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Teaching Obedience, Not Algebra **by Crispin Sartwell**

There's no such thing as public education. Education happens to exactly one person at a time. There are some things that you just have to do by yourself. Even if I'm your teacher, you can't have my education; your education is a private task that is given to yourself.

The education of someone or everyone else doesn't add a single item to your stock of knowledge.

And there's no such thing as compulsory education. Education is something that each of us gives to ourselves or allows others to give us. Otherwise we call it indoctrination or assault; we don't call it knowledge.

In my son's elementary school, there is a slogan plastered on the walls: "Have the courage to stand up for what you believe."

No one actually sees it: It's a form of wallpaper. It's not intended to communicate information but to sweeten our day with words so often repeated that no one's brain gets any traction on them anymore. They are nothing more than a set of high-sounding nonsense syllables. Besides that, it is utterly dishonest. The people who put up that sign want anything, everything, except for your child to have the courage to stand up for what he believes.

The reason my son, Vince, and I were in the school in the first place was that Vince had refused to take a test. He sat there quietly but simply refused to make any marks on the paper, although he thought the test was easy.

Asked why, Vince said that the material was stupid, and that it was exactly the same thing he had been learning in health for the last several years: how to make decisions, how to deal with stress, et cetera — stuff Vince doesn't think bears repeating.

You could put it like this: it had suddenly dawned on Vince that he was the one who was responsible for his own education.

So together, we went to the school to get the health textbook. I read the chapter. The material was goofy, and perhaps not what you'd usually think of as education, but it wasn't moronically written or sheer propaganda.

Personally, I'd have taken the test.

But they weren't giving me the test. They were giving it to Vince, who seemed suddenly to have come across the courage to stand up for what he believed.

And then the teacher explained to me why Vince had to take the test, aside from the fact that he'd get a zero: "It is approved curriculum."

Or putting it another way: It's public education — that standardized information we hope to insert into everyone's head simultaneously.

Stand up for what you believe? Teachers are required to teach the approved curricula like a little chorus of playback devices. Their success is measured by mechanical performance on standardized tests.

No large institution values independent thought, and public schools actively despise and punish it; they demand and attempt to enforce and reward mindless obedience. That, and not algebra, is what they are designed to teach. That is their fundamental purpose, the real justification of their existence.

And if you don't believe this to be true, notice that refusing to take a test on the grounds that you object to the material is treated in exactly the same way as acting out on the playground. The punishment (we'll call your parents, send you to the principal, suspend you) is the same. For the institution, the infraction is the same: disobedience. That Vince's refusal was a principled intellectual objection is irrelevant to the institution, because the institution had nothing to do with principles or with intellect.

What the public schools want from our children and for that matter from its own teachers is just what the Soviet Union wanted from its citizens: a continual enactment of the empty forms of obedience, continual self-betrayal.

You can call that freedom and courage if you want, but that doesn't mean it isn't slavery and cowardice.

Vince is going to take the test. The teacher will assign him a number — his grade. That number will not reflect the measurement of what Vince knows. That was never the point.

That number represents one thing: obedience to the institution.

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