfaction in one's place, and the slow and joyful discovery of one's unique vocation—these are the essence, for Gatto, of a proper and true education. For a Catholic educator, these are all admirable goals worthy of embracing.

### *What's wrong with "the system"?*

According to Gatto, public education, in its current form, has different ends than these in mind. He ascribes a variety of origins to the current state of public education,<sup>[1]</sup> but what he sees as its ultimate, and somewhat sinister systemic goal, is, first, the "eliminat[ion] of human variation" that arises within the family, and, second, the production of dependent, nearly brainwashed wage earners who will play their obedient part in the national-turned-global economy, and who lack the independent spirit to question the all-encompassing dictates of the government. Schools enable this dependence by what boils down to a form of psychological manipulation—making students emotionally dependent upon their grades, convincing them that they are either "good" or "bad" students and allowing them to label themselves as such, as well as incentivizing students lacking creativity who do precisely what they are told to do. Gatto is careful to point out that while this creation of mind-numbing dependence may be the insidious logic of "government monopoly education," there are many well-meaning, even heroic educators working within the public schools of America, who honestly desire to teach children well. However, he claims, they are forced to primarily teach obedience to the system, and he says the system has done its job well. He points to the Department of Labor statistics for proof: the two most common jobs in the American economy are that of cashier and fast-food worker. The work performed in both positions ultimately lacks creativity and often reduces the person to little more than a walking, talking cog in a machine without much opportunity to problem solve or innovate.

Here it begins to become apparent how the problem of education is intertwined with a myriad of other problems, and it is difficult to untangle the strands or discern the causal relationships between them. If an economy based on mechanistic, unthinking labor necessitates the "dumbing down" of students through the current educational system, then re-envisioning education would involve a hand-in-hand re-envisioning of the economy. David Allen, in the book's introduction, half-whimsically, half-seriously suggests an economy with more "artists, dancers, poets, self-sufficient farmers, tree-lovers, devoted followers of...non-materialist cults, Christian or otherwise—handicraft workers, makers of their own beer, stay-at-home moms and dads" who in the current state of things, "endure on the margins and at the periphery of the social economy" (xxv).

Gatto places high value on the integration of people and families within their communities, and he bemoans the weakened state of many American locales today. Neighborhoods have become ghost towns, with all of the actors who formerly peopled the streets and porches siphoned off into institutions—children into an uninterrupted stream of school, homework, and extra-curricular activities, the elderly to nursing homes, and both spouses to full time, non-home-based employment. "In a healthy community, [the teaching function] belongs to everyone," emphasizes Gatto (16). Yet who is left to teach in today's eviscerated American communities? Re-imagining education also involves a hand-in-hand re-imagining of community.

Families and the homes they form, which should be cornerstones of their local communities, are allowing much of their role to be usurped by schools. Schools are being encouraged to serve as a

“synthetic family” for children, due often to the failure of families to function as such. But this seems to be a chicken-and-the-egg problem. Gatto asserts that

schools are already a major cause of weak families and weak communities. They separate parents and children from vital interaction with each other and from true curiosity about each other’s lives. Schools stifle family originality by appropriating the critical time needed for any sound idea of family to develop— then they blame the family for its failure to be a family. It’s like a malicious person lifting a photograph from the developing chemicals too early, and then pronouncing the photographer incompetent. (67)

The intergenerational relationships in a family, a lesson in themselves, are replaced by all-day immersion in flocks of peers, all struggling to learn disconnected facts which lack meaning for them and only enhance their confusion about the world. The “system” even endeavors to weave its greedy fingers into the home, requiring students, once released from their institutional “jail,” to continue working for it, assigning hours on end of homework.

Gatto faults the school system for actively preventing children from learning lessons in “self-motivation, perseverance, self-reliance, courage, dignity, love, and...service to others” (19). He points to statistics noting increasingly frequent bouts of youth depression, addiction, and suicide, as well as an indifference to adult experience and adult life that often leads to an extended adolescence which continues through the post-college twenties and contributes to later and later ages for marriage, or a complete avoidance of commitment all together. Troupes of smartphone-toting youths are addicted to distraction, afraid of solitude, fearful of intimacy, and lacking in curiosity, all at once(17). Is such broad access to virtual connections at fault for this, or is it, as Gatto asserts, the fault of the system of schooling?

#### *What is to be done?*

Looking to the not-so-distant past, including his own childhood in the 1930’s and 40’s, Gatto reflects on what childhood and adolescence used to consist in:

[it] would have been occupied in real work, real charity, real adventures, and the realistic search for mentors who might teach you what you really wanted to learn. A great deal of time was spent in community pursuits, practicing affection, meeting and studying every level of the community, learning how to make a home, and dozens of other tasks necessary to become a whole man or woman. (25)

Time, possibly the most precious resource exploited by the school system, was what allowed this relaxed growth within the home and the community. Extra-curricular activities were rarer and homework was less daunting or non-existent. How then to reconfigure the schooling of the young to achieve a more meaningful education similar to what Gatto suggests here? He himself suggests something of a free-market solution, suggesting that smaller, more local schools (even home-based schools), competing freely with one another, would be able to more adequately address the unique needs of individual students. This would be in contrast to large, “government monopoly,” factory-like institutions that house thousands of students and force their intellectual pursuits to start and stop in response to the beck and call of bells and hall monitors.

Homeschooling, with a smattering of Montessori and co-ops thrown in the mix, is the educational path that our family has chosen, for the time being, for our children. While our initial inspiration was not connected with Gatto’s critiques directly, many of them did resonate with our family’s educational experiences thus far. While I write this, three hours before the public school bus will roll down our dirt

road, my eight year old son is done with his schoolwork for the day and scrounging about in our barn for scrap metal to attempt to create an electromagnet. I am not providing much help in the matter, but that hasn't hindered him, as he was inspired to the project by perusing our science books and encyclopedias, and has been turning to them for guidance. My six year old son, also done with his formal schooling for the day, is voluntarily snuggling up with his three year old brother and reading him a book, practicing his newly acquired reading skills and performing an important service for his article-writing mommy at the same time. Time—golden minutes of personally-directed learning and exploration, even after several hours of farm chores, prayers, formal lessons, and house clean-up—is the greatest gift which homeschooling has given our children.

In addition to giving my children time to pursue their inspirations, our homeschooling experience has also been marked by opportunities to make connections with mentors in our community. My oldest son still remembers the day when Dan, a member of my husband's choir, and a geologist by trade, came over to sit on our back porch, toting a ziploc bag full of rock samples and an enthusiasm for his field that inspired my son, then only five years old. Dan talked about each of the rocks and where he had found them, thus fueling my son's growing interest in geology and rock classification. Since then, in his free time, my son has catalogued his rock collection, performed hardness tests, and read all the books about rocks and minerals he can get his hands on, and insists he will be a geologist "when he grows up." Other days have found my boys, together with a passel of their friends, exploring creeks with their moms and little siblings, taking apart lawnmower engines while learning about internal combustion with my husband, or trying on Antarctic explorer's gear when my father was a guest teacher for our in-home class.

Homeschooling has the potential to address many of the critiques that Gatto makes of public schools—we can, for example, do math in half the time, tailoring it precisely to the ability of each student. Student interest in Rome or World War II can be channeled into more palatable handwriting lessons or writing assignments than those that come from impersonal workbooks. History can be taught with a greater sense of continuity and without the disjointed jumping from era to era so often experienced in public schools. Homeschooling also allows for constant opportunities to interweave the family's values and faith throughout the day. Yet it is not, and should not be seen, as a utopia. The focused, extended time spent together leads to an intensifying of not only the joys but also the struggles and growing pains common to any authentic community. In the constant journey towards virtue, direct and often painful confrontation with vice is coupled with the ever-present rhythm of transgression, forgiveness, and healing. While it is a privilege to be able to shepherd one's children on this path, it is not necessarily an easy, painless solution to the challenges presented by the public education system, nor is it a panacea available or appropriate for every family.

While Gatto repeatedly proclaims the impossibility of reforming the system as it is now, throughout the country there are privately run charter schools, all-age Montessori schools, classical academies, part-time academies, virtual online classes, co-ops, and home-schools proliferating. While not all have Gatto's philosophy as their root motivation, and he would most likely chafe at the adherence to tradition and religious authority of many of them, they do serve as models for a potential way forward for improving education in America on a larger scale.

[1] [The Underground History of American Education: A Schoolteacher's Intimate Investigation Into the Problem of Modern Schooling](#) (Oxford Village Press, 2000) is Gatto's extended work on this subject.

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