

24. The 'Boulevard of Broken Dreams'

- becoming 'just miserable rule-followers'

I arrived at Charmouth in Dorset on a sunny Saturday afternoon in May and went down to the beach with Janet to take in the scene. It was the start of a week-long festival and conference for home-based educating families and about 1500 people of all ages would be in attendance. I was due to start the conference with a keynote presentation on '*Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum*' but I was not yet clear how to set the scene. But for now, relaxing on the beach just seemed to be a good idea.

We gazed with interest at the scene in front of us. Two young surfers were developing their skills on their miniature surf-boards on the incoming waves. Just beyond them two young canoeists were in action too. Two younger children were enjoying jumping the waves as they petered out near the edge of the beach, the smaller one sensibly retreating if a slightly larger one came her way.

Three adults went in front of us and paused at a pictorial display on local fossils, enjoyed talking about it for a minute or two and then went on their way. Along the beach a young boy of about eleven years was working with what appeared to be his grandfather in the fossil cliff. Somebody else was reading a book, another reading a newspaper.

Other people of all ages were swimming, paddling and making sandcastles. One young group had not yet got the sand mix right and their sandcastles kept crumbling. But with trial and error they solved the problem. Parents were on hand everywhere generally keeping a watchful eye but not interfering unduly. A rock pipit appeared close to us and we spent a little time observing it and talking about its appearance and behaviour.

Everyone seemed relaxed and happy and nobody was infringing the rights of others to be doing their thing - a miniature display of democracy in action as diversity and variety were cheerfully celebrated. It was also a demonstration of natural learning and the natural curriculum and it illustrated the sub-title of my talk to open the conference: 'anybody, any age; any time, any place; any pathway, any pace.'

But then we began to speculate what a guardian of 'unnatural learning', an OFSTED inspector perhaps, would have to say about the same scene. Well, as regards the surfboarders, there was no sign of professional input. No trained teacher was present to set appropriate tasks, attainment targets and tests. The same applied to the canoeists who did not seem to be working to a graded plan of skill development.

The young ones were enjoying jumping the waves but was this preparing them for their baseline assessment? The adults were rather casual about the fossil display and no follow-up work or consolidation appeared to be in evidence.

The grandfather and child were from quite different 'key-stages', if key-stages had yet been devised for grandfathers. The book and newspaper readers seemed very casual about their chosen tasks and put down their book or newspaper whenever they felt like it. And was the book on the approved list for study anyway?

A decent teacher would have had a rock pipit workcard for when the bird appeared so that appropriate written work could be undertaken. There was no sign of a literacy hour or a numeracy hour to be seen. It was all rather amateur.

So, out of the conversation with Janet, the beach scene could be seen as an interesting example of natural learning in action. I had my introduction: 'on the beach'.

Almost everyone starts out with hopes and even high hopes of going to school. Children may anticipate entry into a world of interest, stimulation and development. Teachers may anticipate a worthwhile, satisfying and positive occupation. Parents may hope for the continued blossoming of their children. Grandparents may anticipate happy grandchildren growing up positively in the world.

But it all seems to go wrong somewhere. Firstly, teachers end up reporting that "*We are just miserable rule-followers...*" This is the verdict of a teacher in South Africa, reported by Clive Harber in *State of Transition*, London: Symposium Books, 2001. But it could be anywhere in the world, given Edward de Bono's verdict that all the schooling systems he has encountered in the world are a disgrace. I have to agree, for all the ones I have encountered are also a disgrace, although some are larger disasters and some are smaller ones. Only a few are trying to be more democratic and are generally less constipated in their approach having a few echoes of natural learning. Not surprisingly, the '*miserable rule-followers*' are currently leaving teaching in large numbers, and many who stay explain that they would leave if they could.

Then, children have their hopes dashed too. As early as age six they can already be reporting that they are aware that their minds are being hijacked. They recognise that their concerns, their interests, their agendas, are already being systematically squeezed off the agenda. But they feel powerless to do anything about it and are already, at six years of age, reconciled to having to conform to a script written by remote others. They, too, become '*just miserable rule-followers*'. (see research by Ann Sherman in *Rules, Routines and Regimentation*, Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press, 1996)

Next, many parents may have their desires thwarted. They may begin to report that school is not doing the kind of things they had hoped. They may find they have handed their children over, in good faith, to a bunch of strangers, hoping for the best, but getting something undesirable - a deadening of the spirit. Some can take action and educate at home as a better option, others are forced by circumstances to become 'miserable rule-followers'. Some can try damage-limitation. Some persevere hoping to find treasure in the wreck.

This is, in the words of the song title, the '*Boulevard of Broken Dreams*'. High hopes gradually - and sometimes very suddenly - becoming shattered. Schooling may then become what has been sometimes described as a long-sentence of suffering, endurance and general low-level misery. Some learn to put up with it, and even exploit it, better than others.

We should congratulate those teachers, and sometimes whole schools, who manage, despite the odds, to keep some kind of oasis going in the general desert. But it is the long landscapes of desert that I am writing about.

One of the propositions of my new book, *Natural Learning and the Natural Curriculum*, is that this fate of becoming 'just miserable rule follower' is one consequence of abandoning

natural learning and the natural curriculum. In its place has been imposed false and shallow learning and the false, largely junk curriculum of the state - unnatural learning and the unnatural curriculum. Paul Goodman described this as Compulsory Mis-education in his book. Chris Shute calls it *Compulsory Schooling Disease* in his. The Chief Inspector of Schools Edmond Holmes, writing at the start of the 20th century, called it *The Tragedy of Education*.

We can stop all this. It has been pointed out many times that mass coercive schooling is NOT a fact of nature. Humans invented it about 150 years ago, and if it is no good, or has outlived any useful purpose, WE CAN SCRAP IT and devise learning arrangements and places that are convivial and far removed from places for miserable rule followers. Adapting the catch phrase of a popular TV series, 'we have the technology and know-how - we can redesign it'.

But we shall need a serious radical re-think to do this. Tinkering with an obsolete and counter-productive system will not do it. Returning to the principles of natural learning looks like a big step on the way forward. In my July column, I proposed closing down schools and handing them over to the Public Library service to redevelop and redesign. Public Libraries have always respected the principles of natural learning and remain popular with the public as a consequence. I am indebted to John Taylor Gatto, the US writer, for many of the ideas that follow.

First of all, libraries tend to be comfortable and quiet, places. It is non-ageist, for people of all ages work side by side in a library; it is not like a school with packs of age-segregated young people. For some reason libraries do not presume to segregate readers by dubious tests of ability or even suspect tests of reading ages.

Librarians do not tell people what to read, do not impose any sequence of reading to be followed, and do not seek to grade my reading. The message of the public library appears to be that you can be trusted to manage your own learning. The librarian lets people ask their own questions and will try to help when help is needed, not when somebody else decides that it is time to intervene.

If I read all day long, that's OK with the librarian. I am not told to stop reading at regular intervals by ringing a bell in my ear. The library keeps its nose out of my home. It does not send letters home or set homework, or issue orders about how I should use my time at home.

There are no records at all detailing a reader's past victories or defeats. If the books I want are available, I get them - even if that deprives a reader more gifted and talented than I am of the book, the library doesn't play favourites for any reason. It is very class blind. It is very talent blind and non-meritocratic. And that seems proper in a country that calls itself a democracy. The library never humiliates me by posting ranked lists of good readers for all to see. It presumes good reading is its own reward.

One of the strangest differences between library and school is that you almost never see a kid behaving badly in a real library, although bad kids have exactly the same access to libraries as good kids do. John Taylor Gatto observed, "*I have taken literally thousands of bad kids into real libraries and not once in 29 years did I have a complaint*".

The library never makes predictions about my future based on past reading habits. Nor does it imply that my days will be carefree if I read Shakespeare and troubled if I read Barbara Cartland.

Finally the library has real books, not school books. Its books are not written by collective pens, nor selected by screening committees. Its real books conform only to the private curriculum of each author, and not to the invisible curriculum of a government bureaucracy. Real books are a vehicle to transport us into an inner realm of absolute solitude where nobody else can come. Real books generate unmonitored ... mental growth. School books are instruments of control made of paper. They are vehicles of training; they reinforce the school routines of close order drill, public thinking, endless surveillance, endless ranking, and endless intimidation. Real books educate. Schools book school. When you take the free will out of education, that turns it into schooling. You cannot have it both ways.

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