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NEILL OF SUMMERHILL: AN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHER FOR PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract: For those who take on the task of trying to make the ideas associated with the personal responsibility tradition a part of their lives, the work of Neill can become one place to begin to see that learning to "let people live in their own way" may at times be aided by a learning environment that is a fallible liberal democratic self-governing community. And the learning community that Neill founded nearly a hundred years ago has indeed helped to demonstrate that it is possible for many young people to get a valuable, meaningful, and worthwhile education if they are lucky enough to just "hang around" a school such as Summerhill.

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It is reasonable to support, and perhaps even encourage, the development of some elementary and secondary schools that give students the freedom to choose to go to class or stay away altogether? This question, which I call the educational problem of making academic learning optional in a school, is clearly an outgrowth of a quote from Paul Goodman's book Compulsory Mis-education. In one of his numerous attempts to explain how the educational reforms advocated by A.S. Neill differ from those endorsed by John Dewey, Goodman wrote the following:

> Like Dewey, Neill stressed free animal expression, learning by doing, and very democratic community processes (one person, one vote, enfranchising small children!). But he also assumed a principle that to Dewey did not seem important, the freedom to choose to go to class or stay away altogether. A child at Summerhill can just hang around; he'll go to class when he damned well feels like it – and some children, coming from compulsory schools, don't damned well feel like it for eight or nine months. But after a while, as the curiosity in the soul revives - and since their friends go - they give it a try (Goodman, 1965, p. 55).

The above quote makes it quite clear that those who agree with the Summerhill policy of making academic learning optional in a school would indeed provide an affirmative answer to the question, "It is reasonable to support, and perhaps even encourage, the development of some elementary and secondary schools that give students the freedom to choose to go to class or stay away altogether?" On the other hand, according to Goodman, those who follow in the tradition of Dewey do not wish to associate their educational programs with schools such as Summerhill. Nevertheless, the experimental educational program that Neill founded in 1921 has indeed become a community of individuals where freedom has been a viable aspect of a school attended by people from the ages of five to eighteen. And over the last nine decades, Neill, his first and second wives, his daughter who now runs the school, and the numerous adults and students who have been members of the Summerhill community, have indeed learned how to make an educational

program that is an interesting, challenging, and vibrant environment where worthwhile learning often takes place when people just "hang around" their school.

Before reading Goodman's Compulsory Mis-Education I had never heard of A.S. Neill or his world famous school Summerhill. However, in the fall of 1964 when I was a very disillusioned second year undergraduate student at the Urbana campus of the University of Illinois, Goodman's book was recommended to me by one of my high school friends. And for reasons that are extremely difficult to explain in this short paper, Goodman's book about how schools mis-educate students hit home to me.

That is, after reading Goodman's book I became acutely aware of the possibility that perhaps, just perhaps, I had been mis-educated since the fall of 1950 when I entered kindergarten in a rather traditional public school in Chicago, Illinois. Needless to say, most of the students and professors at my university did not want to explore the possibility that we were engaged in an educational endeavor that was mis-educative.

After reading Goodman's book I began to think about how I might incorporate some freedom for students in the classes I was attending at my university. And I now have a vague memory of raising my hand in the first class of an English course that was part of the requirements for graduation; when called upon by the professor to speak I asked him if we could discuss the required reading list with the whole class. My hope was that a few students might have suggestions about including some books or articles that were not on the required list handed out by our professor. Moreover, I made the suggestion that it might be worthwhile to consider eliminating or making a couple of the required works optional because the list created by our professor seemed a bit long for an undergraduate course.

The professor in the university class of my youth did not find much value in my attempt to provide students with a little freedom to have a say-so about

what they would read throughout the semester. After my brief request about the possibility of altering the reading list in the syllabus my professor told me in no uncertain terms that in his class the professor was the one person best qualified to decide what students should read. Furthermore, I was told that the reading list would remain as it appeared in the syllabus he had so carefully determined in light of the knowledge he had acquired over many years. And a final point to note about my first failed feeble attempt to incorporate a little freedom for students who attend universities is that after class a number of students told me that they resented the fact that I wasted classroom time with my silly idea that students should participate in the decision making process about what to include in the reading list for a college course. I was told by my fellow students that our professor was a distinguished scholar in his academic discipline who had written a number of books. As with my professor, the students made it quite clear to me that the professor was indeed the one person best qualified to determine what material we should read in class.

The traditional educational programs I attended as a student over fifty years ago assumed that there are some wise individuals who should and could determine a curriculum that all students should learn and all teachers should teach. To be sure, there was, and continues to be, much discussion about the individuals who are indeed wise enough to determine the school curriculum. But as a rule, it is usually the case that in one form or another, traditional educational programs around the world at all levels of schooling endorse a policy such as the following: Teachers, curriculum developers, professional scholars in the various academic disciplines, and other educational experts such as principals and superintendents are reliable authorities who have the wisdom to determine what is learned in school. This policy can be referred to as the policy of expert authority.

The policy of expert authority should not be viewed as a new idea. On the contrary, this policy has its historical roots in works such as Plato's Republic

and The Laws. In these works which were written well over two thousand years ago, Plato makes it quite clear that there can be some individuals who can eventually become so wise that they possess valuable knowledge or information that makes them experts who should decide what all young people should learn. The Platonic view of wisdom articulated in the Republic has indeed become the dominant view of what it means to be a wise person.

In contrast to the above view of a wise person, Socrates as he is portrayed in Plato's Apology suggests that wise people are those who know that their wisdom is worth little or nothing at all. This alternative, and uncommon view of a wise person, can be seen as opening the door for an educational policy such as the following: All school members, students included, should be given the opportunity to be personally responsible for determining their own school activities and many of the policies that govern a school. This policy can be referred to as the policy of personal responsibility.

The policy of personal responsibility can be seen as incorporating the idea that no individuals or groups of people are so wise that they should be viewed as educational experts whose knowledge is so wonderful that they do indeed know what all people should learn and do in schools. If one endorses the view that the only bit of wisdom available to an individual is that, at best, his or her wisdom is worth little or nothing at all, then it can be said that no one is so wise that he or she should decide what all people do in schools. And in many ways the policy of personal responsibility can and should be seen as an outgrowth of the Socratic insight that wise people realize that their wisdom is so inadequate that it is a mistake to think that some people are wise enough to tell others what they should do and learn.

Both the policy of expert authority and the policy of personal responsibility are ideas that have deep historical roots in the history of Western philosophy. And much that I have written here about the works of Plato is an attempt to incorporate some of the insights about Plato's works that are

suggested in Karl Popper's The Open Society and Its Enemies. Also, over the last fifty years I have come to see that in a number of ways A.S. Neill's work at Summerhill is a recent attempt to bring a Socratic way of learning and teaching to an educational program in our modern world. To be sure, Neill was not the kind of writer or educational reformer who quoted passages from famous philosophers, but near the end of his life he did note that his philosophy includes the notion that "no man is good enough, wise enough to tell another how to live." That is, for Neill:

> Philosophy means the study of what is important in life, and as we all have different interests, our philosophies are legion. That makes for universal misunderstanding. I think my own philosophy, by and large, is to let people live in their own way, and really, this sums up Summerhill. I have written again and again that no man is good enough, wise enough to tell another how to live, but I am conscious of the fact that by running a school with freedom for kids and then writing about it, I am assuming that I am trying to tell readers how to live, meaning that I am conscious of being a humbug (Neill, 1992, p. 267).

Neill was not a humbug. And his work at Summerhill and his writings need not be viewed as an attempt to tell other people how to live their lives or how to raise their children. On the contrary, as with Socrates before him, Neill knew that whatever knowledge he had acquired in his long life of nearly ninety years was not worth very much. But Neill did have the courage to make unpopular choices about how he wished to live his life and how he wanted to run a school. The result of Neill's choices can be seen as a life and a school that helped to develop a modern fallible liberal democratic self-governing educational philosophy that used a version of the policy of personal responsibility as a guiding principle for a piecemeal reform in the field of education. And Neill can be viewed as one of the outstanding twentieth century educators who made a highly significant contribution to what we can call the personal responsibility tradition in education.

Plato's works incorporate two very distinct educational traditions. These two traditions can be referred to as the expert authority tradition and the personal responsibility tradition. The first tradition includes some version of the policy of expert authority. The second tradition includes some version of the policy of personal responsibility. And over the last two thousand five hundred years the expert authority tradition has clearly come to dominate thinking about educational thought throughout the world. However, as time goes on a greater number of people may eventually come to see that in various ways it is best to develop additional educational programs that are part of the personal responsibility tradition. That is, in some distant future it may eventually be decided that parts of the personal responsibility tradition are more satisfactory than the expert authority tradition. As time goes on more and more people may eventually decide that personal responsibility schools are more satisfactory than expert authority educational programs.

To be sure, it will not be an easy task to explain that expert authority schools need to be replaced with personal responsibility schools. The task is indeed enormous and at times is likely to seem overwhelming. But for people such as Neill who make the decision to work within the personal responsibility tradition, the task has the potential to provide an individual with a worthwhile endeavor that can help a person discover that there is value in trying to live one's life in one's own way. The large educational revolution may indeed be in some distant future or it may never come about. However, the small educational revolution that can be experienced by individuals of all ages is a matter of realizing that relying on experts for one's own education may not be as satisfactory as learning that it is best to rely on oneself even if one makes mistakes and does not receive the approval of experts.

For those who take on the task of trying to make the ideas associated with the personal responsibility tradition a part of their lives, the work of Neill can become one place to begin to see that learning to "let people live in their

own way" may at times be aided by a learning environment that is a fallible liberal democratic self-governing community. And the learning community that Neill founded nearly a hundred years ago has indeed helped to demonstrate that it is possible for many young people to get a valuable, meaningful, and worthwhile education if they are lucky enough to just "hang around" a school such as Summerhill.

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