

# Teacher of the Year Acceptance Speech

by John Taylor Gatto  
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*The following is the text of a speech by John Taylor Gatto accepting the New York City Teacher of the Year Award on January 31, 1990. It is reprinted from the Iowa State Newsletter.*

I accept this award on behalf of all the fine teachers I've known over the years who've struggled to make their transactions with children honorable ones, men and women who are never complacent, always questioning, always wrestling to define and redefine endlessly what the word "education" should mean. A Teacher of the Year is not the best teacher around, those people are too quiet to be easily uncovered, but he is a standard-bearer, symbolic of these private people who spend their lives gladly in the service of children. This is their award as well as mine.

We live in a time of great school crisis. We rank at the bottom of 19 industrial nations in reading, writing and arithmetic. At the very bottom. The world's narcotic economy is based upon our own consumption of the commodity, if we didn't buy so many powdered dreams the business would collapse -- and schools are an important sales outlet. Our teenage suicide rate is the highest in the world and suicidal kids are rich kids for the most part, not the poor. In Manhattan 50% of all new marriages last less than five years. So something is wrong for sure.

This is a time of great school crisis and that crisis is interlinked with a greater social crisis in the general community. We seem to have lost our identity. Children and old people are penned up and locked away from the business of the world to a degree without precedent -- nobody talks to them anymore and without children and old people mixing in daily life a community has no future and no past, only a continuous present. In fact, the name "community" hardly applies to the way we interact with each other. We live in networks, not communities, and everyone I know is lonely because of that. In some strange way school is a major actor in this tragedy just as it is a major actor in the widening guilt among social classes. Using school as a sorting mechanism we appear to be on the way to creating a caste system, complete with untouchables who wander through subway trains begging and sleep on the streets.

I've noticed a fascinating phenomenon in my 25 years of teaching -- that schools and schooling are increasingly irrelevant to the great enterprises of the planet. No one believes anymore that scientists are trained in science classes or politicians in civics classes or poets in English classes. The truth is that schools don't really teach anything except how to obey orders. This is a great mystery to me because thousands of humane, caring people work in schools as teachers and aids and administrators but the abstract logic of the institution overwhelms their individual contributions. Although teachers do care and do work very hard the institution is psychopathic, it has no conscience. It rings a bell and the young man in the middle of writing a poem must close his notebook and move to different cell where he must memorize that man and monkeys derive from a common ancestor.

Our form of compulsory schooling is an invention of the state of Massachusetts around 1850. It was resisted -- sometimes with guns -- by an estimated 80% of the Massachusetts population, the last outpost in Barnstable on Cape Cod not surrendering its children until the 1880's when the area was seized by militia and children marched to school under guard.

Now here is a curious idea to ponder. Senator Ted Kennedy's office released a paper not too long ago claiming that prior to compulsory education the state literacy rate was 98% and after it the figure never again reached above 91% where it stands in 1990. I hope that interests you.

Here is another curiosity to think about. The homeschooling movement has quietly grown to a size where one and a half million young people are being educated entirely by their own parents, last month the education press reported the amazing news that children schooled at home seem to be five or even 10 years ahead of their formally trained peers in their ability to think.

I don't think we'll get rid of schools anytime soon, certainly not in my lifetime, but if we're going to change what's rapidly becoming a disaster of ignorance we need to realize that the school institution "schools" very well, but it does not "educate" -- that's inherent in the design of the thing. It's not the fault of bad teachers or too little money spent, it's just impossible for education and schooling ever to be the same thing.

Schools were designed by Horace Mann and Barnard Sears and Harper of the University of Chicago and Thorndyke of Columbia Teachers College and some other men to be instruments of the scientific management of a mass population. Schools are intended to produce through the application of formulae, formulaic human beings whose behavior can be predicted and controlled.

To a very great extent schools succeed in doing this, but in a national order increasingly disintegrated, in a national order in which only humanly successful people are independent, self-reliant, confident, and individualistic (because community life which protects the dependent and weak is dead and only networks remain), the products of schooling are, as I've said, irrelevant. Well-schooled people are irrelevant. They can sell film and razor blades, push paper and talk on the telephones, or sit mindlessly before a flickering computer terminal but as human beings they are useless. Useless to others and useless to themselves.

The daily misery around us is, I think in large measure caused by the fact that -- as Paul Goodman put it 30 years ago -- we force children to grow up absurd. Any reform in schooling has to deal with its absurdities.

It is absurd and anti-life to be part of a system that compels you to sit in confinement with people of exactly the same age and social class. That system effectively cuts you off from the immense diversity of life and the synergy of variety, indeed it cuts you off from your own past and future, scaling you to a continuous present much the same way television does.

It is absurd and anti-life to be part of a system that compels you to listen to a stranger reading poetry when you want to learn to construct buildings, or to sit with a stranger discussing the construction of buildings when you want to read poetry.

It is absurd and anti-life to move from cell to cell at the sound of a gong for every day of your natural youth in an institution that allows you no privacy and even follows you into the sanctuary of your home demanding that you do its "homework".

"How will they learn to read?!" you say and my answer is "Remember the lessons of Massachusetts." When children are given whole lives instead of age-graded ones in cellblocks they learn to read, write, and do arithmetic with ease if those things make sense in the kind of life that unfolds around them.

But keep in mind that in the United States almost nobody who reads, writes or does arithmetic gets much respect. We are a land of talkers, we pay talkers the most and admire talkers the most and so our children talk constantly, following the public models of television and school teachers. It is very difficult to teach the "basics" anymore because they really aren't basic to the society we've made.

Two institutions at present control our children's lives -- television and schooling, in that order. Both of these reduce the real world of wisdom, fortitude, temperance, and justice to a never-ending, non-stopping abstraction. In centuries past the time of a child and adolescent would be occupied in real work, real charity, real adventures, and the realistic search for mentors who might teach 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.

But here is the calculus of time the children I teach must deal with:

-- Out of 168 hours in each week my children sleep 56. That leaves them 112 hours a week out of which to fashion a self.

-- My children watch 55 hours of television a week according to recent reports. That leaves them 57 hours a week in which to grow up.

-- My children attend school 30 hours a week, use about 6 hours getting ready, going and coming home, and spend an average of 7 hours a week in homework -- a total of 45 hours. During that time they are under constant surveillance, have no private time or private space, and are disciplined if they try to assert individuality in the use of time or space. That leaves 12 hours a week out of which to create a unique consciousness. Of course, my kids eat, and that takes some time--not much because they've lost the tradition of family dining, but if we allot 3 hours a week to evening meals we arrive at a net amount of private time for each child of 9 hours.

It's not enough. It's not enough, is it? The richer the kid, or course, the less television he watches but the rich kid's time is just as narrowly proscribed by a somewhat broader catalog of commercial entertainments and his inevitable assignment to a series of private lessons in areas seldom of his actual choice.

And these things are oddly enough just a more cosmetic way to create dependent human beings, unable to fill their own hours, unable to initiate lines of meaning to give substance and pleasure to their existence. It's a national disease, this dependency, and aimlessness, and I think schooling and television and lessons -- the entire Chautauqua idea -- has a lot to do with it.

Think of the things that are killing us as a nation -- narcotic drugs, brainless competition, recreational sex, the pornography of violence, gambling, alcohol, and the worst pornography of all -- lives devoted to buying things, accumulation as a philosophy, all of them are additions of dependent personalities and that is what our brand of schooling must inevitably produce.

I want to tell you what the effect is on children of taking all their time from them -- time they need to grow up -- and forcing them to spend it on abstractions. You need to hear this because no reform that doesn't attack these specific pathologies will be anything more than a facade.

1. The children I teach are indifferent to the adult world. This defies the experience of thousands of years. A close study of what big people were up to was always the most exciting occupation of youth, but nobody wants to grow up these days and who can blame them? Toys are us.

2. The children I teach have almost no curiosity and what they do have is transitory; they cannot concentrate for very long, even on things they choose to do. Can you see a connection between the bells ringing again and again to change classes and this phenomenon of evanescent attention?

3. The children I teach have a poor sense of the future, of how tomorrow is inextricably linked to today. As I said before, they have a continuous present, the exact moment they are at is the boundary of their consciousness.
4. The children I teach are ahistorical, they have no sense of how past has predestined their own present, limiting their choices, shaping their values and lives.
5. The children I teach are cruel to each other, they lack compassion for misfortune, they laugh at weakness, they have contempt for people whose need for help shows too plainly.
6. The children I teach are uneasy with intimacy or candor. My guess is that they are like many adopted people I've known in this respect -- they cannot deal with genuine intimacy because of a lifelong habit of preserving a secret inner self inside a larger outer personality made up of artificial bits and pieces of behavior borrowed from television or acquired to manipulate teachers. Because they are not who they represent themselves to be the disguise wears thin in the presence of intimacy so intimate relationships have to be avoided.
7. The children I teach are materialistic, following the lead of school teachers who materialistically "grade" everything -- and television mentors who offer everything in the world for free.
8. The children I teach are dependent, passive, and timid in the presence of new challenges. This is frequently masked by surface bravado, or by anger or aggressiveness but underneath is a vacuum without fortitude.

I could name a few other conditions that school reform would have to tackle if our national decline is to be arrested, but by now you will have grasped my thesis, whether you agree with it or not. Either schools have caused these pathologies or television or both. It's a simple matter [of] arithmetic, between schooling and television all the time the children have is eaten away. That's what has destroyed the American family, it is no longer a factor in the education of its own children. Television and schooling, in those things the fault must lie.

What can be done? First we need a ferocious national debate that doesn't quit, day after day, year after year. We need to scream and argue about this school thing until it is fixed or broken beyond repair, one or the other. If we can fix it, fine; if we cannot then the success of homeschooling shows a different road to take that has great promise. Pouring the money we now pour into family education might kill two birds with one stone, repairing families as it repairs children.

Genuine reform is possible but it shouldn't cost anything. We need to rethink the fundamental premises of schooling and decide what it is we want all children to learn and why. For 140 years this nation has tried to impose objectives downward from the lofty command center made up of "experts", a central elite of social engineers. It hasn't worked. It won't work. And it is a gross betrayal of the democratic promise that once made this nation a noble experiment. The Russian attempt to create Plato's republic in Eastern Europe has exploded before [our] eyes, our own attempt to impose the same sort of central orthodoxy using the schools as an instrument is also coming apart at the seams, albeit more slowly and painfully. It doesn't work because its fundamental premises are mechanical, anti-human, and hostile to family life. Lives can be controlled by machine education but they will always fight back with weapons of social pathology -- drugs, violence, self-destruction, indifference, and the symptoms I see in the children I teach.

It's high time we looked backwards to regain an educational philosophy that works. One I like particularly well has been a favorite of the ruling classes of Europe for thousands of years. I use as much of it as I can manage in my own teaching, as much, that is, as I can get away with given the present institution of compulsory schooling. I think it works just as well for poor children as for rich ones.

At the core of this elite system of education is the belief that self-knowledge is the only basis of true knowledge. Everywhere in this system, at every age, you will find arrangements to place the child alone in an unguided setting with a problem to solve. Sometimes the problem is fraught with great risks, such as the problem of galloping a horse or making it jump, but that, of course, is a problem successfully solved by thousands of elite children before the age of ten. Can you imagine anyone who had mastered such a challenge ever lacking confidence in his ability to do anything? Sometimes the problem is the problem of mastering solitude, as Thoreau did at Walden pond, or Einstein did in the Swiss customs house.

One of my former students, Roland Legiardi-Lura, though both his parents were dead and he had no inheritance, took a bicycle across the United States alone when he was hardly out of boyhood. Is it any wonder then that in manhood when he decided to make a film about Nicaragua, although he had no money and no prior experience with film-making, that it was an international award-winner -- even though his regular work was as a carpenter.

Right now we are taking all the time from our children that they need to develop self-knowledge. That has to stop. We have to invent school experiences that give a lot of that time back, we need to trust children from a very early age with independent study, perhaps arranged in school but which takes place away from the institutional setting. We need to invent curriculum where each kid has a chance to develop private uniqueness and self-reliance.

A short time ago I took \$70 and sent a 12-year-old girl from my class with her non-English speaking mother on a bus down the New Jersey coast to take the police chief of Sea Bright to lunch and apologize for polluting [his] beach with a discarded Gatorade bottle. In exchange for this public apology I had arranged with the police chief for the girl to have a one-day apprenticeship in a small town police procedures. A few days later two more of my 12-year-old kids traveled alone to West First Street from Harlem where they began an apprenticeship with a newspaper editor, next week three of my kids will find themselves in the middle of the Jersey swamps at 6 A.M. in the morning studying the mind of a trucking company president as he dispatches 18-wheelers to Dallas, Chicago, and Los Angeles.

Are these "special" children in a "special" program? Well, in one sense, yes, but nobody knows about this program but myself and the kids. They're just nice kids from Central Harlem, bright and alert, but so badly schooled when they came to me that most of them can't add or subtract with any fluency. And not a single one knew the population of New York City or how far it is from New York to California.

Does that worry me? Of course, but I am confident that as they gain self-knowledge they'll also become self-teachers -- and only self-teaching has any lasting value.

We've got to give kids independent time right away because that is the key to self-knowledge, and we must re-involve them with the real world as fast as possible so that the independent time can be spent on something other than more abstraction. This is an emergency, it requires drastic action to correct -- our children are dying like flies in schooling, good schooling or bad schooling, it's all the same. Irrelevant.

What else does a restructured school system need? It needs to stop being a parasite on the working community. Of all the pages in the human ledger, only our tortured entry has warehoused children and asked nothing of them in service to the general good. For a while I think we need to make community service a required part of schooling. Besides the experience in acting unselfishly that will teach, it is the quickest way to give young children real responsibility in the mainstream of life.

For five years I ran a guerilla program where I had every kid, rich and poor, smart and dippy, give 320 hours a year of hard community service. Dozens of those kids came back to me years later, grown up, and told me that one experience of helping someone else changed their lives. It taught them to see in new ways, to rethink goals and values. It happened when they were 13, in my Lab School program -- only made possible because my rich school district was in chaos. When "stability" returned the Lab was closed. It was too successful with a wildly mixed group of kids, at too small of a cost, to be allowed to continue. We made the expensive elite programs look bad.

There is no shortage of real problems in the city. Kids can be asked to help solve them in exchange for the respect and attention of the total adult world. Good for kids, good for all the rest of us. That's curriculum that teaches Justice, one of the four cardinal virtues in every system of elite education. What's sauce for the rich and powerful is surely sauce for the rest of us -- what is more, the idea is absolutely free as are all other genuine reform ideas in education. Extra money and extra people put into this sick institution will only make it sicker.

Independent study, community service, adventures in experience, large doses of privacy and solitude, a thousand different apprenticeships, the one day variety or longer -- these are all powerful, cheap and effective ways to start a real reform of schooling. But no large-scale reform is ever going to work to repair our damaged children and our damaged society until we force the idea of "school" open -- to include FAMILY as the main engine of education. The Swedes realized that in 1976 when they effectively abandoned the system of adopting unwanted children and instead spent national time and treasure on reinforcing the original family so that children born to Swedes were wanted. They didn't succeed completely but they did succeed in reducing the number of unwanted Swedish children from 6000 in 1976 to 15 in 1986. So it can be done. The Swedes just got tired of paying for the social wreckage caused by children not raised by their natural parents so they did something about it. We can, too.

FAMILY is the main engine of education. If we use schooling to break children away from parents -- and make no mistake, that has been the central function of schools since John Cotton announced it as the purpose of the Bay Colony schools in 1650 and Horace Mann announced it as the purpose of Massachusetts schools in 1850 -- we're going to continue to have the horror show we have right now. THE CURRICULUM OF FAMILY is at the heart of any good life, we've gotten away from that curriculum, time to return to it. The way to sanity in education is for our schools to take the lead in releasing the stranglehold of institutions on family life, to promote during school time confluences of parent and child that will strengthen family bonds. That was my real purpose in sending the girl and her mother down the Jersey coast to meet the police chief. I have many ideas to make a family curriculum and my guess is that a lot of you will have many ideas, too, once you begin to think about it. Our greatest problem in getting the kind of grass-roots thinking going that could reform schooling is that we have large vested interests pre-empting all the air time and profiting from schooling just exactly as it is despite rhetoric to the contrary. We have to demand that new voices and new ideas get a hearing, my ideas and yours. We've all had a bellyful of authorized voices mediated by television and the press -- a decade long free-for-all debate is what is called for now, not any more "expert" opinions. Experts in education have never been right, their "solutions" are expensive, self-serving, and always involve further centralization. Enough. Time for a return to Democracy, Individuality, and Family. I've said my piece. Thank you.