

Education & the Great Transition?

David W. Orr

E-mail: dorr@oberlin.edu

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Abstract

The question for those of us in the business of thinking, propagating ideas, and equipping youth for lives in a confusing and uncertain world is what do we do? Living in the shadows or the sunlight of our legacy, what would our great-great-grandchildren wish us to have done?

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We eight billion--divided into 195 highly unequal nation-states extracting, processing, and moving trillions of tons of matter each year, using 18 TW of energy annually, and burning 5 cubic miles of primaevial goo—are rapidly transforming the ecosphere to our disadvantage. We are now in the rapids of the river of human history. The possibility of capsizing is not remote.¹ The question for those of us in the business of equipping youth for their lives in a confusing and uncertain world is what do we do? What will our great, great grandchildren, living in the shadows or the sunlight of our legacy, wish we had done?

They would probably ask us to overcome our blindness to what is right before our eyes: heat, storms, fires, floods, desecrated lands, extinctions, and injustices and consider what these crises portend for their future lives. Perhaps, they would ask us to reckon with the possibility that “our ideas are too puny for our circumstances,”² and to think more broadly and wisely about what it means to be human. They would surely demand that we stop using the atmosphere as a dump and that we preserve Earth’s forests, rivers, soils, seas, mountains, lifeforms, and grasslands. Certainly, they would ask us to enlarge the democratic vista to include them, their own great, great grandchildren, and other species; they would want us to create an intergenerational, interspecies democracy of sorts. They would expect us to have created a durable foundation of well-considered personal rights and duties, tolerance for

differences and dissent, government powers necessary to ensure security, continuity of institutions, a cultural respect for words that mean what they say, and the wherewithal for truth and reconciliation.

For many reasons, the university as presently conceived is an unlikely source of remedy to these challenges. It is committed, not to transformation, great or otherwise, but more often than not to patching up flaws in the modern paradigm on the wager that it carries the seeds of its own repair and renewal. The educational system with millions of students each year, billions of dollars of research funding, trillions in capital assets, operates with the assurance that goes with its assumed monopoly of solutions to what ails modern societies. It exists unmolested in the world of influence and money as long as it does not threaten the dominant culture and its underlying faith in economic growth and human domination of nature. Its organization often impedes non-trivial conversations across disciplines. Its financial dependency limits serious reckoning with large ideas of justice, peace, interdependence, and ecology. It deals primarily in what E.F. Schumacher called “convergent problems” not “divergent problems.” The former are linear and therefore amenable to scientific or technological solutions. The latter are more like dilemmas that are, by definition, unsolvable but avoidable with foresight. Increasingly our basic problems are of the latter sort: divergent moral and political questions “refractory to mere logic and discursive reason.”³ For reflection or simply mulling things over, the velocity of learning, research, administration, and oversight is too fast on some things, too slow on others. Too often, colleges and universities have

¹ Krausmann, et.al., “Global Socioeconomic material stocks rise 23-fold over the 20th century and require half of annual resource use.” *Proceedings of the National Academies of Science*. Vol. 114. no. 8. February, 2017

² William Barber, State of American Democracy Conference, Oberlin College, November 15, 2017.

³ E.F. Schumacher, Guide for the Perplexed, New York: Harper & Row, 1977, p. 128.

become hives of “busy-work on a vast, almost incomprehensible scale.” More often than not, students graduate as careerists, not agents of transformation. Not least, the very organizations that purport to educate are themselves often incapable of learning relevant to the precariousness of it all.

It is nevertheless difficult to envision a transformation to a more decent, inclusive, and durable world without universities and educational institutions at all levels stepping up to meet the largest challenges of our time.⁵ We need their leadership to repair public institutions and enlarge our vision of democracy. We need their help to restore respect for truth, facts, logic, data, and history. We need their creative powers to help recalibrate failing institutions, constitutions, and economies with the way Earth works as a physical system. We need their example as models of solar-powered, ecologically designed communities. We need their help to equip the young to be citizens in a civic community and in an ecological order—a generation of “radical professionals,” competent dual citizens with purpose, stamina, and vision.⁴ We need their convening power to bring diverse peoples together to forge a new and larger vision of democracy here and elsewhere. We need their help to imagine a nonviolent world, one free of nuclear weapons. In short, we need all of their powers and assets of education, research, convening, spending, investment, and reputation harnessed to the task of making a world more fair, just, decent, durable, and secure—a world that works for everyone as far into the future as one can imagine. We need educators and educational institutions that nurture a profound yet practical awareness of our interrelatedness in the evolving enterprise of life.

The repair and renewal of educational institutions, however, will require a more critical assessment of education. Here is my list of things to keep in mind on such occasions:

- Ecological disorder reflects a prior disorder in the way we think and what we think about educational institutions, making it central to all educators;
- Humans are fast thinkers but slow learners;
- The idea of “system” implying our interconnectedness with all that was, is, and will be remains the most radical and necessary in our language;
- True self-interest is inclusive, not exclusive;

- Not all knowledge is good and not all of it can be deployed responsibly in a world of feedback loops, leads and lags, surprises, and long time lapses between cause and effect; and new knowledge is not necessarily better than old knowledge rediscovered, i.e. “slow knowledge.”⁵
- Formal education deals with half of the brain, dismisses the other half, and seldom engages the hands or heart the result is often an “inverted cripple” with a single overdeveloped capacity;
- The planetary crisis cannot be attributed to the uneducated, but rather to the highly degreed.
- Formal education, bounded as curriculum, can be completed in a few years but true learning is an unbounded process over a lifetime;
- The important problems are those **of** education not those **in** education.

A final note. In the larger ecology of learning, situated on the periphery are many “alternative” small educational centers scattered around the world. They serve as important adjuncts to colleges and universities. They are not a substitute for formal education, but offer the opportunity for students, faculty, and others to step back and put things into perspective and to sort the important from the trivial. Schumacher College in Devon, U.K. mentions one such example. The College occupies an old carriage house on an estate that dates back to 1388. Named for the author of *Small is Beautiful*, Schumacher College concerns itself more with large questions than with answers. Typically, the questions posed in seminars and conversations at Schumacher are the divergent kind that challenge established paradigms and pomposity of any kind. The atmosphere is seldom as certain as in the higher reaches of the academic world. The scale is minuscule—several hundred students per year. Its clock speed—the rate at which things happen—is human-scaled. Its stock in trade is the kind of dependable old knowledge that has accumulated over many centuries. Daily routines at the College allow for serendipity and spontaneity. The focus is a kind of disciplined diversity and boundary crossing thought. The program includes meditation, music, serious lectures, gardening, walks along the Channel coastline that mimic geologic history. In other words, it is diverse but unified around the connection of body, mind, and soul. The College clientele is diverse. The classes in which I participated over

⁴ See Jeff Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, pp. 265-280.

⁵See for example, Michael M. Crow, *None Dare Call it Hubris: the Limits of Knowledge*, *Issues in Science and Technology*, (Winter, 2007); and Michael Crow and William Dabars, *The Fifth Wave*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020.

⁵ Erwin Chargaff, “Knowledge Without Wisdom,” *Harpers*, May, 1980, pp. 41-48.

the years included students of all ages from all kinds of backgrounds from all over the world. Still, they typically bonded quickly into a supportive community in part because they work together to keep the place going. More importantly, at the periphery and removed from the mad bustle and busy-ness of their ordinary lives, participants have the time to sort trivial from the important and observe the world and themselves from a calmer and saner vantage point.

There are others.

At a 1981 Lindisfarne Association gathering, polite discussion had regressed to arguments around fixed positions; the “global generalists” led by International legal scholar Saul Mendlovitz squared off against the “minute particularists” led by Kentucky writer, Wendell Berry. One argued for the importance of the national and international systems of law, government, and economy that structured granular possibilities below; the other was firmly entrenched in William Blake’s view that:

He who would do good to another must do it in
Minute Particulars: general Good is the plea of the
scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer, for Art and
Science cannot exist but in minutely organized
Particulars.

Exasperated, the moderator, poet Gary Snyder, abruptly stopped the hemorrhaging of civility to announce that the issue would be decided once-and-for-all . . . on the volleyball court. The members of the Lindisfarne association adjourned into the warm southern Colorado sunlight and separated themselves into teams according to their generalist or particularist predilections. I do not recall who won the game or even if anyone kept score, but I vividly recall the humor, conviviality, as well as the seriousness of the issues raised.

I leave it to others to wrap such peripheral institutions and experiences into a proper pedagogy and philosophy. I do know, however, that they foster humility, humor, conviviality, breadth, depth, and connections missing sometimes in universities. For students and facilitators alike, such experiences are rather like the effect of salt in stew: small by volume but large by effect changing the flavor of the mysterious thing called education. And, if we are to be truly drawn forth—the root meaning of the word education—we need such places and times to reconnect with our souls, the soil under our feet, and the Life all around us. In such places, the “great transition” begins with a quiet transition in all of us as students. And if education does not celebrate our connectedness and the wholeness and Holiness of it all, then what is education for?

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David W. Orr is Paul Sears Distinguished Professor of Environmental Studies and Politics, Emeritus Oberlin College and currently Professor of Practice, Arizona State University.