Why the Center Can't Hold: A Diagnosis of Puritanized America

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Our galloping disinvestment in education doesn’t need to be proved. By reason of family members and friends—if not from personal experience—everyone’s aware of it. On the surface of things it’s so obviously counterproductive it seems inexplicable. It’s as if a hungry farmer were to say in desperate times: “We’ll eat all the seed-corn this year, but as soon as we are again blest with bountiful harvests, we’ll start again to put seed aside for planting.”

Regarding education, Franklin, Madison, and—in his way—Jefferson were clear that, for government-by-the-people to work, the public would have to be well informed and able to think realistically about needs and prospects. Jefferson tells us “a people who would be both free and ignorant longs for something that can never be.” This is why free speech and a free press, along with freedom of religion, were singled out for protection in our first amendment to our Constitution.

Candidates for government office understand this so well that each of them campaigns to become the Education Mayor or the Education Governor or the Education President. Yet what we observe often these days is that the candidates are no sooner in office than they discover, alas, that now is not the opportune time—in our pressing circumstances, education must await more prosperous days.

Here, let me approach the subject matter in a twofold way: both by providing anecdotes that provide a plausible account of what’s happening, and by intervening with reflection as to underlying causes for these happenings. While the objection may be lodged that you can’t sketch history from anecdotes, let me counter that
if the anecdotes are typical and are set forth honestly, you can—and we do.

While anecdotes are subject to charges of being inaccurately presented, slanted, subjectively interpreted, unrepresentative, I claim that my anecdotes are accurate and exemplary. Whether this is the case is for the reader to judge.

It’s not surprising that the state put Socrates to death. States don’t like criticism. Our own early colonists, particularly those of Massachusetts Bay Colony, practically defined themselves by being critical and dissatisfied with the British state; but in the same breath by which they resisted British control, they regarded themselves as beyond the reach of criticism and as divinely assigned to control others.

In the 1630s the stresses and ironies of this situation come to light in Massachusetts in this first decade of the colony’s history. We look to relations between the Governor, John Winthrop, and the gifted pastor, Roger Williams. Winthrop acknowledged that Williams was sincere and charismatic, but found him a terrible nuisance. Winthrop thought Williams took the position of the Puritan dissenting church a step too far. For Williams argued that if the Anglican Church had not the authority to dictate the beliefs of the Puritan dissenting community, so neither had it—nor had indeed the British state—the authority to license the existence of that dissenting church. The dissenting church was a community of faith which, beyond gratitude for opportunity to set up shop in the New World, owed nothing either to the established Church of England or to the British civil authority which had done the establishing. Further, according to Williams, in the matter of land grants—contrary to the position of the Puritan civil authority in Massachusetts—Indians as human beings had rights of possession which were more than equal to any rights of the white newcomers. How did the colony deal with this critical thinker? Much as John Winthrop, the chief authority in the Puritan community, wanted his colony to be a jewel of enlightened thinking and a beacon of light to mankind, he found this too much, and he acquiesced in the banishment of Williams. Winthrop and his colony believed neither in free speech nor the rights of individual conscience. Is it a too great a jump to say one can discover here an early disinclination to promote education?
This wasn’t a solitary instance, in the founding days, of a Puritan attempt to curb freedom of thought and speech in America. Anne Hutchinson too had her way of drawing conclusions from the Puritan protest against Anglicanism. Puritans rightly, she taught, had no use for pope or bishops. But if these man-made offices encompassed no special license to teach the faith, what special claim on such teaching had the appointed male ministers of the Massachusetts colony? Did not the gospel tell us the Holy Spirit was the true teacher of the faith? And was not the Spirit free to blow where it would? One can imagine how the rigorous and humorless Winthrop regarded such a proposition. He saw it as mutiny, and endorsed Hutchinson’s banishment as he had Williams’s. Later when he heard of Anne’s death at the hands of Indians, he felt God’s honor and his own had been vindicated.¹

So while America was brought forth in a protest against England, it would be unhistorical to say this protest was a protest on behalf of tolerance or critical thinking. It was protest on behalf of intolerance, seeking radical limitations on critical thinking and educational development.

All too soon, there were other, glaring indications that America was not conceived in a burst of dedication to enlightened attitudes, freedom of speech, and the advance of critical thinking. When Africans were brought to the shores of “the new world,” they brought with them the skills and stamina of people raised in agricultural communities. These traits made them valuable. At the same time, it was expedient that their social bonds be subservient to the uses of those who claimed to be the owners of their labor. In being wrenched from communities in which they had operated familiarly and efficiently, the kidnapped Africans lost too their names, their tribal affiliations, their religions, and their

¹. Richard Hofstadter, in his treatment of American anti-intellectualism, uncharacteristically fumbles here. While he can correctly cite Anne as an enthusiast and therefore as unimpressed by book learning and college degrees, he would be entitled to see Winthrop and the Puritan divines as stellar examples of intellectualism only if he’s right in overlooking their misogyny, their prickly narrow-mindedness in their banishment of Anne, and their emotionally-destabilizing adherence to predestination which nurtured bigotry toward anyone notably different from themselves.
languages. While they were taught the language of those who denied their freedom, the teaching was economical.

Let the enslaved learn the gospel—as it might reconcile them to their state. (And the notion they were creating Christians provided a soothing balm to the consciences of those who claimed to own them.) More urgently, no doubt, let these Africans hear and understand the voices of those who sought profit from their labor. Beyond that, not much. Aside from education for specific tasks, let the fetters of the mind bind ever tighter. Since reading was empowering and since writing enabled partnerships and organization for the pursuit of freedom, the teaching of literacy was forbidden. When misguided whites disregarded the restriction on teaching literacy, one got the likes of Nat Turner and murderous slave insurrections—and who needed that? Such was the near universal perspective within the majority culture. Jefferson, so eloquent and diligent on the importance of education, was even more diligent—by reason of its power—in denying education to those under his control.

The colonial mindset was not promising for the future of education in America. This mindset of the white majority toward denying education to blacks—a mindset often coupled with indifference toward the education of children of poor whites—remained in place right into the start of the twentieth century; and it continues to be alive and kicking, and in fact growing, in blighted parts of America today.

In the middle of the twentieth century, when the Warren Court declared that separated schools are inherently unequal, the deep insight behind the ruling was that education is not some privilege to be earned, but a necessity—like mother’s milk—which society must accord the individual if he or she is to grow up wholesomely. For this reason, the situation of an ethnic minority or economic minority is vulnerable and poignant. Unless members of the majority culture open the doors of their schools to the members of a minority, the members of that minority cannot learn the levers and mechanisms, the understandings and style, the agreed-upon wisdom and traditions and linguistic usages by which the mainstream functions. It’s not that minorities need to adopt all these; but lacking an understanding of such things, if they do not simply despair, their members seem condemned to
become either tools in the hands of others, or resisters or wreckers or mere waste products of an order which would reduce them to tools.²

Unanimous though the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision was, from the day it was announced to the present moment there has been widespread resistance to its central idea. White “flight to light” has been a continuing strategy among those whites who find the ruling distasteful. Those who don’t want their children rubbing elbows with children who belong to ethnic or class minorities simply move away and found new communities in suburbs where minorities find it difficult or impossible to follow. The cost of this to society as a whole has been steep. The draining from center to periphery of finances and civic stewardship has decreed urban decay at the core of some one-time thriving American cities. At the urban core of these cities, standards of beauty, health, prosperity have dwindled, or in some cases disappeared entirely; and crime has increased. Nor do we find in such places adequate responses to increase governmental involvement and spending on education as a venture to ameliorate things.

Rather the fleeing population have preferred to take their generosity toward education with them, and spend their educational dollars on the places they come to rather than on the places they leave. It seems they’d sooner pay $50,000 or more a year to incarcerate an abandoned human product of urban blight than pay ten or fifteen percent of that amount per student to leave a semblance of good schools behind. As *Brown v. Board* said, the heart of the problem continues to be that separated schools are inherently unequal. If children of minorities are not to be stunted, it’s not enough that their schools have some of the amenities of suburban schools; rather they need to be in schools where they can interact with the children of those who run things. (Again, this doesn’t mean minorities must replace their culture with white culture, but it does mean they can’t afford to be ignorant of the inner workings—the levers and pulleys—of white culture.)

² It is not really as paradoxical as it may seem that some who are closed out seem to find their richest sense of freedom in activities likely to kill them during their youth.
In 1978 in the case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, the Supreme Court said in effect that UC Davis could not engage in a crash program to increase the number of minority doctors in California unless it was willing simultaneously to open the same program on a competitive basis to applicants from the majority culture; anything less the Court said would violate equal treatment as provided for in the Fourteenth Amendment. The gist of the decision amounted to a declaration that to provide special programs for the down-and-out was a matter of depriving the more well-to-do of the equal protection of the laws. It’s as if one were to say a mother would be acting unfairly if she gave an aspirin to a child of hers who was sick unless, at the same time, she offered aspirin to each of her other children. Or if she had an acutely shy son, it’s as if to say she couldn’t go to his room and read to him unless she invited her other children into his room as well. That they did not share his need was irrelevant. Or it’s as if to say that if there were a scarcity of some health-improving remedy like a vacation in the mountains, she could not make it available it to a sick daughter unless she allowed her vigorous and healthy children to compete with the daughter for its possession. That is a very awkward sense of “equal treatment,” and no decent mother has ever subscribed to it.

Carefully as it was penned by the gentlemanly Louis Powell, the decision in the Bakke case was insensitive to the urgent need to make medical information and guidance available to the deprived and afflicted amid the minorities of California. UC Davis medical school had wanted—by an effort to recruit from the ranks of minority communities people with skills to bring mainstream medical practice back to their communities—to alleviate one of the major adverse consequences of segregated living. If you can accept the analogy, in effect, Davis was trying to create a corps of medical missionaries, not for Africa or South America, but for Compton and parts of Oakland, Fresno, San Jose, East Palo Alto, and the like. Would it have worked? Powell and company decreed it would be un-Constitutional to try to find out.

Justice Thurgood Marshall, who had been the lead attorney for the plaintiff in *Brown v. Board*, was so unconvinced by the decision that terminated this minority-recruitment experiment that, in addition to joining the dissent of three other justices, he
wrote a dissent of his own. In essence, the majority who decided the case had missed the very nature of education. Rather than being some bauble or perk which society puts out there for its best and brightest to compete over, education is something a society owes to each and all its members, and the more deprived any of its members are, the more compelling is society’s obligation. His dissent included a withering rebuke to the Court in the form of a history lesson on the ways the law—especially the Fourteenth Amendment—had been used and was being used to deprive blacks of the benefits the law was designed to provide. The fact, in this case, that we were dealing with descendants whose ancestors—with full support of the legal system of the time—had been brought here against their will, could not, Marshall insisted, diminish society’s obligation, but could only add to it. Such was at the center of Marshall’s dissent.

The elegant language in which the court’s majority could “find no compelling reason” that would justify “imposing a burden” of exclusion on whites born into comparative privilege showed the court’s majority were indeed color blind. They lacked insight into facts on the ground in the lives of a great many suffering Americans. Priding themselves on being color-blind, the gentlemanly Powell and company refused, on grounds of high moral principle, to regard either the color of deprived Americans or the painful burdens a color-conscious society imposed on it.

The situation of color-prejudice is still with us. And it works to dilute the liberating effects Brown v. Board might have been expected to provide. Eventually, our exercise of stinginess toward minorities and toward the white poor has come to provide a precedent for moves toward pricing members of the white middle class out of opportunities for needed education as well. Karma isn’t just some whimsical notion. What has been going around is now coming around.

Bad enough. Yet a tradition of blindness to the needs of our minorities and poor, abetted by increasing austerity toward our middle class, isn’t the only thing retarding and downgrading educational opportunity at present.

Here are some anecdotes—some glimpses of bits and pieces—I offer for consideration. Each is trivial in itself; and you may want to dismiss me as one who “tells tales out of school” and is simply
aerial personal grievances over current educational practice. But
I suggest the implication of these stories isn’t trivial at all. I vouch
for the veracity of what follows; the first names I give are real. It’s
up to the reader to judge whether I’m honest and whether the
examples have relevance.

Picture an episode just before Christmas, on Guam, U.S.A.,
at a Christian school. Father James—a young Anglican priest
teaching in this American school—has given the third-grade
class a kind of elaboration of his sense of Christmas. He’s said
that amid the swirl of Christmas presents—amid all the buying
and selling that sets up this swirl—the real thing to concentrate
on is the gift God has given us in Jesus. To say such a thing was
pretty radical. Father James was taking on the lifestyle in which
his listeners were being raised. But as he told me in his account,
he took a further step. Warming to his subject, he said we should
not get lost in the myth of the generosity of Santa Claus, but
should celebrate instead the generosity of God—Who created us
and showers us with love.

Imagine the recklessness of such a message. And he is speak-
ing in a Christian school, which—being private—depends upon
the benefactions of the students’ parents for its existence! Father
James, as I recall his story, did not reach his dinner table that eve-
n ing before he heard from the headmaster. The owner of a local
bank had called the headmaster, complaining that the rash and
insensitive James had ruined the Christmas not only of his eight-
year-old daughter, but of himself as well. James had arrogantly
used the indiscreet phrase “the myth of Santa Claus,” and so in
his effort to explain Christmas, he had ruined it altogether. The
headmaster communicated news of this outrage to James, and
assigned him to write during the holidays a satisfactory apology
to the irate father. James did as he was told. He did not show me
the apology; but he left the school at the end of the spring term.

Here’s another true story. In a middle school in Northern Cali-
fornia, picture a Muslim woman hired to teach social studies. I
can’t remember her name now, but I liked talking with her. She
told me she’d formerly been a paid consultant to some agency of
the United Nations, and I believed her; for she impressed me as
untypically well informed about current events. Well, one day in
her social-studies class she was talking about the praying habits
of Muslims. She told her students that a devout Muslim is always aware where Mecca is in relation to his or her immediate circumstances. When they asked why, she said it had to do with prayer, and demonstrated by kneeling on the floor and bowing toward Mecca as if getting ready to pray. At least one interested student said “Let me try that!” and, not being forbidden to do so, knelt and bowed. The school had never, so far as I know, had a Muslim teacher before; and in the next term, it was back to normal. The principal told me: “I had to let her go.” Evidently a parent, or several parents, had complained she was trying to convert her class to Islam.

Then there’s Eric’s story. Eric was a colleague of mine in the philosophy section of the humanities department at a community college with mostly middle-class students in Northern California. I often talked with him. He loved philosophy, and his face would take on color when he discussed it. At the start of one term I noticed there was no more Eric. Later I ran into him at a college in Oakland where I also taught.

The story Eric told me—as best I can recall—is this. He was giving writing assignments at that first college, and he was grading the papers meticulously. He gave a C to a paper of a female student, and when she complained, he refused to change the grade, but told her he would work with her on future papers if she wished. Knowing Eric, I believe this; it fit with his sincerity and enthusiasm. He tells me the girl then went to the dean and told her that Eric had wanted to become intimate with her, and that when she’d refused, he’d punished her by giving her a C on her paper. Eric had no tenure—like myself, he was an instance of that great bargain in college education, an adjunct instructor. When the dean summoned Eric, she told him she did not know if the girl’s story was true, but that considering how unsavory the charge was, she could not rehire him after the end of that term.

Let me tell you my own story about an experience at the school in Oakland where I heard this story from Eric. I was not terminated from that school, but was amazed when I ran into a dean problem of my own. It, too, was over the grading of a student paper. As I recall the circumstances, a disgruntled student, a black male, had complained to the dean that my grade on his paper was too low. The dean, a black woman—having failed to
persuade me to change the grade—sought the high ground with me by asking: “Have you considered the possibility that reading and writing may not be his preferred modalities of learning?” I’m pretty sure the last five words are verbatim or very close to verbatim because the jargon all but knocked me down. I hadn’t seen it coming. It seemed to abandon—in the case at least of this student—the long struggle for black literacy. Absolutely I knew my student’s “chosen modality of learning” was not reading or writing; that’s why I was there. Beyond that, the dean knew as well as I that the accreditation of the college was under review by the state. The state university to which we sent the bulk of our graduates was complaining that, while our students were wonderfully articulate orally, they often lacked key skills in reading and writing. It’s significant I think that this same dean was eventually promoted to academic vice president of our college.

Wrangles between teacher and administrator over grades are actually commonplace, and I shouldn’t have been surprised at mine. A friend of mine, one of the most entertaining storytellers I’ve met, was Larry. Larry had taught math at a high school in Northern California for eighteen years. When I asked him why he’d retired two years short of a full pension, he told me that one day his principal called him in to discuss “the trouble” he was having with his students. Larry said he wasn’t aware of any trouble. The principal countered there was clearly trouble since students who were getting A’s and B’s in their social studies and English classes were often getting C’s in Larry’s math classes. Larry defended himself saying he kept close records of his students’ work; when a student’s answers were right ninety percent of the time or more, the student got an A; when they were right eighty percent of the time but less than ninety, the student got a B; and so on. The principal said: “Ah! Now I see the problem. I want you to know, Larry, that any answer a student has worked on is a good answer for that student. Once you understand that, Larry, let’s hope your grades will come into harmony with the grades of our other teachers.”

Larry told me he went back to his classroom and thought “I’d better get out of here before I lose my mind.” At the place where I met him and heard this story, he was a very popular tutor of students in math and other subjects; he had not lost his mind, but he had gotten out of there.
I could add more of these stories from creditable, firsthand accounts, but what’s my point? When we talk about what’s happening in education, we do so usually in terms of “good students” and “bad students,” “good teachers” and “bad teachers.” We seldom bring administrators into the picture. What though is the attitude toward education of the administrators in the stories I’ve told?

Is there a common thread running through how these administrators understand their role? There seems to be. Not to paint them as more designing than they are, I think the commonality is that each conceives their role as a role in public relations. They don’t so much support and provide education as apologize for it. They apologize for any pain involved, and they attempt to remove pain. In this I think they’re more representative of administrators today than members of the general public—those who “don’t see the sausage being made”—would like to think. While the administrators I cite lack explicit malicious intent, the effect they have is corrosive and demoralizing.

Let’s think over the stories. In each case but mine, a teacher left an institution. (And in my case, when I had to reduce my workload to two classes a semester in order to start collecting my pension, the Oakland college having the generously flexible dean was—perhaps to my shame—among those I let go.)

The fault of Father James was that he wanted to give his students his version of the truth about Christmas. The headmaster might have reminded the irate banker that, when he placed his eight-year-old in a Christian school, he took on the risk that the Christian teachers there might try to tell his daughter the truth about Christianity as they understood it. To say that however would have been confrontational, and the headmaster preferred to leave James responsible to placate the father on his own. James was lost to the institution. One might say—as the headmaster probably had calculated—“neat ending to an unfortunate incident.” Whether or not that’s how the headmaster saw things, the school lost a sincere and brilliant teacher, and there was also a message to the faculty who remained: never rile a parent—for no one will have your back if you do.

Let’s take the case of the teacher who was so rash as to demonstrate the practice of Muslims at prayer. That her contract was not renewed manifests a craven sell-out by the principal involved.
As I’ve mentioned, it’s unlikely the school had ever hired a Muslim to teach there before. Certainly the students weren’t overexposed to Islam. When the principal told me he’d “had to let her go,” he was implying she’d crossed a line—the implication being she was out to make converts.

Yet he and whoever had pushed him to take that position knew in their saner moments that wasn’t the case. Suppose the teacher had been a Catholic and had, in the course of a lesson on Catholic practice, demonstrated the sign of the cross. Suppose some non-Catholic student or students had imitated the gesture to get the feel of it. Would that have led to a decision not to continue that teacher as an instructor in social studies? I think we know it wouldn’t. What seems to have been at work was not a general principle but a mere yielding to prejudice against Muslims and Islam. Educational opportunity was sacrificed for the sake of smooth public relations. It’s a costly omission that our k-through-twelve public schools offer so little instruction in the world’s religions. While religious views continue to be major forces in current affairs, America’s grown-up diplomats and policy-makers often seem woefully indifferent and ignorant regarding the texture of religious beliefs of those they deal with. Their education has done little to inform them. One fears in fact it has tended to confirm them in bigotry.

Let’s talk about Eric. The termination of Eric is a clear instance of denial of due process. Even if Eric had demanded access to a grievance procedure, he’d still have had a tough time keeping his job. There was no contract regarding future employment. One can say he had a right in equity to expect continued employment; but equity rights aren’t easy to enforce. The dean who terminated him was aware of this. Not unlike the headmaster in the Christian school who left James to twist in the wind, she terminated Eric because that seemed the easiest way to keep the peace. She placated the complainer by telling her the school would no longer employ the teacher whom the student said had given offense. Not only did the institution lose Eric as a result, but if other teachers under her supervision tended to be exacting in the way they graded papers, her act notified them this was a form of self-indulgence she wouldn’t defend. I’d listened to this very dean claim her department maintained the highest standards. More accurate—and this wasn’t lost on teachers or
students—would have been to say her department proclaimed high standards only up to the moment when someone challenged them.\(^3\)

I mention my own confrontation over grading at a college in Oakland to underline how readily some administrators will undermine academic standards. A teacher who tries to hold students to high standards is routinely regarded by some administrators as inviting trouble. Surely the dean in Oakland knew from her own experience the importance of literacy. She was very articulate. My hunch, based on the position she held, is that she was as sharp when writing as she was when speaking. I bet this competence had opened doors for her. Yet she was willing to humor students rather than go to the mat with them over their need for skills like hers. I think it would be no exaggeration to say she’d have been comfortable with a day-care-for-adults program so long as she could call it college. And she fit right in.

Students aren’t deceived. At that school in Oakland, it seemed black males in particular had a problem with attendance. In their life on the street, their experience had density; they lived with a vivid sense of their existence. There things had consequences. Dangerous and destructive as their lifestyle regularly was, it sustained their interest and focused their attention. At an all-too-real cost to longevity, they lived dramatically. My theory is that when they came to our place, seeking better opportunities than the street offered, the kind of college they found frequently registered as an anticlimax. They may have begun to wonder if they were they still living in the real world. On the street, failure to pay a dealer for drugs provided on consignment could cost one’s life. At the college, failure to meet a deadline, or complete an assignment, or show up for a final often seemed to cost nothing. For some, only the demands of coaches seemed to carry authority. (In hopes of a career in sports, they may have seen the coaches as their only authentic teachers.)

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3. I owe it to this institution—which I haven’t named—to add that when, to the relief of teachers like me, this accommodating dean retired, she was replaced by a dean who said he was concerned that teachers weren’t as exacting as they should be in the grading of student essays. Morale improved among students as well as among teachers by reason of his concern. He was greatly missed when he retired.
When we discussed, as we did in my classes (one can see why the dean didn’t like me) why their education growing up in Oakland had been so limited, a standard response was that it hadn’t been by accident. Analytical and articulate, some young males would claim their relative incapacity to empower themselves through education was regarded by society at large as a benefit. It meant (and I’m quoting here) there’d be inmates for our prisons, recruits for our wars abroad, and cheap labor here at home. While I’d chime in endorsing much that I heard, it was black males who would initiate such statements. Shades of Malcolm! I thought it shameful that a college which provided these articulate young men with demanding athletic programs wasn’t willing to pair these programs with equally demanding academic programs.

Looking back on the case of Larry who, as I said, had taught high-school math for eighteen years, in this instance the concern of the principal wasn’t about humoring minority students. Minority students were a distinct minority at Larry’s high school. The principal’s concern was that Larry’s conscientious grading and conscientious effort to raise the level of math skills was keeping his, the principal’s, school from achieving the reputation of a place where nearly all the students were, as at Lake Woebegone, performing above average. Whether the students actually learned math wasn’t among the principal’s priorities. Larry, on the other hand, not only had a gift like Mark Twain’s for telling outlandish stories, but had—like Twain—a disturbing streak of honesty. He felt compelled to tell students when their answers were wrong.

Let’s grant there’s room for discussion here. In the early years of school—first, second, third grades—there’s a case for humoring one’s pupils more than correcting them. More often than not, schools assign these grade-levels to women. The hope is that the really considerable insecurity and vulnerability that nearly all young children experience (and that some young children experience constantly) will be assuaged by a non-judgmental maternal presence. To me this seems quite proper. When a teacher instructs her first-graders to draw a tree, there should be no “wrong trees” held up for criticism at the end of the exercise. When an infant is learning to walk, there’s lots of celebration but it would be unimaginable to rebuke or ridicule any awkwardness. While kindness should always be in season, it would not however be a kindness to young people to treat them forever as infantile.
Good coaches know this. I’m surprised that administrators so often don’t.

I do not think Larry was in any way unpopular with his students. Chances are they understood his concern and respected him for it. (After he left the high school and took up tutoring, it wasn’t unusual for former students of his to come to his new workplace to chat with him.) His crime had been that he did not subscribe to the version of political correctness his principal found convenient. This political correctness holds that no one should ever be made uncomfortable in a classroom. If political correctness like this sounds like a tolerant approach, we should learn to recognize it as a camouflage for indifference. It tolls the death knell of education. If every opinion a student has is “right for him,” if every answer a student gives is “a good answer,” there’s no need for institutions of learning. Much as he’d be surprised to hear it, the program of Larry’s principal for raising grades without reference to achievement was roughly as friendly to education as Attila the Hun was to the Roman Empire. Recognizing the madness, Larry did well to leave.

Because it’s permeated our educational system, let’s delay a bit on political correctness. To do so is worthwhile if it’s worthwhile to reflect on what’s eviscerating our educational system and thereby making it easier to raise arguments against funding it.

Political correctness has roots in thoughts about equality and the role of tolerance in society—both of which it misunderstands. To say “humans are all created equal” is to say something wonderful. To say “we should be tolerant of another’s opinions” is also a wonderful thing to say. To say “since we’re all equal, no one has any opinion better than anyone else’s” is a terrible thing to say. In effect, to say that is to deny the existence of expertise and thereby cancel the warrant for schools. If one person’s opinion is as good as another’s, why go to a person with a medical education for an opinion on your health? Why not just ask your postman, or a cashier at the supermarket?

We don’t really believe this equality-of-opinion business. Yet in the classroom, teachers are expected to pretend they do. Particularly in public schools, teachers shy clear of manifesting convictions or championing any particular viewpoint. When, by contrast, Aristotle taught ethics in Athens, the whole of what he taught was one huge opinion—namely his—of what was
ethical. Today when a person teaches ethics in our public schools, it’s notably less likely the person will share personal thoughts, much less deliberately center the curriculum on personal convictions. Rather the typical teacher sets up a kind of cafeteria of ideas. “This is what Aristotle taught; this is what Kant taught; this is what Nietzsche taught.” He or she may end with: “And who am I to say which was right or wrong?” Or worse yet: “Should we not say that each was right in his own way?” It’s hard to imagine anything more insipid. (Having had for my first nine years of education highly intelligent nuns of strong convictions who endlessly encouraged me and their other students to argue with them, I can’t help but feel sorry for young students who have to endure the bland dreariness of much that passes today for public education.)

One time the head of a social-studies department in a public high school bragged to me: “My students haven’t the foggiest idea what I think about anything.” I suppose I was supposed to say: “How wonderful!” I didn’t. I held my tongue. But I thought: “How terrible. Here you are, supposedly encouraging students to practice critical thinking, but you resolutely refuse to model it yourself. How do you expect students to get the hang of it?” (My mother didn’t do that with her four children. Neither did any other teachers I’ve ever had who I thought were worth their salt.)

When I once asked the principal of a middle school: “What’s your stand on teaching controversial issues?” he said: “Teachers are free to teach any they want. They just have to be careful not to take a side.”

The case for this neutrality is that it does not “crowd” the student. It does not confront any student in his or her comfort zone, or attempt to pull any students out of one. It avoids the danger of brainwashing. However it neuters—de-vitalizes—the teacher and reduces her or him to someone fighting with both hands in their pockets. Sacrificed in the neutral approach is spontaneity and authenticity. There’s a world of difference between students and teacher actually arguing in the classroom (something I was very used to with the nuns who taught me), and a teacher conducting with students a discussion about argumentation. More than two millennia after being written, Plato’s dialogs continue to command attention because they depict Socrates and the young
men gathered about him arguing with each other—not just talking about arguments. (If someone doubts this about how Plato’s Socrates behaved, and says, “No! Socrates never took a position!” let them refresh themselves by looking to book 1 of the Republic where Socrates takes charge of the premises of Thasymachos and turns them against him to the point where the cool and sophisticated Thasymachos runs furiously from the room.) To borrow a bit from Mark Twain, the difference between engaging students in real argument and discussing with them merely the nature of argument is the difference between a lightning bolt and a firefly.

To change the metaphor, the second approach—the politically correct one of laissez-faire—aborts the educational process. It over-defends against the danger of brainwashing and underestimates or ignores entirely the power of Hegelian dialectic. Hegel tells us the social structure of thinking goes something like this: (1) someone says John is a good man (thesis); (2) this sums some other party to claim John is not really a good man after all (antithesis); (3) a third person is thereby prompted to say that John is a complicated man who demands further study (synthesis). The rebound effect (step 2) is at the same time both spontaneous and predictable. Step 3 is the transition to a general discussion. For the process to start however, someone has to say John is a good man. If the teacher won’t venture a thesis (preferably one the teacher believes), and simply begins: “Let us discuss John,” the process is stillborn. One gets a replay of Ben Stein’s classroom scene in Ferris Bueller’s Day Off. What makes the scene hilarious is that the proceedings are so totally vapid and yet so totally familiar.

One of the reasons the study of religions is systematically avoided k-through-twelve is that religion is a hotbed of controversial issues. Out there on the street, there’s been so much contention over religion—often lethal—that schools where attendance is compulsory (i.e., k-through-twelve schools) feel obliged to tiptoe around religion—as if the First Amendment forbade discussion of it. When in college a student elects to take a course in World Religions, a benefit from this delay is that almost all the course’s content is fresh territory and new horizons.

That doesn’t of course mean the study will be without pain. Recently a Jewish student of mine spoke at length to a World Religions class of her grief that some of her ancestors had been
murdered in gas chambers by the Nazis. A non-Jewish student of
German descent approached me after class and told me she had
been deeply disturbed by the student’s talk. I replied I thought
her choices came to about three. She could become a Holocaust
denier; but that didn’t seem to promise much relief. Or she could
seek comfort by saying to herself that the extermination effort
was something the Nazis had done in spite of the resistance of
most Germans; but that seemed a difficult case to make. Or she
could as an adult accept that terrible misdeeds had been permit-
ted and perhaps carried out by people who were precious to her.
Would this third option leave her in pain? Yes. (Admirably it is
this third course that the German government endorses today.)

Education shouldn’t dodge these moments; they’re partly what
it’s there for.

Before leaving the theme of political correctness, perhaps
there’s a further point. Political correctness is usually associated
with avoidance of stereotypes. In its extreme form, political cor-
rectness is ready to commit to the generalization that any gener-
alandization about people is a mistake. The intent is to cut off stereo-
typing at the root by decreeing generalization regarding human
affairs out of bounds. One can see the connection with what I’ve
said political correctness promotes: namely that if generalizations
can impinge on people’s comfort zone, why not ban them from
the classroom?

The problem is that generalization is how human understand-
ing and science proceed. If you exclude generalization about peo-
ple from the classroom, there isn’t much left to say about them.
This reduction seems to be going on. “Italians like spaghetti” is
a perfectly legitimate statement if one is reviewing a menu for
an Italian restaurant from which it’s been omitted. But try say-
ing it in a classroom. You’ll be lucky if the ceiling doesn’t fall
on you. “How dare you stereotype Italians like that!” “What’s
wrong with you?” “What kind of American are you?” Such out-
rage bodes a loss to the classroom—a part of the evisceration of
content that’s been going on.

When Reagan ran for governor of California, he promised to
clean up the mess at Berkeley. Perhaps he did. Certainly dur-
ing the eight years he was governor and then the eight years he
was president, things became quieter at UC Berkeley and in col-
leges and universities across the land. The voice of Mario Savio,
the charismatic promoter of Berkeley’s free-speech movement, became a dim echo from the past, drowned out by the voice of the yuppie. Still later, when students’ eyes were sprayed with pepper spray at UC Davis, the school official who did the spraying was awarded $38,000 for the psychological stress he’d felt from responses to his act.

The Chancellor at Davis kept her job on the ground that she’d given the official no permission to do what he did. She was sorry she had failed to exercise the supervisory role she was generously paid to perform, but things happen. So it was really no big deal. Evidently the spraying had been a good-faith effort to get the students to stop protesting, to stop criticizing the way our country is being run, and to get back to their books. One could regard it as a timely warning: use your eyes to learn your assigned lessons, or risk having them sprayed. The real target was critical thinking.

The chancellor had acted—or rather refrained from action—with the same disdain for the motives of students as had Ronald Reagan as governor. That Ronald Reagan remains immensely popular in memory indicates, among other things, the extent to which we’ve been accomplices in the decline of our educational system. The great agribusinesses of California (the businesses Carey McWilliams has called “factories in the field”) have always been scrupulously conscientious about paying as little as they can to the seasonal workers who bring in our harvests (these “lazy Mexicans”—whose labor feeds us Californians, a good part of the rest of the nation, and huge parts of the world at large). That among those workers are many who are in California illegally has made it easier to hold down wages to something about level with the costs of subsistence—of staying alive. Often the owners have only grudgingly provided toilets and drinking water; they certainly have not been proactive toward medical care, day care for children, or education for children.

So when Governor Reagan wanted to reduce funding for education as a form of reprisal for student unrest, he already had on his side a large block of Californians who were sympathetic to lowering taxes and increasing profits by economizing on education. (These Californians likely overlapped with Californians who approved his reduction of funds for the mentally ill. When Reagan “liberated” the mentally ill by closing institutions that housed and fed them, and sent them pouring out into the streets
of California’s cities to become the new homeless, many voters happily anticipated tax cuts and were grateful for his statesmanship.) Later there was a similar nationwide constituency in his favor when Reagan ran for president. He promised to do what he could to get rid of the Department of Education. Since “government is not the solution, but the problem,” he was promising to do what he could to help education by distancing the federal government from its support. As he’d liberated the students of California, so now he was for liberating students all across the nation.\footnote{The extent to which he had liberated his and Jane Wyman’s adopted son Michael can be read in Michael Reagan’s book \textit{On the Outside Looking In} (New York: Kensington, 1988).}

Constraints that began to be felt in education when Reagan was Governor and later when he was president can’t be construed as resulting from mere absentmindedness. The constraints weren’t limited to restrictions on spending. From the days of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, there had been an acute concern of powerful members of Congress to make sure the movie industry was telling The American Story. When Reagan was president of the Screen Actors Guild, he shared this concern and supported the House Committee’s agenda. As governor of California (and later as president of the United States), Reagan believed that our schools, even more than our movies, should exemplify and teach The American Story. Out of this concern, Reagan worked to have Clark Kerr removed as President of the University of California. Eighteen days after Reagan took office, Kerr was fired.

The American Story is that America is the land of the free and the home of the brave, with liberty and justice for all; and that we are the last best hope for mankind; and that all our adventures abroad—the war in Vietnam included—have been inspired by our desire that others abroad may come to share the same democratic institutions that we Americans cherish here at home. Clark Kerr had allowed a cacophony of voices to challenge that story.

Reagan himself was very good at telling The American Story. Indeed, a key factor in his election to the presidency in 1980 is that he was far better at it than Carter was. Carter was not good at telling The American Story. Before the election, Carter had been saying that something was going awry in our souls, whereas Reagan in his campaign promised Morning in America.
Though it’s not much attended to, there’s an impact of all this on our school curricula. There’s a connection between all this and Student Learning Outcomes (or SLO’s, as their friends like to call them). Reagan did not invent Student Learning Outcomes. If any one person should be given more credit than others for these marvelous entities, it would be Harvard’s late behaviorist B.F. Skinner.

Skinner did not believe there exist such things as autonomous human beings. We must, he said, transcend the mythic notions of freedom and dignity. Because all things are totally under the iron law of cause and effect, human beings are totally under the iron law of cause and effect. At any given moment, the apparent choices you and I make are really just the inevitable outcomes of our genetic inheritance and the totality of circumstances in which we act and the contingencies that have formed us to be the individuals we are. Mother Teresa is not to be praised, and Charles Manson is not to be blamed. Neither of them has ever had any alternative but to act as they did. Mother Teresa had simply Mother Teresa’d. What else could she do than perform the acts of the person she had become? Charles Manson had simply Charles Manson’d. What else could he do than perform the acts of the person he had become?

If for some reason you prefer a person who ministers to the dying homeless of Calcutta to a person who sends disciples into the Hollywood hills to murder rich people, know, says Skinner, it’s a sign of misapprehension to seek an increase in the number of the first (the ministers) and a decrease in the number of the second (the murderers) by some ladling out of praise and blame. While praise and blame may have some limited influence, they are rooted in ignorance. When you praise Mother Teresa, you imply she could have done differently. When you blame Charles Manson, you imply he could have done differently. In both cases, you imply that an agent acted freely. You may have to do so, says Skinner, because you don’t know any better. But the actual way to bring about the increase of the Mother-Teresa-type and the decrease of the Charles-Manson-type is to increase the operant conditioning that produces the first, and to decrease the operant conditioning

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that produces the second. Praise and blame tend to confuse the issue; they tend to distract the praiser-and-blamer from where true leverage resides. There were happenings by which Mother Teresa happened, and there were happenings by which Charles Manson happened. Identify and control those happenings, and you can engineer a world in which there are only Mother Teresas and no Charles Mansons.

For all the fairy-tale character of this approach, there’s a modicum of truth in it. Aristotle at one point says “the way one raises a child isn’t just one factor that bears upon his prospects for happiness; rather it makes all the difference.” The statement seems to override Aristotle’s conviction that each of us is responsible for the adult we become, but he says it anyway. At that moment, Aristotle seems to be making Skinner’s point. Skinner’s denial that we make free choices also seems to get some confirmation from the way heroes quite regularly deflect praise. A man goes into a burning plane at great risk to himself and comes out bearing in his arms a stranger’s child. Afterward, he’s asked why he acted as he did. The man’s face goes blank. He cannot process the question. When he composes himself, he replies, perhaps with notable irritation, “I did it because I heard a child crying in the plane.” He doesn’t seem at all to acknowledge a moment of decision. Likewise, at the other end of the spectrum, a serial killer is asked why he killed all those people. Again, the first reaction may be a blank face. When the questioner refuses to let the question go, eventually the killer may reply: “I don’t know. It seemed like the thing to do.”

One salutary consequence of the Skinnerian approach is that it might make our criminal justice system abandon executions and some other punitive aspects. While it seems altogether necessary to keep Manson under lock and key, if a normal citizen is asked how guilty Manson is, an honest answer probably has to be: “I don’t know; I cannot imagine the inner state of Charles Manson.”

For all that, there’s something missing in Skinner’s behaviorism. As Sartre taught, the experience of freedom is as palpable as the experience of trees and rocks; the fact one’s experience of freedom isn’t directly observable by a second party is no reason to deny it. By and large, Americans agree with Sartre regarding the trivial decisions of their everyday lives. What’s strange then is that a nation which professes in all its public announcements
to value freedom has, nonetheless, taken to heart an educational approach whose central premise is that there is no freedom. The resolution to the paradox comes when one realizes that what is sought in our schools is not so much education as control. “By the third week, 65% of the students will be able to associate 45% of the states with the names of their state capitals.” As Skinner seems to suggest, many who support education (including many who administer it) seem to think: “If only we could teach our students to behave as well-trained pigeons, all would be well.”

For all that, the SLO approach frequently can be appropriate. In a weight-training class, it may certainly happen that “by the fourth week, 90% of the weight-lifters will be able to press comfortably at least 10% more weight than they were able to press at the start of classes.” The trouble comes when one gets into areas where quality seems more at stake than quantity, where affect and sensibility seem more at stake than information, where consciousness seems more involved than muscle. Try the plausibility of this: “By the fifth session in the study of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, 40% or more of the students will have come to appreciate the ambivalence and ambiguity that typically accompany human decision-making, and 25% or more will also, by reason of their exposure to Shakespeare’s diction, have increased by 30% or more their sense of the creative opportunities which are provided by the English language.” The defenders of SLO’s will immediately holler: “C’mon, you’re not being fair; you’ve deliberately chosen to write an SLO where the intended outcome is not easily subject to confirmation by an observer.” Exactly.

The trouble with SLO’s is that they tend to rule out just such behavior as that cited in the SLO above. The operational rule seems to be: “Since that sort of behavior is not directly observable, it cannot be a legitimate goal of education.” According to some of the true believers, it’s not even a behavior. The consequence is that an immense chunk of human experience gets discarded from the educational project. A lobotomy occurs. My nagging hunch is it occurs in order to clear the way for agendas of control. If I may invent a seagoing metaphor, SLO’s have been employed to drive people from the deck and so make it harder for anyone to rock the boat.

Teachers will not rock the boat if their lesson plans are devised within the context of approved SLO’s. Students, it is hoped, will
not rock the boat if the lessons they receive systematically exclude all lessons on boat-rocking.

And indeed students seem generally docile. As students emerge from a class these days, they do not typically cluster into excited groups to discuss at greater length the content just presented in a class. Typically, they do not rush to the library to research further the issues the class may have raised. They reach instead for the latest incarnation of their cell phone so they can re-inhabit their favorite place in cyberspace. They live em-bubbled lives. I’ve watched them walk right into one another and make no apology, but simply grunt, move a bit to one side or the other, and continue down the road of their disengagement from immediate surroundings.

Skinner devised a Skinner box for his daughter so he could increase his control of the inputs which would determine who she became as an adult. As an adult, she’s laughingly said he meant well and she’s forgiven him. Today, we do not have Skinner boxes; rather we have schools scattered across America that aspire to become such. (Since, as I’ve indicated, these schools are outside the student-bubble-space, student feelings toward them are mildly aversive.)

The cost of our present condition is high. Aristotle, the Jewish prophets, and Aquinas had said that we have rights—freedoms—by reason of natural law. The Enlightenment in the eighteenth century echoed this. A corollary of this teaching is that any civil law conceived in violation of our natural rights is, in fact, a mere pretense of law—one that cannot rightfully command the obedience of the citizenry. Jefferson’s committee put this doctrine at the center of the Declaration of Independence. Yet it is unlikely you will find this revolutionary doctrine provided for in the SLO’s of today. Skinner denies that freedom exists. Human dignity is a myth, and the concept of rights is therefore, for him, an empty one. To follow up on an earlier suggestion, the outcome often envisioned by our SLO’s seems to be

6. Is this why students tend not to worry about climate change—that they are living in an alternate space-time continuum where the climate seems always improving?
well ordered day-care centers, presided over by avuncular types who enjoy Reagan-like gifts for telling The American Story.

When we talk of someone “going postal,” we’re suggesting it’s not exactly that someone went berserk at a post office, but that work of the type done at a post office was conducive to the berserk behavior.

When one turns to think about similar events in our schools, one must tread softly. Children have been murdered. Terrible wounds remain open. One must not casually and callously use cruel tragedies to score points. Yet—in an understandable, indeed inevitable, effort to draw a lesson from it all—we often turn in these tragedies to an examination of gun laws. That seems natural enough. It’s less often, however, that we turn to an examination of schools. A sense of fair play seems to forbid such a turn. On many occasions, school personnel have put their lives on the line, and some have died heroically, to mitigate or interrupt such tragedies.

Nonetheless, there’s material here that invites inquiry. Around 2014, I heard a talk show host say there had been over 175 outbreaks of lethal violence in our schools since Columbine in 1999. I don’t know just where that count came from, but certainly the actual number, whatever it is, is high.

Why at the schools? “Well,” comes an answer, “that’s where lots of vulnerable people are.” This may call forth a counter statement: “But there are lots of vulnerable people all over the place.” That in turn can elicit the reply: “People in those other places have been targeted too.”

Still, why so many schools? There are enough instances to make a pattern, and patterns invite speculation.

At our schools, most of our students find niches in a circle of friends. They find enclaves that support their emotional and intellectual lives sufficiently so that they are reasonably comfortable, and do not go off the deep end. As noted above, they are further nurtured and buffered by the extension of their enclave into cyberspace. Facebook and twitterings provide this. While their parents may both be working, and are, for older teen students, more often divorced than not, and while family life may not be the support system it once was, most students find sufficient compensation in make-do family arrangements and other
immediate social relationships, supplemented by social media, to get along.

The problem is when it comes to loners and misfits. Some of these are very bright people. In fact this may be why others often don’t see trouble coming. And it’s here that what I’m driving at can get very controversial. It is my hunch that the intensely introspective, the sensitive and easily wounded, might perhaps be able to get by if the curriculum were rich enough to feed their curiosity and nurture their lonely souls. But the curriculum is all too sure they have no souls.

Too often the curriculum has internalized Skinnerian thinking that there’s “no autonomous person,” and in ignoring the freedom and dignity of the persons it’s supposed to nourish, not only does the curriculum not provide for freedom and creativity but in its actual performance too often works toward stifling these things. “In the fourth month of instruction, the student will be able to perform the following six operations, and perform them up to at least the third level of competence, as the levels are set forth in the schedule below.” SLO’s often sound like phrasing from *Brave New World* or *1984*.

While I don’t want to come across as more sure of what I suggest than I am, it is my hunch that some of the violence we’re experiencing in our schools these days can be laid at the door of SLO’s and the Skinnerian behaviorism in which they are anchored. In an ironic way, Skinner is right: it’s a predictable behavior of human beings that when their freedom is disregarded, they become unruly and unpredictable. Operant conditioning works. Even whales revolt.

7. An analogy with recent events in Afghanistan comes to mind. Not long ago in Afghanistan, at an American base where American soldiers were supposedly training Afghan soldiers in how to make their people good Afghans, the American soldiers were experiencing so many violent attacks from their Afghan trainees that they had to build a high wall through the base to protect themselves from their nominative students. Violent attacks of Afghan “allies” continue as I write. On the evening news one can hear the bafflement of an American officer: “Why aren’t these people more grateful for all the things we’re doing for them?” The obvious answer is “these people” don’t see us as acting on their behalf.
Lest this section itself slip out of all bounds, let’s make an end. We could go on. We could delay at length on the breathtaking indifference of American businesses to the insufficiencies of American education. (“We bring in brains from abroad!” Alternatively: “We send our business overseas—where the people are better educated, and cost less.”) We could also discuss the obscene salaries many educational administrators command while they shed crocodile tears over the financial burdens of the students.8

Let’s close by returning to the kinds of questioning addressed by my former students in Oakland: “Is the dilution of content and the currently accelerating cost for education the result of a conspiracy?” The answer depends on how one defines a conspiracy. If “conspiracy” implies “something carried on in secret,” the disinvestment in education isn’t a conspiracy. The attack on education is carried on in broad daylight. If though, all that’s required for there to be a conspiracy is what the etymology of the term demands—namely, “an action or plan of action carried on by a number of people who share a common spirit”—then beyond all reasonable doubt there’s a conspiracy today against American education.

8. As I will elaborate on later, I once heard a well paid economics professor say: “It is not only desirable but a moral duty that an employer pay a worker no more that the lowest wage at which he can persuade the worker to work.” Taking my moral duty to heart, it was hard for me not to raise my hand and inquire whether we did not then owe it to ourselves to convene a committee to see whether the professor himself could be persuaded to work for less than the generous salary he was receiving.