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Message to the Young: Be Prepared

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All of us are concerned about it. We are concerned because we have sons and daughters, nieces, nephews and grandchildren, but also because we care about our neighborhoods, our cities, our nation and our world. What I'm talking about is the preparation of young persons by our society for life in it. It has been said that somehow society muddles through this and in some way gets the young prepared. For the pre-school child, we are tempted to think of this as the task of the family only, for the school-age child we shift much responsibility to schools. But for this evening when we speak of the preparation or education of the young let's think in terms of the responsibility of the entire society. I would like us to intentionally think about the interaction between individuals and their society as this relates to this preparation.

First I want to present a just a few of the many available examples of the concern that this matter has been attracting, along with the efforts of some to provide explanations and/or solutions. This is an eclectic collection of references intended as food for thought, presented in roughly reverse chronological order of the dates of publication and connected in one way or another with my topic. Finally, I invite you to follow the paper with a discussion about the current state of affairs in this regard and about what needs to happen to enhance the ways that our society prepares persons for lives in it.

The following examples, mostly from psychologists, remind us that concerns over how our type of society prepares its citizens for life in it are not new. By the late 1990ies, after two decades of much focus on how young females have been short changed by a male dominated society, several books and articles appeared presenting the case that now it is young boys who are in trouble in their preparation for life. As *Time* magazine reported it, both A Fine Young Man by a Spokane, Washington, therapist, and Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From the Myths of Boyhood, by a Harvard psychiatry professor, agreed that boys are in crisis from emotional undernourishment, but differ in the reasons and on how to avert the difficulties. One calls for sustained relationships with mothers and the other for more male bonding. (*Time*, July 20, 1998) August 29, 2003, USA Today ran an article under the provocative headline “Girls get extra school help while boys get Ritalin.” The article cited data showing that male students lag females, but claimed that few educators are paying attention to this. The lag is particularly obvious in reading abilities scores, ranging from a modest difference in fourth grade to a wide difference in twelfth grade. Gender differences also showed up in disproportionate percentages of boys with learning disabilities, and emotional disturbances. Declining college going rates among males was also cited. In a similar vein, in June 2003 the PBS evening news with Jim Lehrer aired interviews with persons claiming that it is now males that are not being given necessary encouragement to enroll and to persist in higher education. (That same program included interviews with persons who scoffed at the claim that males do not receive enough attention in our society.)

The decades of the 1980's and 90's were times of special focus on the development of young females. Psychologist Carol Gilligan and others studied and commented on the loss of their confident "voice" by girls between the ages of 11 and 14 and on differences in moral reasoning by males and females. A surprise best-seller book, Reviving Ophelia, by counseling psychologist Mary Pipher, echoed this theme. Pipher brought the eyes of a person educated in cultural anthropology, psychology and counseling to her observation of the interaction of cultural pressures and individual development. She opined that girls must find their own North Star to guide them through a "girl-poisoning culture" as they prepare for their life in it. In 1994 she wrote: "America today limits girls' development, truncates their wholeness and leaves many of them traumatized." (Pipher, 1994)

Recently my wife pointed out to me a passage in the prologue of a 1999 book, Guns, Germs, and Steel, by Pulitzer Prize winner Jared Diamond. As part of his analysis of differences between New Guineans and Westerners, Diamond offers a comparison of child development in the two cultures. "Besides [a] genetic reason [explained by survival of the more intelligent in a more challenging environment], there is also a second reason why New Guineans may have come to be smarter than Westerners. Modern European and American children spend much of their time being passively entertained by television, radio, and movies. In the average American household, the TV set is on for seven hours per day. In contrast, traditional New Guinea children have virtually no such opportunities for passive entertainment and instead spend almost all their waking hours actively doing something, such as talking or playing with other children or adults. Almost all studies of child development emphasize the role of childhood stimulation and activity in promoting mental development, and stress the irreversible mental stunting

associated with reduced childhood stimulation. This effect surely contributes a non-genetic component to the superior average mental function displayed by New Guineans.

That is, in mental ability New Guineans are probably genetically superior to Westerners, and they surely are superior in escaping the devastating developmental disadvantages under which most children in industrialized societies now grow up.”

(Diamond, 1999, p.21)

In the fall 1995 issue of Daedalus, Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, a well-known researcher and professor at the University of Chicago, published an article “Education for the Twenty-First Century.” This article, reprinted in Education Week in April of 2000 included the following thoughts:

“With dismal regularity, we return to efforts to improve K-12 education. These efforts usually fail because education is conceived narrowly as schooling”

“Whether or not children learn does not depend primarily on what happens at school, but on experiences, habits, values, and ideas they acquire from the environment in which they live. Thus, instead of concentrating exclusively on schools as the sites for change, we must take into account the broader processes involved in formative education.”

Csikzentmihalyi argues that a laissez-faire approach to this matter will not work and that, in order to know how best to proceed, we must “map the field of forces” involved in the formation of the young. “These would include such institutions as the family, the neighborhood, the community, the schools, the voluntary associations, the media, and the economy, as well as such physical influences of the environment as the purity of the air,

the water, the diet, and health in general.” And of course we must then use that information to the benefit of the young.

“Formative education (i.e., what Germans call *Bildung*) is the result of a continuous interaction between individuals and the environment. Children are formed by their experiences with parents, teachers, peers, and even strangers on the street, and by the sport team they play for, the shopping malls they frequent, the songs they hear, and the shows they watch. The citizens of the next century will be the product of these various social forces. Schools, while certainly important, contribute only a relatively modest fraction to the education of the young. For instance, American adolescents (12-13 years of age) spend about 20 percent of their waking time studying in school or at home. They spend almost as much time (18 percent) just being with friends....” Smaller amounts of time are spent watching television, playing games and sports, listening to music, and reading magazines and books. “Very little time is spent in the company of adults. The typical American adolescent spends only about five minutes a day alone with his or her father – not nearly enough to transmit the wisdom and values that are necessary for the continuation of a civil society. Even less time is spent in a one-on-one interaction with a teacher or other adult.” (Csikzentmihalyi, 1995)

The May 1974 issue of the Kappan carried the article “Walkabout: Searching for the Right Passage from Childhood and School” by Maurice Gibbons. His article was prompted by the 1971 movie, “Walkabout.” The story the movie tells contrasts the rites

of passage to adulthood of youngsters in the Australian Outback and city children. Gibbons wrote: "What I find most provocative is the stark contrast between the aborigine's walkabout experience and the test of an adolescent's readiness for adulthood in our own society. The young native faces a severe but extremely appropriate trial, one in which he must demonstrate the knowledge and skills necessary to make him a contributor to the tribe rather than a drain on its meager resources. By contrast, the young North American is faced with written examinations that test skills very far removed from the actual experience he will have in real life. He writes; he does not act. He solves familiar theoretical problems; he does not apply what he knows in strange but real situations. He is under direction in a protected environment to the end; he does not go out into the world to demonstrate that he is prepared to survive in, and contribute to, our society." (Kappan, May, 1974) Gibbons then proposed that "for the young person who has just finished twelfth grade, a graduation ceremony ... might include demonstrations of competence in five basic challenge categories."

1. Adventure: a challenge to the student's daring, endurance, and skill in an unfamiliar environment.
2. Creativity: a challenge to explore, cultivate, and express his own imagination in some aesthetically pleasing form.
3. Service: a challenge to identify a human need for assistance and provide it; to express caring without expectation of reward.
4. Practical Skill: a challenge to explore a utilitarian activity, to learn the knowledge and skills necessary to work in that field, and to produce something of use.

5. Logical Inquiry: a challenge to explore one's curiosity, to formulate a question or problem of personal importance, and to pursue an answer or solution systematically and, wherever appropriate, by investigation.

Gibbons' suggestion that we redesign our own rites of passage "spawned Walkabout programs throughout the US and Canada." Ten years later the Kappan (Kappan, 1984) presented a follow-up article describing programs in Ohio, Illinois, Wyoming, New York, North Carolina, and Colorado. Several phrases from those reports capture the flavor of that movement: "learning how to learn for a lifetime," "pattern of competence for all students," "one that will affect everything else that they do," "directing one's own activities and reaching out to new levels of performance is a demanding way of learning," "every program component must be aimed at increasing students' abilities to direct their own lives and learning," "it teaches students to think, to act and to contribute." Perhaps at least some of the adventure-based and service programs in schools and colleges today are related to the Walkabout movement.

In spite of what we might think, all of the young are not always more receptive to change than their elders. I offer the following as an example of this. In an essay in the 1970's Norman Cousins, then editor of "The Saturday Review of Literature" magazine, proposed that the curricula of colleges and universities be reorganized in a cross-disciplinary fashion around broad themes representing crucial challenges confronting humankind. As I remember the essay, he thought this would make curricula more important and engaging for students and more useful for society. Just after having read Cousins' essay, I accepted an invitation to speak to an honors class at a local high school.

I thought this a perfect opportunity to present Cousins' proposal, and relished the imagined excited response of those bright young students. It wasn't the first or the last time I was wrong about how students would respond to an idea presented in class. The idea bombed with that group of students. They preferred the known curriculum in which they had been highly successful to an unfamiliar different one.

Decades ago, Robert J. Havighurst, of the University of Chicago, promulgated ideas on the developmental tasks that our society uses to prepare its members for rewarding and productive lives in it. In developing his ideas about developmental tasks, Havighurst drew heavily from the concepts of Jean Piaget, the Swiss researcher who studied, in ingenious ways, the moral and cognitive development of young children, and also from those of Erik Erikson, the immigrant psychoanalyst who extended and broadened Freud's child development concepts to include the adult years and to explicitly recognize the importance of society in the development of individuals. Although he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Ghandi's Truth, one of several psychological biographies he wrote, Erikson probably was best known for his concept of eight life cycle stages, each characterized by a developmental crisis or challenge to be resolved. Piaget was best known for his recognition of the cognitive capabilities and limitations of very young children and his for characterization of them as little scientists actively trying to understand the world.

Havighurst said that "[t]he developmental task concept occupies middle ground between two opposed theories of education: the theory of freedom – that the child will

develop best if left as free as possible, and the theory of constraint – that the child must learn to become a worthy, responsible adult through restraints imposed by his society. A developmental task is midway between an individual need and a societal demand. It assumes an active learner interacting with an active social environment.” (Havighurst, 1962) It is a useful concept for thinking about how society prepares its members for life.

He also said that the origins of developmental tasks lie in the physical maturation of individuals, in the cultural pressure of society, and in the rise of personal values and aspirations. Some refer to this as the three clocks of development: the biological clock, the social clock, and the psychological clock. Havighurst also noted that there are sensitive periods for learning: “When the body is ripe, the society requires, and the self is ready to achieve a certain task, the teachable moment has come. Efforts at teaching, wasted if earlier, give gratifying results at the teachable moment.” (Havighurst)”

In contrast to many earlier societies, when a person might learn in the first twelve years of life the skills needed to live successfully in his society for a lifetime, in modern changing society an individual must continually learn to adapt. Society presents a long series of tasks to learn – those things that constitute healthy growth. Learning well brings satisfaction and rewards; learning poorly brings unhappiness and social disapproval, as well as difficulty with later tasks (Havighurst).

Ranging across the life span, the tasks include learning to walk and talk, developing conscience and moral judgement, developing acceptable attitudes toward society, and achieving a healthy social role in childhood and adolescence, to selecting a mate, starting

a family, starting an occupation, and assuming civic responsibility in early adulthood, on to helping teenage children, achieving adult social and civic responsibility and career achievement and adjusting to aging parents in middle adulthood, and finally to such things as adjusting to decreasing strength and health, adjusting to retirement, adjusting to the death of one's spouse, and meeting social and civic obligations in later adulthood (Havighurst).

That Havighurst also considered the agents principally involved in the tasks - self, family, peer groups, the media, school, religious group, the economy - is especially pertinent to this paper. Additionally, he recognized that we are not one society only; but rather that our overall society includes subcultures, not the least of which are the socioeconomic subcultures, and that these subcultures have their own particular impact on setting developmental task agendas. In present day America it is easy to think that the contrast in the tasks of survival presented by the toughest inner-city environments and the privileged suburb environments may be as different as those of the aboriginal Outback experience and the city experience. The difference certainly contributes to many of the behaviors seen in schools and other settings.

This list of agents brings us around to specific consideration of how society prepares us for life in it. I'm going to ask you to consider a series of questions concerning these agents and in just a moment I will repeat the list. What would you add or subtract from this list? How would you rate the relative power or influence of each agent? What are the important trends within each of the agents? What is the health or harm of each agent

in our larger society at this time? Here is the list of agents again: self, family, peer groups, media, school, religious group, the economy.

Social-psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner emphasized the forces of society in a similar way, pointing out that while we have our own course of development, we all are influenced by a set of nested systems ranging from the immediate family, neighbors, child care centers, and play groups to schools, places of worship, television, town governments, and on to broader religious influences, national government, societal values and world events.

These concepts, when paired with the concerns we have about the proper development of the young beg the question “How can society do a better job of preparing its young?.”

Proposals for utopian societies usually address this issue.

All who have worked with troubled or under-performing youths have wished, at one time or another, and maybe very frequently, to be able to change the home, neighborhood or peer environment of a young student, client, or parish child. This wish is born of recognition of the power of those agents in a child’s life. It is possible to make such changes in utopian societies, if nowhere else. Even though utopian proposals for reorganizing society, in spite of the success of a few experiments, have not gained acceptance as pathways to improving society or to improving the preparation of citizens, we can look there for ideas.

One such rather comprehensive effort, was B.F. Skinner’s novel Walden Two, published in 1947. In the novel, which Skinner labeled a “thought experiment,” Frazier, the person in charge of Walden Two, and other residents, explain the premises and workings of their intentionally constructed society to Professor Burriss and his fellow visitors to

Walden Two. In this society the leaders have made decisions about desirable and undesirable human emotions and relationships. Members are to be cooperative, productive, truthful, free of envy and prejudice, and able to sympathize with the concerns of others. Behavioral engineering is used to condition them to behave in these ways. Central to the endeavor to motivate people to accept these practices and make them work is the system of child rearing and education. Child rearing and education are considered much too important to be left to the haphazard methods of biological parents and incorrectly structured schools. Instead, all children are raised in a carefully controlled way, living in special quarters, and under expert supervision. This begins with a first year in air-conditioned cubicles and proceeds gradually through steps that eventually leave the young adult, conditioned to appropriate attitudes and behavior, virtually free of supervision from others. This novel presented a proposal entirely consistent with Skinner's life long claim that we do not real freedom anyway, that, rather, we are conditioned every day in every way, that we have the behavioral engineering know how, and that we should use it intentionally to improve the quality of our communities and our lives. The novel attracted a vehement backlash and, at the moment, I can't think of any proposals that thorough being published since then - at least not outside the science fiction genre.

Most of us strongly react against the prospect of a society directed by an almighty planner, no matter how well intentioned that planner might be. At least in part that seemingly is what spurred the humanistic perspective of Abraham Maslow, with emphasis on self actualization, and the human potential movement in the 1960's and 70's.

Earlier utopian writings and world events had attracted anti-utopian responses: e.g., Aldous Huxley's Brave New World in 1932 and George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-four in 1949.

To provide one final evidence of concern about society's role in the preparation of persons to productively live in that society, we can mention briefly the most famous of all examples: Socrates' proposals in the Republic as presented by Plato. Of course we remember the irony in the fact that Socrates, who cared so much for his city and for the proper preparation of persons for a productive role in it, would eventually be tried, found guilty and put to death on a charge of corrupting the youth. Remember that he proposed specialized training for those males and female qualified for certain roles in society and that he gave particular attention to the role of certain societal agents, and specified that certain ones must be excluded from the Republic. In particular, he recognized the power of cultural mythology and proposed to ban the poets who promulgated it from his ideal society. If I knew more, and if time permitted examining this entire utopian proposal in depth would be fruitful in a discussion of youth and society.

There you have it – a brief examination of the preparation of the young for life in their society and of some of the particular ways society goes about that preparation, whether intentionally or accidentally. I'll close by inviting your attention again to Havighurst's list of agents that are particularly powerful in this process: self, family, peer groups, the media, school, religious group, and the economy. I invite your comments on these and other aspects of this topic.