

JOHN HOLT AND THE ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY HOMESCHOOLING

by Patrick Farenga Copyright 1999

This article was originally published in *Paths of Learning*, Vol. 1 Number 1 Spring 1999.
It was slightly revised in November, 2003.

Patrick Farenga worked closely with the late author/teacher John Holt from 1981 until Holt's death in 1985. He published *Growing Without Schooling* magazine for sixteen years, as well as many other materials, articles, and books about unschooling. He continues Holt's work by writing and speaking about learning outside of school for children and adults. His most recent book is *Teach Your Own: The John Holt Book of Homeschooling* (Perseus, 2003).

Far from being a new idea, homeschooling has grown and developed over the centuries, and came into focus in the late 20th century as the forces of standardization and cultural homogenization took over schools and people sought alternatives to them. Homeschooling didn't emerge from the vision or work of any one person, and it is not the province of any one political party. By focusing on the work of author and teacher John Holt though, one can trace not only a personal journey from school reformer to unschooler,¹ but also an intellectual and educational legacy that led to homeschooling that is little reported by conservative and liberal media alike.

The sixties and seventies were times of great ferment for new ideas about education. Some education and social critics, like John Holt, became popular writers by questioning methods of schooling. The battles over look-say reading methods versus phonics, training teachers to be gentle facilitators or drill instructors, whether to encourage hands-on learning or test-taking skills, were well-worn battles to these writers even in the sixties. Many school reformers, such as Herbert Kohl, noted that it is a wide variety of methods, materials, schedules, and techniques that help children learn and the teacher should have the freedom to use any combination of things and ideas to help students. Further, some writers, such as A.S. Neill and Holt, suggested that the student should have complete freedom to choose how, when, and from whom they wanted to learn. In the early sixties, Paul Goodman, in *Compulsory Miseducation* and *Growing Up Absurd*, argued that compelling children to attend school is not the best use of their

youth, and that education is more a community function than an institutional one. This idea was developed and amplified over the years by many authors, but most forcefully by John Holt.

John Holt was a fifth grade teacher who worked in private schools. In 1964 (see bibliography for current edition information) his book *How Children Fail* created an uproar with his observations that forcing children to learn makes them unnaturally self-conscious about learning and stifles children's initiative and creativity by making them focus on how to please the teacher and the school with the answers they will reward best. To paraphrase Holt, the only difference between a good student and a bad student is that the good student is careful not to forget what he studied until *after* the test is taken. His subsequent book, *How Children Learn* (1967), also became widely known. The two are still in print and together they have sold over a million and a half copies and have been translated into over 14 languages.

Holt went on to become a visiting lecturer at Harvard and Berkeley, but his tenure at both places was short-lived. Holt did not feel the school establishment was serious about change in the ways he wanted to go, such as changing the relationship of the child to the teacher and the school to the community. During this time Holt wrote two books about why he thought schools weren't working and how they could be made better: *The Underachieving School* (1969) and *What Do I Do Monday?* (1970). Holt was intrigued by the free school movement of the late sixties and supported it as a way to help children who weren't thriving in conventional schools. However by the early seventies Holt developed reservations about free schools and proposed other ways to reunite living and learning.

In *Freedom and Beyond* (1972) Holt openly questioned and analyzed the free school movement, and in particular what educators really mean when they use the words freedom, discipline, authority, and choice. Most importantly, it is in this book that Holt decides that bringing more freedom into the classroom is not the solution to education's

problems; he recasts the problem as a social one rather than a technical one. He writes,

People , even children, are educated much more by the whole society around them and the general quality of life in it than they are by what happens in schools. The dream of many school people, that schools can be places where virtue is preserved and passed on in a world otherwise empty of it, now seems to me a sad and dangerous illusion. It might have worked in the Middle Ages; it cant work in a world of cars, jets, TV, and the mass media. ...The beyond in the title *Freedom and Beyond* means, therefore, that we must look beyond the question of reforming schools and at the larger question of schools and schooling itself. Can they do all the things we ask them to do? Are they the best means of doing it? What might be other or better ways? (*Freedom and Beyond*, p.4)

Other writers at this time also proposed ways to alter compulsory schooling. Hal Bennett wrote what he called “an operators manual” in 1972 entitled *No More Public School* about how you can take your child out of public school and how to educate him at home. In *The 12-Year Sentence* (1974), a collection of essays, one of the writers proposed that gifted parents should be able to teach their own children if they wish. But it was Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1971) that most influenced Holt. After *Deschooling Society* appeared, Holt studied and corresponded with Illich at length, and was deeply

influenced by Illich's analysis, particularly with his analysis that school serves a deep social function by firmly maintaining the status quo of social class for the majority of students. Further, schools view education as a commodity they sell, rather than a life-long process they can aid, and this, according to Illich, creates a substance that is not equally distributed, is used to judge people unfairly, and, based on their lack of school credentials, prevents people from assuming roles they are otherwise qualified for.

By the late seventies Holt had given up on the possibility that schools would welcome and assist the sorts of changes he and others were suggesting. He sought ways to make these changes as individuals and communities, thus running around, rather than confronting, school resistance to these ideas. One tactic Holt wrote about was to fight for children's rights, which he thought would not only help kids escape bad schools, but also help them escape bad social situations by granting children the full protection and responsibilities of US citizenship. Holt's *Escape From Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children* (1974) continues to stir passions on both sides of the argument, particularly now that some of the scenarios Holt discusses, such as giving children the right to choose their own legal guardian, the right to control their own learning, and the right to legal and financial responsibility, have come into our courts twenty-five years later. A concept that runs throughout Holt's work gets further developed in this book. Even though our institutions may not be the way we want them to be in order to bring about a better world, we can still act, in our daily lives, as far as we can, as if that world existed. For instance, we don't have to wait for the courts to grant children the right of privacy for us to act as if they have a right to privacy. In this book Holt also expands on his theme that it is not what children are taught, but how they are treated, that determines the sort of adult they will become. Holt continued to develop these ideas and practices in his next book, which led directly to his work in homeschooling.

In *Instead of Education: Ways to Help People Do Things Better* (1976), Holt not only described actual non-compulsory schools, learning centers, and informal learning

arrangements in action, but also proposed

a new Underground Railroad to help children escape from S-schools.² Some may say that such a railroad would be unfair, since only a few children could get on it. But most slaves could not escape from slavery, either, yet no one suggested or would suggest that because all the slaves could not be freed, none should be. Besides, we have to blaze a new trail if only so that others may follow. The Childrens' Underground Railroad, like all movements of social protest and change, must begin small; it will grow larger as more children ride it. (*Instead of Education*, p. 218)

In this book Holt proposed removing children from school legally or as an act of civil disobedience. While the education establishment barely recognized this particular book of Holt's, it struck a chord with some parents. Some wrote to Holt explaining that they were teaching their children at home legally, others that they were doing so underground. Some were rural families, some city dwellers, others were in communes. Intrigued, Holt corresponded with them all and decided to create a newsletter that would help put these like-minded people in touch with one another. In August of 1977 the first issue of *Growing Without Schooling* (GWS) was published, and the nation's, and probably the world's, first periodical about homeschooling was born.

Holt wanted to help bring about a social change not by writing from a distance while employed at a university or think tank, but by being engaged in action with like-

minded people. It is, I feel, important to note that Holt never believed that more than a very small percentage of parents would homeschool even if it were a widely accepted practice, which is why he never gave up trying to help schools change. Susannah Sheffer writes that during the last years of Holt's life he was collecting material for a book about school reform, indicating that even though he had made conscious resolutions to stop trying to change what he could not change, he apparently never quite lost the hope that if shown the way more clearly we would do what needed to be done. Holt urged educators and parents to catch the spirit of unschooling, be inspired by the variety of approaches and methods homeschoolers show, and reconsider assumptions about schooling based on what ordinary parents, as well as some alternative schools, were doing with children. It is in this regard that Holt is so different from many education writers and school reformers. He never felt that only trained teachers should teach students. Holt never studied education in school, which he considered an advantage since his mind was thus not full of assumptions about what kids can and can't do. He was a practitioner who learned from what worked and what didn't in his experience, and he felt very strongly that any concerned adult could do as well or better than he in this regard.

In this sense, his book *Never Too Late: My Musical Autobiography* (1978) is instructive not only as a description of how an adult learns new things, in this case how to play the cello, but also as testimony against the view that one must become expert in something before one can truly love it and do it effectively with others. Holt (and we who heard him play!) knew he would never be in a league with Yo-Yo Ma, but that never stopped him from playing the cello. Likewise, Holt's support of homeschooling parents, many of whom have never been professional teachers, is inspiring. Holt often wrote that there is no need to duplicate institutional teaching and assumptions in non-institutional settings, and he therefore saw no need to make parents anxious about their abilities to learn from their children how to best teach them. As long as children and parents communicate clearly, solutions can be found for all situations, utilizing family and

community resources.

For instance, Holt wrote in the second issue of GWS about how a welfare mother who doesn't know how to read can still teach her own kids, by finding a child, relative, or friend who can read to teach them all to read. He cites various mass literacy programs used in a number of poor countries in which as fast as people learn to read they begin to teach others, as well as various schools whose policy of allowing older children to teach younger children to read has borne excellent results. He notes that reading, and teaching reading, are not a mystery. The schools, in teaching the poor (and the rich too) that no one except a trained teacher can teach, have done them (and all of us) a great and crippling injury and wrong. Trained teachers are not trained in teaching, but in classroom management, i.e., in controlling, manipulating, measuring, and classifying large numbers of children. These may be useful skills for schools, or people working in schools. But they have nothing whatever to do with teaching — helping others to learn things.

The growth of homeschooling often led to strange bedfellows, or mixed allies as Holt referred to them in GWS:

Those who read GWS, and want to take or keep their children out of schools, may have very different, in some cases opposed reasons for doing this...

... [For example,] some may feel that the schools spend too much time on what they call the Basics; others that they dont spend enough.

Some may feel that the schools teach a dog-eat-dog competitiveness; others that they teach a mealy-mouth Socialism.

Some may feel that the schools teach too much religion; others that they don't teach enough, but teach instead a shallow atheistic humanism. I think the schools degrade both science and religion, and do not encourage either strong faith or strong critical thought.

What is important is not that all readers of GWS should agree on [the reasons for a family to homeschool], but that we should respect our differences while we work for what we agree on, our right and the right of all people to take their children out of schools, and help, plan, or direct their learning in the ways they think best...

Twenty-two years after Holt wrote that, more and more writers about homeschooling keep creating new ways to define themselves, since they agree only with bits and pieces of various practices. Some are uncomfortable with unschooling since Holt asks parents to respect children and allow them freedom to pursue their intellectual interests (but he never dictates that they do so), particularly when these interests veer away from school subject matter; some prefer to literally do home school, with the national anthem sung each morning, 6 hours of school work with a break for recess, and so on. Other parents consider most of Holt's ideas untenable, but like his life-long advocacy of using whatever works - with parental discretion - to help children learn: they refer to themselves as eclectic homeschoolers. Some will follow various curricula: some purchase canned curricula and follow them to the letter; others purchase curricula and use them as broad outlines. Some homeschoolers work with private schools through the mail or the internet. Some prefer no label at all, daring you to capture the richness of their

family life with a phrase.

Holt's only book about homeschooling, *Teach Your Own: A Hopeful Path for Education* (1981), is, I feel, really two books in one. Both books grew directly out of Holt's work with GWS. One book is about the nitty-gritty details of how and why to teach your children in your home and community. The other book is an analysis of the public consequences of homeschooling, particularly regarding how parents can fight in our schools, courts, and legislatures to maintain their rights to raise their children according to their beliefs. I revised this book in 2003 and doing so made me marvel at how many of Holt's insights about children, learning, and politics are now even more pertinent than in 1981. Society, and schools in particular, have become even more standardized and the breezes of personalization and human scale that homeschooling drifts into our communities and families seem to me more needed now than ever.

As homeschooling has grown, so has the market for selling a variety of methods, philosophies, products and services to homeschoolers. Some families prefer to develop communal resources rather than buying them; they join together to form homeschooling co-ops and learning centers in peoples homes or to share facilities, costs, and teachers for group instruction. The idea that we need to have one best way for all children to learn is effectively refuted by the diversity and growth of the homeschooling movement. But this was hardly enough for Holt. In 1983, he wrote, "A life worth living and work worth doing - that is what I want for children (and all people) - not just, or not even, something called a better education." (*A Life Worth Living*, p. 266)

Holt presided over the slow but steady increase in subscribers to *Growing Without Schooling*, and in 1983 revised his two most popular books, *How Children Fail* and *How Children Learn*. Holt felt the revisions were needed in light of his work with homeschoolers. The changes made both books significantly different from their original printings, and Holt kept the original text alongside the newer text so that the reader can see the differences. Both books are worth reading on their own of course, but they also

serve as demonstrations of Holt's philosophy that living and learning are interrelated, that we learn more from our mistakes and successes than from tests and instruction, and that it is never too late to learn more about ourselves and the world in which we live.

In the late seventies and early eighties, Holt would often speak about homeschooling to small groups of parents. Often Holt would get a speaking engagement at a large university and when he was done there he would travel to speak to local homeschoolers in smaller venues, such as parks, homes, and small hotels. By the mid-eighties, large-scale (1000 or more attendees) homeschooling conferences began to spring up across the nation, but Holt would not be able to address them. In 1985, John Holt died of cancer at the age of 62. His final book, *Learning All the Time: How Small Children Begin To Read, Write, Count And Investigate The World, Without Being Taught*, which contains a lot of writing that Holt did for GWS, was published posthumously in 1989.

The history of homeschooling is still being written. Homeschooling continues to spread across the United States and other countries; as of this writing, GWS contains listings for homeschooling support groups in Canada, Ireland, England, France, Australia, Spain, South Africa, New Zealand, and Japan. Homeschooling is legal in all 50 states. One recent benchmark of homeschooling's growing popularity is that *Newsweek* (Oct. 5, 1998) ran a cover story about it with the headline: *More Than A Million Kids And Growing: Can It Work For Your Family?*

Some will argue that I assign Holt too big a place in the history of homeschooling since others have influenced more people to actually undertake homeschooling than did Holt. I don't dispute that others influenced the growth of homeschooling as much as, if not more than, Holt, particularly among religiously-oriented homeschoolers. But John Holt does not only speak to the choir of would-be and current homeschoolers, political parties, or education theorists. His work speaks to adults and children in school as well as out; it addresses larger social concerns beyond school, and continues to inspire

thousands of people from all walks of life.

Notes

1. Unschooling was Holt's neologism for describing what families were doing at home with their kids during school hours. He created this word in order to avoid giving the impression that families were merely creating miniature schools in their homes, as the word homeschooling connotes. However Holt used unschooling and homeschooling interchangeably in his writing, and eventually felt that homeschooling, for better or worse, was the term most people would use when discussing the idea that one can learn without going to school.

2. In *Instead of Education*, (Sentient Books, p. 19), Holt used the spelling S-school to denote: "The schools for educators, which get and hold their students by the threat of jail or uselessness or poverty," and s-schools to denote: "The schools for do-ers, which help people explore the world as they choose."

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