DOSSIER

SUMMERHILL SCHOOL: MAKING TIME FOR CHILDHOOD[16]

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Abstract: In this paper, the author brings some memories from the time he lived in Summerhill to explain how the school is.

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> "Many pupils have been allowed to mistake the pursuit of idleness for the exercise of personal liberty" Ofsted Report.

The 'Do-as-You-Like' School

A few days ago I dropped my 13 year old daughter, Eva, off at Summerhill School for beginning of term. I was in her room helping her unpack, when a couple of girls rushed in to announce that a particularly annoying boy was on his way. Eva quickly locked the door got on with unpacking. A few moments later there was a knocking on the door and a boy's voice calling her name. She rolled her eyes and ignored it. After a few moments of banging loudly he shouted "Bitch!" and threatened to find an axe to smash the door down with, before stomping off. Eva, completely unperturbed continued her unpacking. Later as we left the room a spray of water hit me straight in the face and I found myself facing three girls, who were dissolving into a mixture of giggles and apologies. They had been waiting to ambush Eva or one of the other girls in the room and did not expect a parent to emerge. Eva found it just as funny as they did.

The atmosphere was more like that of a large family than a school: a family in which adults were included as equals. Some adults might find it uncomfortable to be treated as one of the crowd, rather than a figure of authority. Some parents might find it disconcerting to find strange boys calling their daughter a bitch and threatening to destroy her bedroom door with an axe. But I felt very at home at Summerhill as, indeed, it had been my home for nine years, when I had lived and worked at the school as a houseparent. Eight years have passed since then, but the easy-going flow of interactions between kids of all ages and kids and adults was familiar terrain to me. It did not occur to me for a moment that the boy at the door was going to turn into a pre-adolescent version of Jack Nicholson in the film 'The Shining'. He was just venting his frustration at Eva's shutting him out. The moment passed and later they were behaving with each other as if nothing had happened.

Technically Summerhill is a boarding school, but it has little semblance to the traditional notion of boarding schools. No-one wears uniforms. The children swear freely without fear of being told off. Adolescent couples wander around with their arms around each other. Small children weave around small groups of talking adults, totally involved in their own play, no-one telling them to walk, not run or to not get so excited. Summerhill has often been a focus of media attention, generally portraying it as the 'do-as-you-like school' where unruly children run wild. But there is a lot more to Summerhill than sensation-seeking journalists, who have spent little more than a couple of hours at the school, would have us believe.

Summerhill was founded in 1921 by A. S. Neill, a Scottish teacher, after becoming disillusioned by conventional schooling methods. He saw these methods as a way of breaking the child's will, rather than supporting the process of learning. Neill was influenced by psychoanalysis, which had introduced the then radical notion of the unconscious, and by seeing many of the children he taught going off to be senselessly slaughtered in the First World War. He sought to create an environment in which children could be as free as possible to be themselves. Motivated by the belief that children are essentially 'good' by nature, he considered this 'goodness' was warped by adult attempts to mould the child into unnatural ways of being. The 'goodness' Neill proposed was not the naïve, sentimental innocence that so-many adults attribute to children, but an innate capacity to develop into emotionally open and socially responsible individuals. It was freedom, he declared, that allowed children to stay in touch with and grow in accordance with their inherent 'goodness'.

Neill maintained his championing of freedom for children until his death in 1973. Fifty years of experience did not change his mind. Summerhill continues today to embody the same principles that it did then and is run by Neill's daughter, Zoe Readhead. It is located, as it was for most of Neill's life,

on the outskirts of the small town of Leiston, in Suffolk. Very much an international community, Summerhill draws children from all over the world. It is a small school, with less than a hundred pupils, aged roughly between 7 and 17. Most of the children board, though some of the younger ones are 'day kids' and go home at night. When I was living at the school I was the houseparent for the 10 to 12 year olds. Neill dubbed this age group the 'gangster age' as they often arrived new at the school having been in mainstream education long enough to have built up a full steam of resentment and rebellion within themselves. Neill sometimes took on quite difficult and disturbed children and allowed freedom to do its work on them. He observes in his books how they began to soften as they resolved their conflicts in the context of a tolerant and easy-going community. I saw the same process at work in my time there. Children whose difficulties would have been compounded by trying to force them to conform to the conventional system of punishments and rewards, became relaxed and sociable with a little time and patience from the community. But I don't want to give the impression that these young 'gangsters' are a particularly troubled bunch. Even the children who were most 'well-behaved' in their previous schools, once the pressure was off, allowed aspects of themselves, that had hitherto been kept under wraps to come to the surface. In doing so I saw them become more rounded and confident in themselves.

Making and Breaking Laws

It may then come as a surprise that Summerhill has many rules or 'laws' as they are called. There may be 200 or more such laws at any time. These laws are not dictated by adults, but are proposed and voted on in regular community meetings, in which everyone, adult and child alike, have one vote. The voice of a 7 year old had equal weight as that of the Principal. In most schools and homes children learn only how to break the rules, not how to make them. At Summerhill the children are fully involved in the whole process and therefore

understand and appreciate the reasoning behind the laws. When a community of children sit down to decide the parameters by which they are going to live, they make practical laws based on experience and in relationship. For example, if the smaller children are running around the dining room when the older children are trying to eat, someone may propose that they are not allowed in at that time. Or if some of the 12 year olds are putting pressure on the younger children to borrow things and the younger children are finding it difficult to say no, someone may propose a law saying there has to be one of the older kids or an adult present to make sure no pressure is being exerted. Children do not propose or vote for laws based on abstract codes of conduct, such as everyone needs to hold their knife and fork in a certain way or wear a certain style of dress. They naturally come to distinguish between what Neill called 'freedom and licence'. Freedom is doing what you want as long as it does not interfere with someone else. License is doing what you want without caring about the consequences.

The popular notion is that left to their own devices children will throw all caution to the wind and chaos will prevail. Experience at Summerhill does not bear this out. On one occasion when I was living at the school, we had a lot of new pupils straight out of mainstream education, ready to flex their democratic muscles in the meeting. This was at a time when we had more than the usual number of young children and a large group of adolescents, who had grown up being part of the law making process and knew their value, had left. Having a strong majority this bunch of new pupils threw out all the laws, with the exception of a handful of health and safety laws that are not open to the meeting. Certainly it was chaotic for awhile, with no bedtimes and children riding bicycles up and down the corridors. But within days the community started to vote the laws back in, as they felt the need for them, and by the end of term nearly all the laws were back in place. This experience taught these

children that these laws were not just arbitrary and authoritarian, but were there for a reason.

Of course, like anywhere else, the laws get broken all the time, but anyone who wants to has recourse to the meetings to ask for something to be done about it. For example, if someone uses another person's bike without asking, that person can bring a case against the offending individual in the meeting. The person who took the bike can offer an explanation as to why he or she did so and, a vote is taken on whether or not they should be fined. This may just be a strong warning not to do it again, or a small money fine, or to go to the back of the lunch queue. In my experience the community is generally good-natured and fair when it comes to fines. The few individuals who called for heavier fines, were always the moralists with bad consciences of their own. Through their use of the meetings the children learn practical boundaries rooted in personal interaction. These are not incomprehensible orders barked at them by bigger people, as many children experience in their lives. Nor is there the lack of clarity that comes when the boundaries are not there, either through neglect or from parents who are afraid of confrontation. Meeting the 'no' of others, as long as it is reasonable and can be mutual, gives us the sense of self and other we need to form healthy relationship.

One of the things I always appreciated about the meetings, was the lack of resentment when things did not always go the way people wanted. I remember once bringing a case against a group of big adolescent boys who had been making noise in the night, in an area of the school that they were not meant to be in. This was the culmination of a series of occasions I had been woken up in the night and I argued for a substantial fine. They argued just as passionately against it. But this time the meeting went in my favour and they were fined. As the meeting closed and they filed past me, each of them gave me a big hug and apologised for waking me up. There was no resentful sulking or left over tension, either on their part or mine.

Time to Play

Another aspect of Summerhill that people often find hard to comprehend is that that lessons are not compulsory. Children only go to lessons when they decide they are ready to learn. People often argue "I would have never learnt anything if I hadn't been made to." My reply would be "Of course not, your desire to learn was killed in you by that very act of being made to." Part of my present work involves teaching adults and, even though they are wanting to learn, I see how much fear they bring with them to the learning process. Compulsory education has undermined their capacity to inquire and replaced it with an anxiety-based need to get it right. Their nervous systems reverberate with the fear of being seen as stupid, instead of resting in the open, receptive state that is conducive to taking in and processing new information. This is a real handicap for many adults and a direct result of the way they have been educated.

When Summerhill children do go to class they tend to learn quite quickly, as they are motivated. They have been able to play as much as they like and are ready to engage with some structured input. Most children do not get enough time to play and be in their own worlds, so find it hard to concentrate at school. They become bored, restless or anxious. Neill declared that if the emotions are free the intellect will look after itself. Certainly as I reflect on the children I was houseparent for, who are now in their mid to late twenties, they all seem to be doing very well in their respective careers. Most went onto further education and now have degrees in a variety of different subjects, some very academic, some more artistic. I have met a broad range of ex-Summerhillians over the years, spanning the whole 85 years of the schools existence and only a handful expressed the feeling that they wished they had been made to go to lessons. For the most part they seem to feel that they were really able to develop their own interests and leave Summerhill feeling equipped and ready for the wider world.

They also cite other qualities that they feel they got from being at Summerhill, which could not be reaped in the classroom, but developed out of the sense of freedom and community.

So what are these? One is confidence. I see this already in Eva, even though she has only been at Summerhill for two terms and was quite happy in her previous school. She is more relaxed in herself, which allows her to be more outgoing. Another is self-motivation. Not having been organised into endless activities by anxious adults, afraid that their children will not develop into budding violin virtuosos or become multi-lingual before their brain cells dry up or, god forbid, be bored for half an hour, their inner worlds have remained spacious and intact enough for them to know what they want out of life and what they have to offer. During my stint as houseparent I often remember hearing back from an employer or college how much they appreciated the capacity of this or that ex-pupil to creatively engage with work without needing to be told what to do all the time. Another quality that was often remarked on was that of being able to get on with people. Learning to live with people evolves naturally in the life of the community. Ex-Summerhillians, in my experience, are generally very tolerant. They do not judge people by external status symbols, such as clothes, career or wealth. They relate to people primarily as people and are not judgemental of their flaws and struggles.

Taking on the Government

These qualities are not ones that we can measure and award qualifications for. As such they fall outside the criteria of a good education, as laid down by the educational establishment. Education has become highly standardised, with specific goals being set for specific ages. These have to be tested for and pupils progress measured in terms of good test results. The Summerhill approach to education has not generally sat well with the government inspectors. The attitude of Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) towards Summerhill has

been akin to that of Uncle Vernon's red-faced indignation at the mention of Hogwarts School in the Harry Potter stories. Throughout Neill's career he was always fearful for Summerhill's future, citing only one inspector who ever seemed to grasp what Summerhill was actually about. During the 1990's the inspections started to become more frequent and aggressive, until eventually the school was threatened with closure if it did not bring in measures that would essentially bring an end to non-compulsory lessons.

This culminated in March 2000 in a High Court appeal in which Summerhill challenged the government's formal notice of complaint. It soon became clear that the government inspector's report was full of inaccuracies and prejudices that could not be substantiated in court. It also emerged, that despite the inspectors assurances that Summerhill was not being specifically targeted, it was on a secret list of schools 'to be watched.' The government quickly backed down and David Blunkett, the then Minister of Education, offered a set of conciliatory proposals. To quote the Times (Friday March 24th 2000): 'In extraordinary scenes at the Royal Court of Justice, the school was allowed to take over Court 40 to hold a student council to debate Mr Blunkett's new proposals.' Just like any other proposal the meeting voted on whether to accept David Blunkett's proposals. Essentially these proposals represented a complete turn around and for the first time in Summerhill's history Neill's educational philosophy came under the protection of the law. It was the end of a long campaign in which the children had been active throughout. They had taken on the British government and won.

For myself, and many others, it is a great relief that this one small school that champions children's freedom has been able to survive. This is personal – it is my daughter's school, she chose to go there and I was able to and happy to support her in this. It is also a part of my personal history: Summerhill remains for me the strongest sense of community that I have experienced in my life. But it is also the living embodiment of a way of raising children that forces us to

think about the fear-based way in which children are so often regarded: Fear that if we do not force them they will not learn. Fear that if we do not mould them they will go rotten. Fear that at our core there is a badness that needs to be made good. If there is one thing that Summerhill offers us it is that we do not need to be so afraid.