

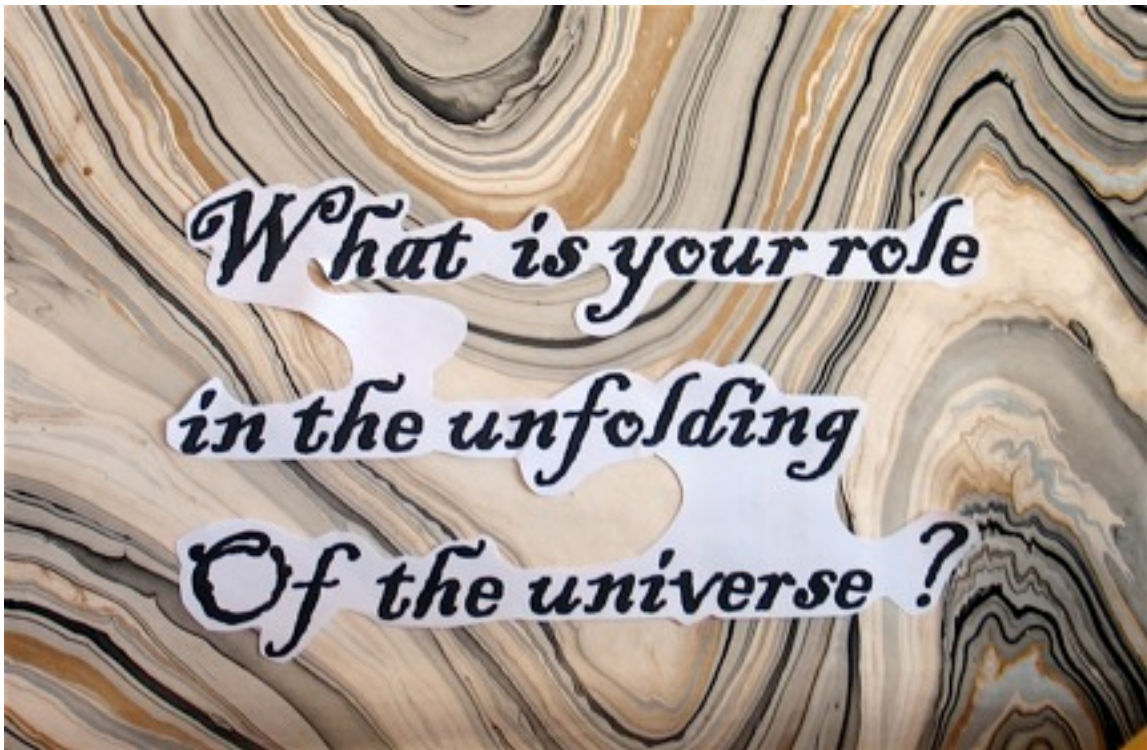
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# Unschooling and Educational Transformation

Reactions, Critical Learning, and Transformation

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When I first began this course, my intentions were to continue my exploration of the concept of “unschooling” - the notion that life is an educational process and an unfolding. One of the more profound learning experiences early on in my graduate study was observing students at The Village School of Northfield. The Village School was a K-12 Minnesota charter school where students learned what they wanted, when they wanted, and how they wanted. It was in effect, an “unschool” within a school. I had wanted to dive deeper into the literature surrounding “unschooling” - parents who didn’t send their children to school, teens who unplugged from the public school system to create their own unique educational experiences, and the resources available to “unschoolers.” What actually happened in this course was a beautiful unfolding transformation, which allowed me to not only study these concepts, but to participate in and actively create something new from within this learning.

## From Village School to Starwalkers

In May of 2006, the Northfield School Board voted to revoke their sponsorship of The Village School of Northfield. While the decision of the school board is still being argued in the courts, as teachers of the Village School have in effect, sued the Northfield School board, The Village School has been closed for an entire year.

Normally, students would find other schools to attend after the closing of a school. However, out of the 40 students enrolled at The Village School, 50% of them refused to “go back to school.” Three of the former teachers of the Village School remained in the building three days per week, and agreed to teach students on a volunteer basis. Students were registered as home schoolers, and named themselves The Village Learning Community. Both teachers and students felt that the word “school” needed to be eliminated from their name. This community of “squatters” were allowed the use of their original school building, while the bond holders who actually owned the building waited for court proceedings to play out.

While volunteering to teach children at The Village Learning Community, Rose Ann Steenhoek and Olivia Frey approached me to create a website for an organization they were creating, called Starwalkers. Starwalkers was then envisioned as an intentional community in rural Northfield, which would also host workshops and retreats on personal transformation. Starwalkers would also be an umbrella organization for The Village Learning Community. After meeting with Rose Ann and Olivia several times concerning the web site, I began having conversations with them about possibly teaching a Reiki workshop through Starwalkers. After a few months of meeting with these women, coming together to prepare meals whenever we would work on the web site, I approached them about the possibility of becoming a partner in Starwalkers. I could create marketing materials and assist them more fully in developing the overall program for the organization. They immediately said “yes!”

Now, Starwalkers has hosted two Awakening Quest retreats, as well as a Reiki hands-on healing class. We staffed a booth at the Living Green Expo in Saint Paul in May, and have three more retreat weekends scheduled through September of 2007.

“Starwalkers is an intentional learning community that fosters personal transformation, leading ultimately to societal transformation.” This was our 15-second introductory speech to those who would stop at our booth at the Living Green Expo. This was a great exercise for us, because we first felt that there was very little “established language” for what we were trying to do. We

wanted to create a place that people could live, both for months at a time, and for 2-4 days at a time, where we would explore the very nature of ourselves, our passions, and our uniqueness. We would come together in a community to help each other tap into this uniqueness, and to support one another in carrying that forward into the world. Starwalkers is about the unfolding of deep and meaningful transformation. In many ways, it has been the outgrowth of ideas held at The Village School, combined with my own notions of transformation and “the lid being off” from within my own study of Human Development.

Now, when I attend a workshop or am asked to facilitate or help in the kitchen, I always come away with new insights, new dreams, and wonderful perspectives into my own life. Rose Ann, Olivia, and I now all agree that without the closing of The Village School, none of this could have come about. Starwalkers is an organization that is independent of the powers of a school board. We have more freedom now to create a vision that at times had to be compromised because of educational “standards” and expectations.

### **The Crisis of the Current Educational System**

Throughout my reading, attending Tent State events, participation at Starwalkers, and reflecting upon my own experience, I believe there is a crisis in our educational system. This crisis of this institution can be summarized by the following categorical assumptions (these are my opinions):

- I. Education is used not for democracy, but to serve a system controlled by an economic and cultural elite.

With the recent passage of No Child Left Behind, governmental restrictions of public education abound. Federal funding for education is tied to military recruitment. Unless parents opt their children out, their information is used for recruiting purposes. As well, teacher compensation and student achievement are measured more and more according to standardized test results. Who benefits from these facets of education? More and more, the economic benefit from these regulations is delivered, not to students, but to test manufacturers, curriculum development corporations, textbook publishers, and multi-national corporations. Universities that were once 80-85% financed by state tax dollars, are now seeing their state funding drop to 15-30% - the rest of their funding derived from private industry. When public universities are no longer primarily funded by public dollars, how can they be assured to benefit the public trust?

Furthermore, schools and classrooms, by example, can be some of the most undemocratic

places to be. From the moment a student sets foot in a classroom, they have had no say in the rules and regulations, the imposed curriculum, a history of “founding fathers” or a required Pledge of Allegiance, the color of the walls, etc. Often times there is no freedom to learn in individually designed ways.

2. Our current educational system fragments learning and is not integrative.

From as early as preschool, a child’s educational experience within our current system is one of fragmentation and compartmentalization. Bells are sounded for recess. Coursework is separated into 50-minute class periods by subject. Children are assigned seating in rows of desks, away from the natural environment, or their natural patterns of growth and movement. Students in colleges and universities must declare major and minor courses of study from a prescribed list of departments. From an early age we are pressured to “specialize” our learning, to suit a pre-defined curriculum, or to obtain specific certifications for certain careers. Education and learning are placed in a box, even when research in learning shows us that we learn and absorb the most when our experience is integrated.

3. Education is largely disconnected from our own personal transformation.

Throughout our educational experience, we learn to largely disconnect from our personal experience in the learning process. Coursework is chosen from a pre-defined curriculum. Grading and testing measure the ability to memorize facts and information. Students progress through an educational system through pre-defined yearly grade levels. Very little support is given to foster an individual’s passions or transformation from within this educational context. Furthermore, the measurement or assessment of our own personal transformation of self is rarely a consideration. Schooling and education are a means to a vocational or economic end, rather than a life-long pursuit spurred from ongoing curiosity.

4. Our current educational systems are unsustainable - both economically and environmentally.

College tuition in many cases has risen tenfold since 1969. Many students graduate with a debt load of \$17,000 or more. In my case, in 1988, my tuition payment for Coe College was less than \$10,000 per year. Today, yearly tuition at Coe College is well over \$30,000. With a growing US trade deficit, the looming approach of global “peak oil”, and the threat of global climate change, we may see a crisis that will make higher education a distant afterthought compared to our immediate needs. Very few public schools, colleges, or universities are stepping up to be “ahead of the curve” with respect to these approaching harsh reali-

ties. If public schools, colleges, and universities are meant to serve the public good by preparing students for challenges that lie ahead, is it not imperative that they consider these challenges - both in practice and within the educational curriculum set forth?

## **How Can We Change the Story of Education?**

The story of education in our time, I believe, is primarily one of maintaining hierarchical structures, and a system based on the control of an elite few over the vast majority of people. Our educational systems are an outgrowth of our larger political and institutional climate. One could argue that the undemocratic practices of education can well serve the empirical needs of corporations or a governmental structure in power.

In his essay entitled Change the Story, Change the World (2001), David Korten illustrates his philosophy that Empire, as a system, has had a 5,000 year hold over society and its definitions of public culture. Korten believes this:

*“The key to turning the human course from Empire to Earth Community is to break the trance and displace Empire stories that deny our human possibilities with compelling Earth Community stories that celebrate those possibilities.”*

In this essay, Korten provides a model for defining the “Empire Development Story” of an institution, deconstructing this story to illustrate its destructive force, then in turn, creating a new “Earth Community Story” which addresses the core needs of people and the planet. I believe that this model could be applied to education as follows:

### **Empire’s education story:**

*Through further standardization of curriculum, testing, and controls on public education, we can ensure a more uniform education to allow citizens access to careers in the public and private sectors. An educational system focusing on advancements in technology, biomedical research, industry, security, and economic growth, will insure that our nation can not only compete in the global marketplace, but emerge as a clear leader for the future.*

### **Deconstruction:**

*The standardization of curriculum, testing, and national control of education does not serve a*

*landscape of people of diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Education focusing on the emergence of power in a global marketplace serves a system that encourages the economic gain of one privileged nation-state at the expense of another. Individual passions, creativity, and emergence of new and innovative ideas are not fostered. Only those carrying the prescribed knowledge, certifications, or job titles which benefit the ideals of Empire will be rewarded economically, leaving a self-perpetuating landscape of “haves” and “have nots” both locally and globally as a result.*

### **Earth Community’s education story:**

*By nurturing the unique passions, interests, and talents of people from diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds, education serves to further pluralize and democratize our world. Education which preserves cultural heritage, integrates rather than specializes learning, and deeply conveys a responsibility for the stewardship of Planet Earth and all its inhabitants, serves to create a more fair, just, and harmonious world. As we look inward to learn about ourselves, and outward to cooperatively learn from the world and its inhabitants, we break down walls, create equal opportunity, and share in our co-created abundance - for continued generations of the human experiment.*

I believe that “changing the story” of education, as well as the story of the many forces which influence our lives, will be vital to our sustained existence in the wake of energy shortages and global climate change. We may well need to be a people of courage, innovation, imagination, and cooperation to adequately survive. If our educational system does not transform, we may be in a lot of trouble.

### **Reflecting Upon My Own Educational Journey**

Often times, I see the irony and dichotomy of my own situation with regard to my current education. Through the Master of Arts in Human Development, I am free to pursue my curiosities and passions to their fullest. Yet, I cannot deny that I am also working within the very system that I am openly criticizing. I borrow federally subsidized student loans in order to pay rising tuition, so that I might explore the possibilities of transformation within this system. More strongly even, my inquiry leads me to believe that disconnections from the “Empire Story” are a vital and necessary step toward the creation of a more responsible and loving global humanity.

I am thankful to have the opportunity to forge my own path in this educational journey. I sometimes wonder however - just as in the case of The Village School - if forces in power might someday eliminate the very structure within Saint Mary's University that provides for me this kind of deep, meaningful, and sometimes radical inquiry. But, just as energy cannot be destroyed, only transformed (or so we know now), these seeds have been planted deep within me. A further irony I feel is that I myself may be, in essence, creating my own "unschool" within the confines of academia. While I may never use my Master's degree to attain wealth, or to "plug in" to a system of dominance and control for my own economic security, I feel that I have been changed, and that am better for it.

I believe that a deep critique of education as a system, as well as my own unique role in my education, was a needed step for me. I'm beginning to embrace the idea that all of my learning can, and probably should, be derived from that which I create. Whether it is art, music, an intentional community, a poem, or a letter to a college president, my learning experience and my life experience of passion, imagination, and joy should not be disconnected. It must not be disconnected - in order to continue the deep integration and synthesis I desire and which I am capable. Through the continued experience of creativity, joy, and radical inquiry, I have the power to awaken, as Marshall Rosenberg states, "what is alive in me."

The true gift of my learning now lies in the deep connections, correlations, and parallels I trace and create among and between discoveries I make along my journey. When I witness the unfolding of a flower or walk the twists and turns of a labyrinth, I feel the deep connection and integration of learning, as if it is a cellular experience. When I create art or music, place my hands upon wind turbines, or dip my feet in sacred waters, I can change my own story, and perhaps claim my place in the formation of a new "Earth Community."

With all of my heart, I hope.