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Leonard Turton[25]

Submission: 07/12/2015 Review: 24/12/2015 Acceptance: 24/12/2015

Abstract: This essay is about starting a democratic school.

Keywords: Education. Neill. Summerhill.

[25] Summerhill democratics.

1. Lily Marie

A few weeks ago a former student of mine from a state school contacted me on Messenger. This is a composite of those chats:

Hey Mr. T! It's me, the one and only Lily Marie. Great news, I haven't been bitten by any dogs lately, but I still wear platform shoes.

I wanted to write to you and say thank you for being such an inspiration in my life. I talk about Club House Democracy all the time and the tools and weird things and the meetings our class did to make us all focus and become young adults.

I'm getting married in three weeks… never thought I would but I am. Jimmy Reed is my man of honour. We are still best friends to this day.

Because of being in that classroom I have achieved in many things where I didn't think I would. What we did in our class has stuck in my brain and I use the tools on a daily basis! It was especially good for classes like ours...we were rotten. We made the French teacher cry and leave. Remember ?

Ya. In the afternoons on rotary you guys terrorised teachers all the time. I always thought it was like theatre. The class simply chose whatever script they wanted to act out.

Bahaha we were bad. But Club House Democracy calmed us down and we felt like we were in charge with you ... Mini adults. It made us feel that we were important. That we mattered.

You even made Mr. Woodhouse, the vice principal, throw a fit, burst into tears and walk out of the room. That even astonished me cause you were all such great people. Ha.

You let us arrange the room so the desks were all at one side and have a library and sofa, a workshop, art space, even a small stage. Rob, Matt and I would work in the workshop but still learn and do our work...and not act out because we were bored. We had things to do. And remember the art shows?

I just thought you all needed to do that. So I checked with the principal. I said these kids are so nervous about school work I want to cancel everything for two weeks and do an Art show. So we did that conceptual art. That was a lot of fun.

You let Kelsey do art anytime she wanted.

Yes, well that seemed right. It's what she loved to do.

And anyone who got excited about reading a book could just read as much as they wanted any time at all. You said to Martin, "Just read ... never mind the Math."

Ya. He was reading the first Harry Potter book before it was famous. Funny to think that.

And we ran class meetings to run things, solve problems and make decisions. You said you would cut out as much school work as possible so we could do other stuff and projects that really interested us.

And the stool and microphone at the front for the chairperson. I loved that!

Yes, you did!

Remember the time we started a book of boring short stories and I said "I don't know about you but I think this book is awful," and asked what you all thought and the class agreed so we got rid of it.

You said, "The Math book isn't in charge of you. It can't hurt you, it can't kill you ... but you can kill it. I will show you." And you ripped the pages out of the book and threw them up in the air.

Yup. But then I said, "Please don't everyone do that or I will lose my job!"

And remember the 'Here comes the teacher game ?

Oh yes.

(I would leave the room and tell the students to yell and scream and toss stuff around and have one person at the door peeking out the window. After a few minutes I started back. The lookout yelled, "Teacher !" and the class picked everything up and got out books and pretended that they had been working quietly the whole time. I'd say, "This has got to be the best class I have ever taught. I can trust you completely.")

And we voted that each of us could decide to do spelling or not or how many math questions to do. And decided independently to do homework or not.

Yeah. That worked really well I think. Those were good ideas. Even I was impressed at the decisions people made.

We voted to have more homework one time.

You did ha ha. That was a surprise.

All those kinds of things changed my life that's for sure. Before we came to you supply teachers would walk out at recess and never come back. Ha ha ha.

Remember the class where Matt turned his desk upside down and went on strike and the teacher was screaming and he didn't care just sat on the upside down chair grinning? And Mrs. Hanson ran out of the room to me and she said " I don't know what to do. That kid is out of control." So I went to the room and said something very quietly to him like, "Matt , that's not so smart I think, " and he just tipped his desk back and sat down !

I remember it all clear as day. Rob was so hyper and you said, "Rob just stand if you want, or do flips or go over on the rug and do somersaults if you need to." And you asked us, "Is that okay?" We said yes.

And that bully Rebecca, making everyone frightened. The class finally brought her up at a meeting and we talked about it and you voted that she be sent home for two days. And after recess I said to choose two people to go to

the principal and explain what the class had decided and why. Ten minutes later Rebecca was packing her things and leaving.

It showed us that we were in control and we had a big say in making it a good place to be. She stopped most of the bullying after that.

Yes, she did.

I was dumb before coming to your class...literally. In so many ways. I learned more in your class than at high school and elementary put together. It was a big inspiration to me, and I will never forget the best times of my childhood in your classroom.

2. Club House Democracy

It's important to say that everything I did in that classroom had the approval of the state school principals. I never subvert. I never imply any other teachers should do what I do. I always show respect to colleagues.

Club House Democracy was something I created from my experiences in the democratic day school, Odyssey House, that I founded in Canada in 1971, after reading Summerhill at the University of British Columbia. After nine years at Odyssey House I went back to graduate school and in the 1980's taught in the state system while raising a family. (You can only do what you are able to do at various stages of your life. Never feel guilty that what you do isn't your total dream.) So, in the 80's I was the director of a Homeschool Centre in my house and at the same time started teaching at inner-city Prince of Wales. I was there for twenty years before I went to the UK and Summerhill, where for twelve years I was the Class 2 teacher, Curriculum Advisor and then Education

Manager. I left Summerhill in 2014 and am now a director of Summerhill Democratics, an NGO that helps people start democratic schools in the Summerhill style.

When I went to Prince of Wales School where Lily Marie was a student I first made sure I showed everyone that I was an accomplished teacher in any style, that I respected the school and the principal and the teachers. Most were doing their best in tough circumstances.

Once I had credibility as a professional I decided to adopt as much from Odyssey House as possible. I would talk this over with the principals. The school was generally in constant crisis so they were happy for new ideas ... anything. At times what I did didn't seem like a lot to me but to the kids there it was significant.

After a couple of years the students in my classes ran the classroom. They started the day, ended the day and I didn't need to be around. I could teach what I had to teach then go and sit in the staff room and they just carried on doing things. We changed the room ... created an appropriate habitat, I slashed curriculum to absolute essentials ... no Obsessive Compulsive Curriculum Disorder, so the students had time for themselves and their interests and projects. I allowed them a great deal of free choice of action in this clubhouse community and a say about what they learned and how they learned. Democratic meetings were introduced.

To begin with I said, " I want to ask you something. I am the teacher and I have the authority given to me by the state. I cannot give it away or I would be breaking my contract. But I can share my authority with you. Would you like

to share authority with me and work with me as partners or do you want me to continue to have all the authority?" Of course they wanted to share.

I said to them look, you think you have to go to school but you don't. You can get up in the morning and just say no. But I'm glad you don't do that because I like you all and its fun for me to be with you. But it's not easy is it? We are all stuck in this Cube invented by adults. Crammed in this cube. That is not really normal to have so many of us crammed together all day long. It's like a bad zoo. But here we are, no point in saying we aren't here. So let's work together to make it the best place to be that we possibly can. We will work together but I will stay out of your way as much as possible and cut what I teach as much as possible and we will invent good things together in the empty time and in the empty spaces we make in our Club House.

And kids who are 11 and 12 are smart and they are practical and they understand and they knew what we soon made was good. And they embraced it.

The principal was amazed at the change of behaviour. Young teachers started to come and talk to me about what I was doing. I taught them what to do. In just three years the top floor of the school, six teachers and one hundred and eighty children from nine to thirteen, were practising Club House Democracy. The superintendent was impressed. Other principals started to send teachers to see what we were doing. They came and when they saw they were amazed ... but angry. They would say, " Why don't we know this? Why did nobody teach us this?" Student teachers would come to practice in my room and they would also be angry. "None of our professors know anything about this. What is wrong with them? They are supposed to be experts. The Teacher College is 30 minutes from here."

The school became a great and happy place and a wonderful place to teach. The staff on that upper floor pledged to stay for a good long while to give the kids something stable in their lives. I had my own school, Odyssey House, before Prince of Wales, and I worked at Summerhill after. But those twenty years were, I think, the most rewarding. Bringing authority sharing and democracy to inner-city kids.

When Lily Marie wrote to me and thanked me and said that I had changed her life what she was really saying is that A.S. Neill changed her life. That a little bit of Summerhill changed her life.

So what the hell is this all about? This Summerhill.

3. What It's All About

I will not give you graphs, charts, statistics or scientific analysis. But I will tell you the facts of the matter. The truth of the matter. If you want to prove it to yourself you will have to go to Summerhill and see for yourself. Or to another established democratic day school, although a day school will be a different experience in many ways, not so much a village or a tribe or a family. And you cannot just visit for a day or a week. You must stay and take part for a good long time. And when you leave you will tell people the truth as well. But don't expect to be able to prove it in any conventional way because you can't document it without interfering terribly with the children and that's not allowed. This drives people crazy, and leads to doubt and disbelief. Can't do much about that I'm afraid.

Democratic education isn't, of course, new. It's a hundred years old in its present incarnation. It's not radical. It's not an experiment. It works; in boarding schools, day school and state schools. It's a proven, successful, alternative. It's not Democratic Education's fault that people don't know this. People just don't pay attention. Or don't want to because they want Control Factors to dominate.

I didn't know Neill but I know his family well. What Neill used to say, perhaps to annoy and provoke, was that children are free to choose to play or go to lessons. Lessons are, totally, optional. However, as true as this is, it's a very modest statement. What really goes on is profound.

What goes on is Freedom of Choice of Action in Democratic Community. The democratic and community are essentials ... you can't do whatever you like. You must negotiate your presence, your freedom in a community of equals and in democratic meetings. Freedom Not License is crafted by this.

Now this freedom of choice of action must also include the Gifts of Democratic Meetings and Appropriate Habitat, the Gift of the Recognition of Energies, the Gift of Time, the Gift of Adult Stepping Away, the Gift of Valuing Emotional and Social Growth as the prime values, the Gifts of Excellent Teachers and Classrooms that are neutral, of Curriculum that is kept to essentials, and the Gift of Neutrality of Lessons ... as no more or less important a choice than deep play, project play, or teen life ... or of simply being in the world. A child at Summerhill is valued because he IS.

It's not magic; it's methods and techniques and skills that create a democratic school 'curriculum'. The adults set this up, this freedom, this

democracy. It is a conscious artificial construct. You need to know what you are doing; you just can't take away state school procedures and hope for the best. You can't play hippy dreamland although in the sixties and seventies the culture and the media branded Summerhill as that. Neill was not a hippy. He was a Scot from the late nineteenth century and he knew what he was about. This democratic education ain't no fooling around.

Many adults bristle at the idea that a democratic school is created with thought and reason and specific choices. They even think that some type of total randomness means natural and free, that the successful schools flourish in a utopian vacuum that is defined by NOT BEING traditional schooling. That's dangerous nonsense.

Summerhill students do not live in an unrealistic bubble. Far from it. A student at Summerhill travels the different stages of childhood, of deep play, project play, colourful teen life, and comes to a natural timely awareness of the outer world and the requirements of that outer world after Summerhill. And excellent care is taken to make sure children receive appropriate information at appropriate times as they move from, say 13 to 17 particularly. Summerhill is a Cambridge Exam Centre and students can choose to sit state GCSE exams in order to apply for college. There are more intelligent staff meetings about the children at Summerhill than in any school I've known. As well as a Special Attention list of students of concern.

A truth is though, and this is self-evident if you work for several years in a democratic school, that children don't have to do much, if any, formal school work up to about the age of thirteen to comfortably learn what they need to learn to be successful in later lessons that lead to senior curriculum and successful exam results.

The other version of that ... relentless work, homework and testing, is a dysfunctional sham, a lie. But now is not the time to go into that.

Let's go back a bit. Just trying to answer a few objections there before they popped into your head.

At Summerhill a student is Gifted Time and with that time can freely choose her actions moment to moment. As she chooses to do and to relate, the world and the people in it react/relate back; and through this constant Free Choice of Action and resulting Reactions the child creates herself. The child creates a Personal Developmental Narrative. Writes her own story in the world. Becomes who she freely 'chooses' to be.

Let's look at what's common in traditional schools: the child's Time is controlled and his choices of action and relationship are controlled. This is done for purposes decided upon by others who are far away … by politicians, think tanks, university professors, experts, religious leaders and so on … in order to make the child into ... what? Well, perhaps an economic warrior for the state or a military warrior, a very obedient citizen, a true believer, an addicted consumer, a passive democrat … and so on. I'm not saying that everything about that is conscious, though a lot is. Let's just say I'm describing the ant hill.

Of course family and culture and media and many other things impact upon a growing human being. But not nearly as much as the daily fifteen-year long control policies of the people-product factory that is state education.

There is, of course, an understandable desire for any culture to want to sustain itself over time. But our school systems go way beyond that.

So at Summerhill, at democratic schools, children are gifted the opportunity to create themselves; in state schools someone else creates the child … into some 'other' self. Authentic vs Inauthentic. And, if you live at a democratic school you will often be able to say Satisfied vs Unsatisfied, Happy vs Unhappy, True to Self vs Alien to Self. This is observable.

When students come to a democratic school most are out of focus. That sounds mystical but it's not; they are fuzzy … even to themselves. After a while at a democratic school children come into focus ... to themselves. It can be startling to see students be surprised at becoming who they really are ... as they 'move into themselves'; as they come to 'fit themselves.' No miracle; just a fact of being left to be, and to be able to choose a Personal Developmental Narrative.

Let's look at stages of development at Summerhill. Class 1 students are about 6 to 10 years of age and although there is a two room area with lots to do (that they don't need to go to) these are the children you will see most engaged in Deep Play which, to describe simply, is typical child play both individual and group. And they do this most days all day all over the place inside and out. It's a joy to watch, and you really want to connect them to cameras and microphones to figure out what's going on, find out what the thoughts and words and interactions and games are. It's obvious what's happening is ancient and right but if you get too close … well you can't. It's like rabbits and birds. They will let you sort of approach … next they sense an alien presence … and either stop or are gone.

As Class 1 children grow older they smoothly graduate out of this stage ... although all Summerhillians, right up to graduation, are never afraid to Deep Play.

Next is Class 2, basically 10 to thirteen years of age. This is the age of Professional Childhood, of Veteran Children. Frighteningly accomplished and able to plan and organise and run meetings and take part in Project Play. They do things, make and create things ... on an increasingly sophisticated level. For some of this they need a properly set- out Activity and Learning space. Summerhill has a very sophisticated space for Veteran Children. It's filled with materials and books and computers that hits the mark of that age group. The teacher is simply a facilitator but usually not required. Veteran Children teach themselves, teach one another and are allowed to live out this end of childhood until each feels the pull of early adolescence. Summerhill respects the Professional Child. It is a critical part of development that most school systems ignore, all too often ripping 11 years olds out of the Veteran Stage and tossing them into high schools and into what is quite a destructive learning regimen. It is a world-wide tragedy. It is the Age of the Club House and needs to be honoured.

Appropriate Habitat is crucial to a democratic school. Once the control of the adult at the front of a class is removed the space itself must be able to tolerate and adapt to child life, be able to mediate the flow of energies that range from quiet to boisterous; must offer what the children require by way of doing, must be clear and have proper essential product placement. If you mess this up then the children will have a lot harder time coping, doing, learning and being together; a very badly arranged habitat will create chaos that the children will not understand at all ... it will just happen. You can't mess about if you want

a democratic school to work properly. You can fake it of course and see license and children going crazy and smile and think yes this is freedom this is Neill, this is Summerhill. It's not. Not at all.

The single school building of the Democratic Day School is much trickier to sort out ... as compared to the several buildings on a good piece of land that Summerhill offers. And if the one building was a former state school it's trickier still. For in no way is that architecture appropriate for adult withdrawal without some serious thinking and interior design.

Each building requires study and planning, taking into consideration whatever age ranges it has to accommodate. I just spent six weeks in Lithuania helping a new democratic school get started and that was a big part of our serious work.

In Lily Marie's classroom you remember the traditional interior was redesigned by myself and the children. And it changed the behaviour of the children as much as the meetings and sharing of authority

Okay … then after Class 1 and 2 comes teen life and teen socialising and hanging about and between choosing or not choosing to go to lessons often doing not much at all. That's as it should be. That's free choice teen life. It's actually very productive. Just not what adults often think should be happening. Too bad for you, adults.

Teens are in Class 3 and 4 (which is called Sign-Up) and there are subject teachers and specialised spaces and classrooms. These spaces can also be available to younger students at certain times in addition to their multi room Class 1 and 2 areas.

The school has a timetable so that children know when their lessons are or when spaces are open and for whom. Teachers are in charge of their classrooms but students can bring them up at meetings or ask for an Ombudsman if they think a teacher has abused her authority.

Summerhill is not afraid of authority. Authority is something that is given to people for particular reasons for a particular time and perhaps for a particular place. The community can always review this authority. Most community authority is regularly electable.

Summerhill is a very orderly place. Children like laws and the Summerhill Law Book has hundreds … made, refined, appealed, made again. The Law Book hangs in the dining room and students are constantly referencing it. There are laws for bed times and wake up and going down town; what you can do where and when; when and where you can be noisy or have to be quiet. If you can think of something that people can have serious differences about the school has probably discussed it in a meeting … and the meeting may have created a law.

There is also a tribal range of ages. There are child elders, the Carriage Kids and other older students, who bring the weight of experienced common sense to the impulsive enthusiasms of younger students. "No, the law says you cannot have a knife. You are not old enough." "No, you cannot go downtown with Erik, he's only a House Kid." And so on.

The school meeting is the heart, the engine room of a democratic school community. One person one vote.

If you spend time at Summerhill you will observe that it is naturally orderly, naturally law abiding … adults need not be around to make this happen. Young and old are honestly respectful of one another. There is little artifice; there is no fear.

Returning to Appropriate Habitat: Summerhill has eleven acres of lawn and woods and about fourteen different modest buildings. You generally only see the iconic Victorian main house in pictures. Children have their own living spaces, the lounge, the Woodwork that's always open, libraries, the dining room, Houseparent areas and so on. Classrooms are only one option (And you can access most classrooms and not do lessons). Everything is an option unless there is a law about it.

Although the spaces combine to create a complete child-village environment it is not crammed with endless diversion. Summerhill children are given the Right to Boredom. They have time, they have space and places to go to but they often get bored and that is allowed. Adults feel no need to solve that problem. Boredom is good for figuring yourself out and for creativity and for contemplating that interesting emptiness that comes upon you when you have finished something and aren't sure what's next.

The Gift of Adult Stepping Away connects very closely with Free Choice of Action. I once saw an adult greet students arriving at a democratic school and soon he was leading a game with about fifteen children. This bothered me. When I was at a new school in Lithuania I had to impress upon the very

enthusiastic adults to get out of the way, to leave the children alone. To let them be themselves and let them feel power and that the place was theirs as much as anyone else's. I said, "Don't care so much about the children. Just care about giving them a good democratic school environment. You must not need children, or need the energy of children. You have to be independent of children and their attention and let them be independent of you." If you live only to see the shining light of learning in a child's eyes … better avoid a democratic school. You have no right to demand that or to manipulate it to make it happen.

Some new teachers at Summerhill start to act like Camp Counsellors … or edu-tainers. This is not good and they are advised about it. Adults are not at Summerhill to be the centre of attention, even with all the best-of-caring intentions. Teachers at a democratic school can have a lot more influence on children than state school teachers because the relationship is closer; one student wanted to change classes and go to a different language teacher. She said, "The way K teaches just doesn't work for me." I said, "Okay that's fine." The girl burst into tears and replied, "But I don't want to hurt K's feelings. He is a good teacher, just not for me." This was soon resolved and the student changed classes. K, of course, did not mind at all.

Free Choice of Action depends on the Gift of Emptiness. This is essential. Freedom is the right and the ability to move outward with self, and to move outward requires emptiness to move into. Empty time to fill; emptiness of habitat … which is a habitat that does not impose itself upon you but is there for you and waits, Appropriately; empty of adults unless you ask for them; empty of adults who need to teach or lead; emptiness of curriculum … a curriculum that you can access but that does not force itself upon you, and that

is not full of the unnecessary; empty of imposed authority … that is replaced with democratic authority.

The environment and the mechanics of a democratic school is there but not there. It should be primarily invisible to the child so that the child can act and feel free … to create himself.

But no mistake … be of no doubt … Summerhill adults are ultimately responsible for everyone. Not all laws are made by the children. The structure of every successful democratic school includes a compassionate, wise, and experienced group of staff that ensure a safe and secure experience for every child

4. Village /Family

(Excerpt from Unerzogen, 2010)

When I wake up in the morning at Summerhill I go outside to 90 people I know. I don't know them all in the same way or to the same degree and my relationship with each will change over time but I know them and they know me. And I meet with them in meetings to discuss village life and village problems. And we vote on issues as equals. It is an unrelated extended family, with older and younger brothers and sisters, uncles, aunts, parent-like and grandparent-like figures. The children do not substitute for blood relations, but embrace an even bigger set of close relationships that mirror family life. The Summerhill Village redefines what family can be… perhaps should be in a healthier world. Perhaps once was.

I am Canadian, and boarding schools are alien to Canada. I am not of the opinion that families are necessarily damaging or that children should not live

at home with their own families. However, it does appear, in the context of Summerhill, of freedom of choice in democratic community, of numbers in the 80 to 100 range, in a village like setting, that children live very happily in non-related extended-family groups, and thrive on the multiple interactions and friendships formed in freedom. There is simply nothing cultish or manipulative about it. It appears, perhaps to the distress of those who hold dear the nuclear family, to be very natural. Children appear to thrive in a small village, or a small tribe. To be happier.

M said at lunch today, "Yeah, I wish I could stay here over the holidays. I have a good family and I love them, but I'd rather be at Summerhill." What I think M means is that she understands and appreciates the value of living in a deeply connected environment; instead of in a world that is all too often fractured and fragmented.

5. Start a Democratic School

So don't wait and longer. Start a Democratic School