

The Conundrum of Education in the Age of Distraction
Building a Philosophy of Self-Leadership & Happiness: Means vs. Ends
(Includes Some Suggested Reading)
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For me, as for some of my favorite authors, the best times of were in the natural world; to revel in the pungent pines, the dinosaur bones of the birch, along the root-corrugated trails. Poetry was at the heart of my daily experience, and now the pines are scientifically scented.

A scientific approach can help us to create connections to the natural world and find or rediscover enchantment in the realm of ideas and the life of the spirit. Pine trees are helpful in this regard it turns out. Scientists say they've found a mechanism by which these "sweet-smelling" vapours turn into aerosols above boreal forests. These particles promote cooling by reflecting sunlight as well as reflecting rays back into space. This perfume is one of the most significant but least understood sources of aerosols in North America, Northern Europe and Russia. Maybe this will help to limit rising temperatures, or maybe not. The forests will stop emitting vapours if they become too stressed from heat or lack of water.

We seem to live in an almost schizophrenic world of rampant Cartesian dualism so that we need a new epistemology applicable in different times and places. We need to envision the future of humanity in harmony and to do so we must learn from our past within a living history. James McPherson (2003), former president of the American Historical Association, once stated that there is no "single, eternal, and immutable truth about past events and their meaning. The unending quest of historians for understanding the past -- that is revisionism -- is what makes history vital and meaningful. Viewed in this light, revisionism is not an attack on classical interpretations of history, but rather a natural evolution of constantly unfolding interpretations of our past..."

We are on intellectual and emotional journey into the zone of modern consciousness, aflame with myriad distractions of every kind, but also full of the excitement of amazing discoveries. No wonder dualism predominates. Stewart Brand, author of *The Whole Earth Catalog* and now the guru of The Long Now Foundation writes of our era: "Civilization is revving itself into a pathologically short attention span. The trend might be coming from the acceleration of technology, the short-horizon perspective of market-driven economics, the next-

election perspective of democracies, or the distractions of personal multi-tasking. All are on the increase."

To overcome these distractions and find time to listen to the forest isn't easy for any age group, with the myriad distractions of pop culture and misapplied behavior management in the schools, where the study of history was relegated to the realm of "social studies." An outspoken revisionist historian of note is John Taylor Gatto, author of the *Underground History of American Education: An Intimate Investigation Into The Prison of Modern Schooling*. Ironically, this NY City and NY State teacher of the year introduces his book with a quote by one of my favorite authors, Dylan Thomas (who has his 100th birthday in 2014).

In "Fern Hill" we read "Now when I was young and easy under the apple boughs About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green, The night above the dingle starry, Time let me hail and climb Golden in the heydays of his eyes."

At the end as Thomas aged he wrote "to the farm forever fled from the childless land. Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means, Time held me green and dying though I sang in my chains like the sea."

Simon and Garfunkel sang in their heyday, "Time it was, and what a time it was, it was A time of innocence, a time of confidences. Long ago, it must be, I have a photograph. Preserve your memories, they're all that's left you."

We are caught between the machine and the farm; between a sci fi world and nostalgia for a simpler time. We love our technologies and science but deep down we know that we are children of nature. I often invite my students to read Orwell's essay "Why I Write" because he starts off, like Gatto, describing his natural proclivities and propensities and ends up explaining the power of politics as it drives one's writing and life. The natural world was clearly a wellspring for him.

A happy vicar I might have been / Two hundred years ago / To preach upon
eternal doom / And watch my walnuts grow; / But born, alas, in an evil time, /
I missed that pleasant haven, / For the hair has grown on my upper lip / And
the clergy are all clean-shaven. / And later still the times were good, / We
were so easy to please, / We rocked our troubled thoughts to sleep / On the
bosoms of the trees. / All ignorant we dared to own / The joys we now
dissemble; / The greenfinch on the apple bough / Could make my enemies
tremble. / But girl's bellies and apricots, / Roach in a shaded stream, /
Horses, ducks in flight at dawn, / All these are a dream. / It is forbidden to
dream again; / We maim our joys or hide them: / Horses are made of
chromium steel / And little fat men shall ride them.

Certainly vehicle and motorbike horsepower dominates our world, but out in the fields we have Lyme Disease and bears and coyotes oh my! And now in recent years the only remaining sanctuary other than the church, the school, is no longer sacrosanct. In Connecticut there are some 765 violent crimes in the schools, and 15,000 fights per year.

This goes beyond not enough recess, and reflects an unhealthy disconnect from the natural world and the spirit that emerges from contemplation and leads to healthy growth. When we are children, the world revolves around us, but ideally we grow up to achieve the highest states of being as described by Erik Erikson's eight states of psychosocial development. In stage seven we create positive change that benefits others and feel that we've accomplished something in the world. In the last stage we reflect on our accomplishments and achieve wisdom, the memories of Simon and Garfunkel.

In the early years, in catechism class in the 1950s at the Union School, Unionville Ct, our primal questions from the *Baltimore Catechism* were: "Why did God make us? To show forth His goodness and to share with us His everlasting happiness in heaven. What must we do to gain the happiness of heaven? We must know, love and serve God in this world."

When all else fails during the course of our turbulent lives, we can fall back upon this, but only if we were taught to do so, and only if we don't neglect the natural world as it is a reflection of the Maker's handiwork (and yes evidence for evolution is indisputable). Materialism, consumption and secularism became even more pervasive around that time, and the search for transcendence was not perceived as pragmatic or utilitarian.

Harvey Cox wrote *The Secular City Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* in 1965 (I read it then), which sold a million copies, and did a recap in 1990 when the book was republished. Secularism as he defined it is not a bad thing. "It prevents powerful religions from acting on their theocratic pretensions. It allows people to choose among a wider range of worldviews... The truth is that both religious revival and secularization are morally ambiguous processes. Both heal and destroy. We still desperately need a way of welcoming diversity that does not deteriorate into nihilism..." (*The Christian Century*, 7 Nov 1990, 1025-1029). In 2010 he wrote *The Future of Faith* and in 2013 his original work was republished by Princeton UP. The debate is still on. The cities, secular or not, are our future, and they are threatened by rising seas, and the likelihood of mass migrations. We need a revival of the spirit more than ever to confront our future and rein in overconsumption, overtreatment and all wasting and wasteful activities.

Authors in the transcendentalist movement used to engage the populace. From the *Oxford Dictionary* we read this was "An idealistic philosophical and social movement that developed in New England around 1836 in reaction to rationalism. Influenced by romanticism, Platonism, and Kantian philosophy, it taught that divinity pervades all nature and humanity, and its members held progressive views on feminism and communal living. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were central figures." This was a time of contemplation and the study of poetry was at the heart of the curriculum.

There are many recent studies of the nature of happiness perhaps triggered by the desperate desire for contemplation in a culture full of noise. Both Confucius and Socrates implied that happiness and personal growth were a major purpose of life, and a central goal of education. According to the Federalist Papers, written by the founders of U.S. government, "A good government implies two things: first, fidelity to the **object** of government, which is the happiness of the people; secondly, a knowledge of the **means** by which that object can be best attained." More than two hundred years later, our schools and even our colleges have lost sight of these basic tenets. We are so busy cultivating our intellectual skills in the pursuit of wealth and status <ends>, that we have neglected the pursuit of happiness.

To come up to speed quickly on the history of public education in the U.S. and glimpse what Gatto writes about voluminously see the video by Sir Ken Robinson <http://ednerd.wordpress.com/2010/10/23/sir-ken-robinson-ed-nerd-hero/> We are born with a sense of wonder and how this is transmuted and nurtured, or not, over the years correlates to our enjoyment of life. Our journey is influenced by our role models, mostly our parents and teachers, but also poets such as Thomas and a variety of authors. Unfortunately the media with all its distractions is the most powerful influence, and that inspires the hyperactivity and sense of boredom and unfulfillment increasingly seen in schoolchildren.

On the book cover, Matthew Crawford, author of *Shop Class As Soulcraft* writes of *The Shallows* by Nicholas Carr:

The core of education is this: developing the capacity to **concentrate**. The fruits of this capacity we call civilization. But all that is finished, perhaps. Welcome to the shallows, where the uneducating of homo sapiens begins. Nicholas Carr does a wonderful job synthesizing the recent cognitive research. In doing so, he gently refutes the ideologists of progress, and shows what is really at stake in the daily habits of our wired lives: the re-constitution of our minds.

Maryanne Wolf, author of *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* writes:

Ultimately, *The Shallows* is a book about the preservation of the human capacity for **contemplation and wisdom**, in an epoch where both appear increasingly threatened. Nick Carr provides a thought-provoking and intellectually courageous account of how the medium of the Internet is changing the way we think now and how future generations will or will not think. Few works could be more important.

In Carr's words:

We want to be interrupted, because each interruption brings us a valuable piece of information... And so we ask the Internet to keep interrupting us, in ever more and different ways. We willingly accept the loss of concentration and focus, the division of our attention and the fragmentation of our thoughts, in return for the wealth of compelling or at least **diverting** information we receive. Tuning out is not an option many of us would consider. (133-4)

Over the years, external and internal forces, the so-called nature vs nurture factors, influence our development in varying degrees. Getting the right balance in our lives is our biggest challenge. But what if exterior forces are stronger than our inner drive and resources? We have to understand how these forces came into being historically and are maintained so that we can overcome our lethargy or frustration.

Some of these forces are more manageable than others and impact our freedom of spirit and creativity in various ways, good and bad. Relating to other people sometimes seems to be the most initially challenging aspect of development (Erikson's seventh stage). We can accelerate the process of learning about human nature through our scholarship. When we achieve a certain level of understanding of human nature and the natural world, we can put our knowledge and drive to work by seeking common ground with others to reinforce our goals and hopes and dreams - and impact the material world and the future.

Students sometimes express interest in learning about the concept of **common ground**, and I will refer them to the writing of philosopher Jacques Maritain on the common good. This is from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

A key notion in Maritain's moral philosophy is that of human freedom. He says that the "end" of humanity is to be free but, by "freedom," he does not mean license or pure rational autonomy, but the realization of the human person in accord with his or her nature --

specifically, the achievement of moral and spiritual perfection. Maritain's moral philosophy, then, cannot be considered independently of his analysis of human nature. Maritain distinguishes between the human being as an individual and as a person. Human beings are "individuals" who are related to a common, social order of which they are parts. But they are also persons. The person is a "whole," an object of dignity, "must be treated as an **end**" (*Les droits de l'homme*, p. 84) and has a transcendent destiny. In both the material and the spiritual order, however, human beings participate in a "common good." Thus, one is an individual in virtue of being a material being; one is a person so far as one is capable of intellectual activity and freedom. Still, while distinct, both elements are equally necessary to being a human being. It is in virtue of their individuality that human beings have obligations to the social order, but it is in virtue of their personality that they cannot be subordinated to that order. Maritain's emphasis on the value of the human person has been described as a form of *personalism*, which he saw as a *via media* between individualism and socialism.

The ability to separate means from ends is at the heart of critical thinking. We must understand how different forces (social means) for progress (social ends or the common good) detract from or supplement our true mission in life: to enjoy the simple, natural joys of the world that has been created for us to inhabit and safeguard.

Ideally you will get the values needed to understand and evaluate the powers of distraction, whether imposed from within or without, by self or others -- as they affect our families, our selves, our co-workers. With myriad distractions one does not have time for reflection, contemplation, meditation to even find a path to reconcile or negate these distractions; which are increasingly inescapable (though we may think we are immune). Without time spent in reflection we cannot reconcile conflicting impulses and ideas and feelings and make progress in our lives and work. **We can't take on the challenge of self-leadership and self-empowerment and separate means from ends.** We can't have honest dialogues with each other in families or governments. We can't lead others or teach them to lead themselves. We can't enjoy nature for its own sake, and this disconnect leads us to unhappiness and to continue to exploit the natural world, with increasingly drastic consequences, as the population grows to nine billion.

The search for reflective time has practical implications for our workaday lives. Numerous business leadership gurus such as John Maxwell, author of

Developing the Leader Within You, put the concept of self-leadership at the center of their books. This is not new. Samuel Johnson once wrote that "He who has so little knowledge of human nature as to seek happiness by changing anything but his **own disposition** will waste his life in fruitless efforts." J. Krishnamurti wrote: "In oneself lies the whole world and if you know how to look and learn, then the door is there and the key is in your hand. Nobody on earth can give you either the key or the door to open, except yourself." It may have been the Oracle at Delphi who first coined the admonition to "Know Thyself."

The sooner we tap into our self-awareness, and develop an ongoing ability to refine our attitudes and awareness, the more successful we will be in self-leadership. Students are bored and frustrated if they don't understand how what they study can be applied to their lives. D.H. Lawrence once wrote, "The great and fatal fruit of our civilization, which is a civilization based on knowledge, and hostile to experience, is boredom. All our wonderful education and learning is producing a grand sum-total of boredom. Modern people are inwardly thoroughly bored" (Retrieved at this Dominican web site, which has a good little article on the subject of modern boredom: <http://www.goodnews.ie/betweenourselvesgeniet.shtml>).

To develop the right disposition and frame of mind you need an open mind, so that you can understand the power of your thoughts and perhaps even place yourself in the right environment to influence those thoughts in a positive way - whether this environment is real or virtual. Most students today do not spend much time seeking out the most challenging thinkers to open their minds, or seek out the solitude they need to do so. They are in the wrong environment, or have difficulty controlling their environment. With the Internet and gaming, where so many spend their time, a wrong or misplaced or useless environment is easy to find, and time is easy to waste. Is the Web a growing, global brain or a global labyrinth? (Read *The Shallows*.)

For Trent Batson, it is a labyrinth. "What we have lived with for all of human history--obfuscation-- has now assumed a new form that is sinister and nearly invisible," writes Batson in *The Age of Obfuscation*, Campus Technology, July 21, 2010.

Humanity now has the ability to spin vast systems that leave people confused and overwhelmed. Mortgage instruments sold in the first decade of this century were so complicated that not only did the buyers fail to have a glimmer of what they were getting into, but most of the people selling the instruments probably had no idea what they were selling. The financial sector nearly collapsed in the fall of 2008, one commentator said, because the people who had created the

financial instruments du jour simply forgot what they had put in motion: The system they built grew beyond anyone's comprehension so almost no one was aware of how precarious their whole system had become.

Managing complexity, and ensuring the right attitude to do, needs to be the focus of education today. I can only hope we're verging on what de Chardin once called the "Noosphere" of interlinked consciousness around the world as a force for good. Basically he foresaw the Internet before the dawn of computers. Phil Hefner writes about de Chardin in *Building One Big Brain*:

He saw the evolution toward the interconnected brain as one pole of the dialectic, while the enhancement of the 'cell' is a co-equal pole...One needs to have a metaphysic (or theology) that recognizes both elements of this dialectic... (the) balancing of the two poles. After all, it is only because of the intensifying of the knowledge and self-awareness of your individual self as a cell that you are able to recognize the evolution toward big brain (Opinionator, *New York Times*, 7 July 2010 at <http://community.nytimes.com/comments/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/07/06/the-web-we-weave/?permid=96#comment96>).

"Love is the answer," sang England Dan and John Ford Coley, but hardest of all to achieve it seems; which is the reason for Christ's coming to earth. De Chardin wrote: "Someday after mastering winds, waves, tides and gravity, we shall harness the energies of love, and then, for the second time in the history of the world, man will discover fire." Presumably we must greatly lessen the spread of hatred, which is driven by factors that I think we have yet to understand within ourselves and our communities of different kinds. Hopefully lots of dialogue will help in this regard, and the world will not continue to become a tower of Babel.

When we have found ourselves we can then focus on altruism and the common good, including working toward global harmony, children's rights, animal rights, worker's rights etc. **To understand the common good and achieve the greatest good for all, and contentment if not happiness, we must redefine the notion of progress - and that is very hard to do.** "If policymakers measure what really matters to people—health care, safety, a clean environment, and other indicators of well-being—economic policy would naturally shift towards sustainability" (The Alliance for Sustainability at <http://www.afs.nonprofitoffice.com/>). People around the globe are desperately seeking to understand changing cultures, alternate or alien cultures, their place in the world within the concept of sustainability.

Marcus Aurelius (161 - 180 A.D.), warrior, philosopher, and the last great emperor of the Roman Empire wrote:

From my grandfather, Verus, I learned good morals and the government of my temper. From the reputation and remembrance of my father, modesty and a manly character. From my mother, piety and generosity, and abstinence, not only from evil deeds, but even from evil thoughts; and further, simplicity in my way of living, far removed from the habits of the rich.

A positive, lifelong process of education begins in a happy home and an extended family of some kind. It begins in a world of imagination driven by images and dreams of nature and even of idyllic times of yore, with Bible stories, fairy tales, and folklore galore. As Bruno Bettelheim writes in *The Uses of Enchantment* it is the reading of such fantasies that lead to healthy childhood development and the capability to confront reality. (Jim Henson created "The Storyteller" series which is also pretty amazing.)

Experience with nature is crucial to encourage independent learning and happiness. Wordsworth in 1798 penned: "One impulse from a vernal wood, May teach you more of man, Of moral evil and of good, Than all the sages can."

Dylan Thomas wrote: "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees Is my destroyer. And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose My youth is bent by the same wintry fever."

A life with time for contemplation is the key to happiness in our daily life and in the workplace or in school or college. Joseph Pieper writes in *Happiness and Contemplation* that "man's ultimate happiness consists in contemplation... This idea belongs to a store of traditional wisdom whose roots go deeper than historical time." (I discovered this guy when I was a Fordham student around 1968.)

Also, for author and Yale Professor Harold Bloom contemplation brings happiness. In *Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages*, he writes that he:

Was a very lonely child, despite a loving family circle and he remains solitary after a lifetime of teaching, rereading, and writing. But how much more isolated I would be if poems and stories had not nurtured me, and if they did not go on fostering me. The child alone with her or his book is, for me, the true image of potential happiness, of something evermore about to be. A child, lonely and gifted, will employ a marvelous story or poem to create a companion for himself or myself. Such an invisible friend is not an unhealthy phantasmagoria, but the mind learning to exercise itself in all its powers.

"To learn, you must want to be taught." (Proverbs 12:1) Motivation, of course, is a huge topic in business literature. For Maxwell, motivation springs from attitude. In teaching or in business we consider motivational issues in relationship to the common good, home life, nature, the media, loneliness, happiness -- to better motivate employees or students to learn. If a teacher can demonstrate that learning is a "big picture" activity, a transcendent and spiritual activity, and a way to make sense of reality, then the student will want to learn. Our greatest satisfactions and joys come from significant challenges overcome.

How many students have an opportunity to study philosophy and the meaning of life, overcoming the significant challenges of difficult reading? Understanding oneself is not a one shot activity; it can take most of one's life, and a choice to actively seek out the difficult material. When a certain level of self-knowledge is attained, then one can then go beyond the self into altruism, which should be a normal part of maturation. (Service learning is very popular now!) However, maturation is deliberately delayed by the business church of advertising, TV and gaming, since adolescents are the best consumers. (See *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults and Swallow Citizens Whole*, by Benjamin Barber.)

People want to be treated as ends in themselves, not as a means toward the gratification of another's vanity or as conduits for stuff. An important part of education is to learn not to confuse means with ends. **A decent lifestyle is a means to an end as well as an end in itself**, giving one time for important things such as helping others to achieve a meaningful life, or the pursuit of the arts, or just to enjoy nature.

Recently, at my alma mater, Fordham College, alum Chris Lowney, former Jesuit seminarian, author of *Heroic Living: Discover Your Purpose and Change the World*, and former managing director at J.P. Morgan, spoke on the financial meltdown of 2008. He said that America needs people who can distinguish ends from means, make great choices and reflect daily on what is happening. The title of his talk was "Could St. Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* Have Spared Us the 2008 Wall Street Crash?" He said that:

Virtually no attention has been paid to help sharpen the decision-making skills of the human actors in this industry. This is where Ignatius can contribute critically. The *Exercises* force participants to reflect deeply about human purpose before making decisions about their own careers or the lives of others. We humans often choose badly not because we lack data or analytical tools, but because we are gripped by "disordered attachments," unfreedoms or

desires or biases that undermine our decision-making ability. We need to develop a habit of reflection in a world that just moves on. We need to become courageous leaders in a world with too few of them.

Everyone has the potential for courageous self-leadership, and then once this is achieved the wherewithal to lead others to courageously lead themselves. This is true in education and in the workplace. This is what the best teachers do, as well as corporate CEOs, and it starts with a spirit of inquiry and the love of learning for its own sake to combat boredom, and acknowledgement of the inestimable value of life for all species on our small planet in the vast universe some 15 billion years old (see *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story*).

Without a questioning mind, one cannot perform effectively in today's workplace, where self-leadership is valued by the most advanced organizations, as noted by John Maxwell, author of *Developing the Leader Within You*, and in *Super-Leadership: Leading Others to Lead Themselves*, by Charles Manz and Henry Sims. In the latter we read in the chapter on sociotechnical design and teams:

What is the connection between conversation and productivity? What is there about what people say that translates into bottom-line results? Why is talk more than just talk? Part of the reason conversations get turned into productivity is *information sharing* and part is influence on *employee motivation*. If any executive is asked what his major problem is, the chances are good that the reply would be something like this: 'Communication. Our communication is not what it should be. We just never seem to have the right information at the right place at the right time.' Inadequate information often means inadequate information sharing. More often than not, this problem is the result of a policy of secrecy.

The authors go on to explain that the best managers promote the sharing of all information that isn't personal, and this leads to an unprecedented culture of openness and basis for "proactive problem solving." So is our philosophy of life pertinent in the workplace if we don't share the personal? It would seem that with a solid philosophy of life we will be better performers in the workplace, since we won't bring in a lot of baggage to the water cooler. We will understand the difference between the personal and the private. Our motivation comes from within and is a means to an end, to improve the common good.

More Quotes:

"Nothing of value happens to the individual through coercion" (Plato).

"Do not train children to learning by force and harshness, but direct them to it by what amuses their minds, so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each" (Plato)

"It is very nearly impossible... to become an educated person in a country so distrustful of the independent mind" (James Baldwin)

"The pupil who is never required to do what he cannot do, never does what he can do" (John Stuart Mill)

"Nine tenths of education is encouragement" (Anatole France)

"The best teacher is the one who suggests rather than dogmatizes, and inspires his listener with the wish to teach himself" (Edward Bulwer-Lytton)

"Education is not the answer to the question. Education is the means to the answer to all questions" (William Allin)

"Formal education will make you a living; self-education will make you a fortune" (Jim Rohn)

"A liberally educated person meets new ideas with curiosity and fascination. An illiberally educated person meets new ideas with fear" (James B. Stockdale).

"An educational system isn't worth a great deal if it teaches young people how to make a living but doesn't teach them how to make a life" (Author Unknown).

"I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think" (Socrates).