

Free Yourself from the Fraud of High School: A Message for Students

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Sometimes my mind wanders back to when I was in school, including all the stupid assemblies I had to sit through. To give some examples, my high school brought in all kinds of characters to speak to us students, including the brother of a Columbine victim to tell us that her vague doodles proved she had premonitions of the massacre, a guy presented as divinely inspired because he could quickly finger-paint pictures of Jesus, and various perverts to fanatically promote abstinence-only contrary to the stance of every medical authority. Of course, we also had pep rallies to celebrate how our school was somehow better than the thousands of other high schools in the country, whipping up the groupthink known as “having school spirit.” More recently, I started imagining what I would have liked to have heard at one of these assemblies, what actually would have benefited me instead of taking up time I could have spent actually learning something, or even better, what I would want to say if I got invited to speak at a high school myself. What I came up with guarantees I would never be invited back...

Part I: The Reality of School

One of the most important things I wish students would realize is that what the people around them at school think counts for nothing after graduation. Who’s popular, who’s not, who embarrassed themselves today, who got in trouble: nobody cares beyond the walls of your school and your small group of fellow classmates. What you go through can still be painful, horrible, and senseless, but you have to try to look at it in context, realizing it’s not going to last long and not let it define your life. Unless you do something really stupid, like commit a serious crime, get pregnant, or become a drug addict, your time in high school doesn’t count for much at all, and even in those cases, the damage can often be overcome. The worst thing you can do, on the other hand, is try to “fit in.” It’s a kind of suicide to subordinate your own individuality to some group, sacrificing what makes you yourself to satisfy its twisted will, as if the group is better than you are. Even just looking at it pragmatically, the group, especially in school, tends to be petty, capricious, and bigoted, so forcing yourself to fit in is probably a hopeless enterprise anyway. The best thing you can do is grow as a person, not grow into other people’s conception of what you should be.

In that spirit, don’t let teachers tell you that when you enter the “real world,” you won’t be able to get away with this or that, and so you had better behave the way they want you to. The struggles and hardships school presented seemed real enough to me, and the assertion of the teachers begs the question that if you’re not in the real world, why do they treat school so seriously? They don’t even live in the real world themselves. Obviously what they mean is that things will be even more difficult and unpleasant in the workforce than they are at school—really giving you cause to look forward to your future—and while things may often be worse, the fact is, it depends on the circumstances. In some cases, you can get away with more in the so-called real world, and as miserable as it is out there, at least you usually have more autonomy than in school. Nevertheless, you’re not there yet, so they should just let you be students for now. Other fear-mongering assertions you should ignore include that if you don’t buckle down, you won’t get a good job; that if your standardized test scores aren’t high enough, you’ll wind up flipping burgers or scrubbing toilets; and that failing in school will determine the whole course of your life. Tests, in reality, are bullshit, while grades reduce education to some kind of accounting transaction or turn it into a competition. You learn how to answer the types of questions

that are on the test, get a passing grade, and then forget everything. I don't call that an education, I call it training how to take a test. I don't call an adult pressuring a child with lies "positive reinforcement" or "tough love," I call it child abuse.

Your goal shouldn't be to get a job anyway; it should be not to need a job. If you find yourself in a so-called good job someday, you failed. What kind of life is it to sit in a cubicle for forty years taking direction from some asshole? That's the life of a slave, and if that's the reason you have to take a test seriously, you should hand in your Scantron blank. If you realize what school really is, and you try to drop out as a result, people may say that all the time you already spent in school will have been a waste if you do, and that's very telling. What they're really saying is that education has no value in itself, only the piece of paper you get at the end does. The truth is that with the kind of education you get at school, your time went to waste whether you get the paper or not. You may have misspent much of your youth so far in school, but you can't get that time back, so instead of worrying so much about that, look ahead and think about the waste of spending your life generating profits for a company that doesn't give a damn about you. Honestly, almost no employer even cares about what you did in high school. A real path to a successful career isn't about grades but having developed useful skills, which happens to be the biggest area where school is lacking.

Why don't schools by and large teach anything useful? Even looking at something like writing, probably the major focus of school, it manages to completely screw up. Writing isn't about ticking all the boxes in a rubric or following a style sheet, it's about communicating in an effective and compelling way. But school makes ticking the boxes the whole point, probably so you can tick boxes in your cubicle someday, while actually learning to be a better writer would mean forgetting what you learned at school. Similarly, what good is it to teach someone how to measure the area of an ellipse, for instance, and give no information about how this can be used in practice, such as in engineering or astronomy? Random pieces of knowledge mean nothing without context. And students often don't even get the random knowledge but rather are fed plain dogma. One example is simply asserting "just say no" with respect to drugs, which provides no tools, no understanding. Why not instead teach in detail the psychology of groups, about the value of individuals, about thinking for oneself rather than conforming? Why not give students the skills and facts to make their own intelligent choices, which might actually be an effective strategy against society's drug problem? The likely answer is that kind of thinking would apply as much to the way things work in school and society at large as to drugs, which is dangerous for the powers that be.

In the same vein, why not have detailed courses on how to start a business, how to finance it, how to run it, how to grow it? Why not teach the actual skills to provide some good or service? Similarly, why is there not an extensive course on the rights and duties of citizenship? Why don't schools teach you how to participate in a political campaign or how to lobby government officials? Why don't they give you in-depth instruction on your civil rights, how to handle police encounters, how to use and navigate the courts, and an understanding of the laws of the community, state, and country? Why don't schools train you how to identify disinformation in the media, and I don't mean bias toward one political party over another, as if there's a real difference between them, or information that goes against the official narrative, but rather how the whole corporate edifice of the media is a gigantic project of manipulation. These are such obvious, essential things for everyone to know. Their conspicuous absence in school indicates that it doesn't want you to know about any of them. The reason is that such would empower you, and the goal is not to have a society of empowered citizens, it is to have a society where 800 people get to be billionaires, and they don't want any competition.

When I was in high school, I had to memorize the Bill of Rights and the most famous Supreme Court cases but learned very little about how they apply in practice. Like everything else, the lessons were reduced to empty, pointless rote that, with no practical application, I quickly forgot anyway. My American history textbooks would have a line each about Upton Sinclair's book The Jungle—that it revealed unsanitary conditions in the meat industry—and Ralph Nader's book Unsafe at Any Speed—that it showed how cars lacked safety features. Why didn't the school instead have me read the actual books, which are among journalism's seminal works? The Jungle, in reality, is a novel that puts forward a detailed critique of capitalism, while Unsafe at Any Speed is a devastating expose of corruption in industry. That is why the school system doesn't want anyone to actually read the books or think about what they really say, deflecting their true significance by inoculating students with misleading bullet points. If the goal is a "well-rounded" education, why is there no course on anarchism, none on Marxism, and so on? Regardless of what anyone thinks of the system, it's obvious that a real education would cover in an honest way the counterarguments and critiques. Simply being fed the party line isn't education, it's brainwashing. The best thing you can do if you want to be educated is to read on your own, not just the books that appear on reading lists but more importantly the ones that wind up on ban lists, which seem to be growing at an increasing pace.

While real learning is being ignored in the classroom, why do athletics take such a prominent role outside it when they have nothing to do with education? One motive is the vanity of the school and the prestige that comes with having a successful sports team. Another is to encourage the tribal behavior inscribed in the rivalry between schools, which in turn helps normalize setting one group or nation against another. That kind of mindset justifies the violence of keeping people down in the hierarchy and ultimately the violence of war. Your personal fitness is none of the school's business, so instead of making you waste time in gym class, which, being so limited, in reality does little to make you more fit anyway, why not let everyone just go home early? After all, schools already have the burden of homework to destroy students' ability to pursue outside interests. Without gym, we may lose out on the scholastic value of dodgeball but will also abolish the pointless conflict and pain that come from locker-room posturing, team selections, and forcing non-athletes to try to keep up in activities they don't care about. Values like "team-building" and "sportsmanship" are used to spin athletics into being educational, but if that's really the point, why are those values so frequently torn down in school otherwise?

If you still think school is about education, consider how much of the day you spend actually ingesting knowledge, such that it is, and how much of the day you spend dealing with bullshit, not only gym class but also sitting in homeroom, sitting in assemblies, changing classes, being berated for something, and so on. Then look at all the activities that are supposedly educational but are actually pointless, like watching movies or mutilating dead frogs. The obvious reason people don't show up for school, why they cut class, or otherwise act out is that they rightly don't want to be there, since school is oppressive, boring, and a waste of time. Moreover, people have different needs and respond differently to a given environment, so how do schools expect to get good results by ramming everyone through the same paradigm? Not surprisingly, it doesn't work, so the schools use punishment to try to force it to work, but that's also ineffective, which is why they end up with suspensions and expulsions, with students flunking, and with students dropping out. As far as the system's concerned, however, this isn't a failure but rather a successful purge of those who cannot be made to conform. The reason that students who are expelled from or drop out of school have poorer life chances on average isn't that there is anything inherently wrong with them but rather that they have been deliberately tagged by the system as people

who should be marginalized going forward. Teachers call such students insubordinate, they call them defiant, they say those troublemakers don't respect authority. But such qualities are exactly what is needed to have a free society, and school plays an important role in preventing one from emerging.

If you ever spent a few seconds thinking about it, you will have also realized that enforcing all kinds of trivial rules that have nothing to do with education makes no sense if the point of school is to learn. Why waste resources on policing what students wear, handing out hall passes, looking for new things to ban, and other absurdities? The rules make no sense because they aren't supposed to make sense. It's not about preventing "distractions," as school officials like to claim, because all that pettiness is itself the biggest distraction of all. Education is controlled by narrow-minded egomaniacs trying to teach people to obey, whether there's a good reason to or not. All the frivolous things you have to deal with—like skirts a certain number of inches above the knee or hair a certain number of inches above the collar—are just about putting you in your place. School trains you to follow the rules just because they're the rules, which is what your boss will expect of you in the supposed real world. It puts a boot on your neck so you can get used to having one there until you retire, or die. The natural human reaction to being told to do something stupid is not to do it, so the enforcement of petty rules is used to subdue that questioning impulse.

Even the practice of calling teachers Mr. and Mrs. is primarily to help establish a hierarchy where you're on the bottom, to scare you into "showing respect" rather than give you a reason to actually feel it. Student positions of supposed authority, like class president or hall monitor, meanwhile, are made to look like they matter but are actually empty, their true impact limited to the whims of the real authorities. They serve to further acclimate you to the game of dominance by getting students to actively participate in the tyranny that's crushing them. Many of you become even more complicit than that by self-organizing a strict hierarchy on the meaningless basis of who's "cool" and who's not instead of helping each other through your common ordeal. Almost every depiction of high school in film and on TV glorifies that stratification, reinforcing the pathological behavior that goes along with it even further.

The obsession with dominance also explains the popularity of "zero-tolerance policies," which could just as accurately be called "zero-nuance," "zero-justice," "zero-compassion," or "zero-effectiveness." So if someone gets beaten up, just handle it the lazy and easy way and expel him along with the guy who beat him, or maybe just let off the guy who did the beating. Alternative means of dealing with bad behavior include subversive concepts like reason and communication, which apparently have no place in school; the only thing that matters is maintaining authority. If the way schools do things is correct, why are they so intolerant of dissent? Why isn't every school newspaper full of critiques of each school? Why don't these critiques come blasting over the morning announcements every day? Not tolerating criticism is just an admission that it can't be withstood, and the educational system is an extremely fragile edifice that is hard to keep standing against the human impulse toward freedom. Instead of worrying about radical nonsense, such as the values enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, just say any agitators have ADD and dope them up on Ritalin rather than try to make any improvements. If anyone really needs medication, it's those who can sit still through hours of irrelevant, tiresome trivia no one cares about, but instead drugs are used to help smash those who say no.

Draconian policies are supposedly employed for the sake of security, but this is just the easiest excuse to pile on restrictions. School shootings have been a boon for that mentality. The mass murder of children in schools, once essentially unheard of and unimaginable, has now become somewhat routine,

revealing a society in deep crisis and decay, though the risk is still actually minuscule. If a school has 500 students, and ten are shot, that's only a 2% casualty rate, and 98% of students would have made it through unscathed, notwithstanding anyone getting hurt in the chaos of the aftermath or suffering psychological trauma. What's more, that just considers the school where the shooting actually occurred, so looking at all schools makes the odds almost immeasurably small. Another thing to consider is that the miserable conditions in schools might be a contributing factor in the shootings, yet the possibility of a shooting is still used as an excuse to make schools even more like prisons. Any word you say or action you take that can be twisted into a threat is used to rain down consequences on you.

That gets to another sinister thing schools like to do, conflate punishment and consequences. The subtext is that you essentially choose to be punished by stepping out of line, that punishment is a natural, automatic consequence of doing so, when really it is something imposed by the authorities for their own reasons. What they may not realize is that their way of thinking abolishes any idea of morality and even undermines itself. The implication of punishment as an innate result of actions is that people should behave in a certain way only because they'll be made to suffer if they don't, not because of any logical thinking or greater purpose, and so there's no reason for them not to do whatever they want as long as they're either prepared to "pay the price" of the consequences or clever enough to avoid them altogether. The convenient result of being subjected to the propaganda that punishment is some kind of law of nature is that you may start to believe whatever goes wrong is always the result of your own actions, so the system never has to worry about a challenge from you, since you always already know you're the one to blame.

Information technology, meanwhile, had so much potential to improve education, but it's used instead to make it worse. Laptops and tablets in the classroom further acclimate students to the tech companies' abuses of privacy and property rights and add more needless complexity to their time in school. Smartboards don't provide much enhancement over blackboards, white boards, and overhead projectors but are way more expensive and something else to break down. How much time do your teachers waste during class trying to get all the technological junk working? Such "enhancements" are really just another burden, another distraction, another example of abuse, and these downsides often eclipse any advantages. A paper notebook, on the other hand, doesn't need to be charged, it doesn't create a bill for hundreds of dollars if you drop it, it doesn't try to control how you use it, it doesn't try to be your nanny or act as an informant against you, it doesn't steal your data to manipulate you into buying things, it doesn't make all your work disappear if you press the wrong button. Another example of technology harming education, plagiarism detection services are generating fantastic wealth by building databases of students' work, a kind of plagiarism in itself, especially since schools coerce students to accept having their work absorbed into those systems. This relieves teachers from having to scrutinize assignments, which apparently isn't part of their job anymore. It degrades all of you by making you presumed plagiarists until proven otherwise.

The real punchline, however, is that the concept of plagiarism gets invoked much too liberally anyway because there's no such thing as an original idea. Considering the billions of people who have ever existed and how fundamentally similar they are, almost anything you think of has almost certainly been thought in some form by someone else before. Anyone who has an idea is really just building upon previous ideas. None of us emerge from a vacuum or conjure up thoughts out of nothing but instead we are constantly informed by our surroundings. Ideas are not property to be stolen but just reflect an awareness of what already exists in nature in one form or another; that's the context in which the mind inescapably exists and, by definition, it cannot create the inconceivable. If school were really about

education, no kind of cheating would exist. If students were just there to learn, if school existed just to teach them, it would make no sense to waste time pretending to learn. Everyone would just take the time and use the methods that he needed to gain knowledge. But because school has been perverted into a competition, with other students to outdo, grades to make, checkpoints to reach, time limits to beat, and positions to win, students do what they think they must to succeed at the game, to get the piece of paper at the end, as that is the point rather than learning. After all, the cheaters who didn't get caught and the so-called good students come away with the same reward. If undertaking a real education, on the other hand, everyone would have only one competitor, himself, as that is the only relevant party involved. Cheating is not really the result of student dishonesty but the dishonesty of the system that pretends to teach them. If by cheating "you're only cheating yourself," as teachers often say, why should there be any punishment for it, being that you're the only victim?

Ultimately, the greatest predictor of success isn't how you do in school, it's the circumstances that surround you, that is, how much money and how many connections your parents have. But how do we even define success? Do we call a fat-cat stockbroker a success because he's good at manipulating money? Do we call someone who's broke but who has impacted the lives of others for the better a failure? In this society, yes. The argument could be made that school needs to be sick to prepare you for a sick world, but I would rather make the world less sick, or at least extract people from the sickness of the world and put them in a humane society.

Part II: Taking Action

I wish I could give you specific steps for a path out of school to a real human existence, but I can at least give you some general suggestions:

- Don't follow anybody. Don't submit to anybody. Don't do things just because that's the way they're done but rather think critically about them. Don't automatically listen to authorities over your own instincts because authority is not necessarily correct. Don't do things you don't want to do but try to garner the strength to refuse because you don't owe it to anyone to just go along. In a similar vein, be extremely wary of anyone whose main inclination is to control, punish, or censor. Being independent and rebellious is not the same as being rude, mean, or unethical, despite what school would have you believe. Instead of becoming a drone to serve the elites, which is what school wants to make of you, be your own person. At the same time, have solidarity with other students, who should face an unjust world together. When the school resorts to collective punishment, for instance, don't get angry at whoever supposedly committed the triggering offense, which is the whole point of collective punishment, get mad at the unjust authorities who inflicted that punishment on you.
- Establish concrete goals. Fervently reflect on what you like, what's important to you, and then plot out a realistic path to achieve that. At least make the attempt to get there because you just might succeed, as opposed to resigning yourself to believing "that's the way it is."
- Only take on debt strategically and preferably not at all. Having to slave away to pay off student loans, for example, can prevent you from doing other things in life, like buying a house, getting married, or traveling. You can't get rid of the loans in bankruptcy, and the banks won't renegotiate them, so if you get in trouble, the interest and penalties will just keep piling up, and you'll really be trapped. If you are going to take out student loans, you had better have a clear,

solid plan about what field you're going to study and what you're going to do with it. Don't think you're going to borrow tens of thousands of dollars, major in gender studies, and it will all work itself out. That doesn't mean you shouldn't pursue whatever subjects you're interested in, but don't cripple yourself with debt to do it or let it distract you from a realistic plan to free yourself. Ultimately, you shouldn't buy into the lie high schools often push that college is the only option or best choice. Like most things in life, it depends.

- Unfortunately, it fully falls on you to give yourself an actual education, since you're not going to get the truth in school. You should set aside time to learn things that you care about and can be directly applied to the real world, that are practical and useful and in demand, such as farming, construction, computer programming, or becoming conversational in a foreign language, unlike what is taught in school. The sooner you start, the sooner you'll be able to make progress, and if it's something you really like, it won't be as arduous as school is.
- Don't buy into the false idol of consumerism. Don't worry about accumulating possessions. It's bullshit, it means nothing. When you're old, you're not going to be thinking "I wish I had worn fancier clothes" or "I wish I had driven a flashier car." If anything, you'll regret not having found more meaning, not having had richer experiences, not having loved or been loved more deeply, things from which consumerism distracts us. What you should do is keep your expenses low so you have to worry less about making money, which is what the system uses to enslave you.
- Make use of the Internet, not Facebook, Twitter, and the rest of that creepy, narcissistic, time-wasting, privacy-invading garbage, but rather take advantage of the educational and business opportunities it provides. Notwithstanding paywalls and DRM, you have access to effectively all knowledge. The whole world is potentially your market. You can get started with an on-line store or producing content with basically no money. Don't sit there coming up with excuses for why nothing will work, just try because you never know how things will unfold, and you have little to nothing to lose. It should also be noted that the whole issue of cyberbullying can be made to evaporate with the extremely simple act of deleting your social media accounts, which do no good anyway.
- Watch how you treat people because you can't take anything back. Likewise, in everything you do, think about what it does to your dignity. Don't put your head down if someone mistreats you, but don't bring yourself down to their level either. These things are important not only on a moral level but also to avoid needlessly burdening your psyche with guilt and shame.
- In some cases, it might make sense to get a GED and drop out of school as soon as you reach the legal age to do so, to avoid needlessly wasting more time. However, this may be risky and would have to be part of a careful plan, as opposed to just saying "screw this."

In school, the authorities claim to be showing you how to succeed, but they define success as getting enough money to subsist by way of submitting to a master, which they make out to be the height of endeavor. In line with such a bleak view of human potential, they're constantly telling you to worry about this petty thing or that. It's all just a distraction from what's really meaningful, and real education is the process of discovering what would add meaning for *you*. No one can legitimately tell you in high school that this is where you have to decide what to do with the whole rest of your life. That results

from a lifetime of decisions, not a pointless, wasted four years. I hope that waste has the unintended effect of directing you toward a better path, along which you should never stop striving toward freedom and happiness. I can't promise you'll achieve those things, but I can guarantee there's at least a chance if you keep trying and thus always a reason for hope.

If you're having trouble writing your valedictory address, please feel free to "plagiarize" this speech. It seems to me that if a school asks people to speak, they should be able to say whatever they want, or the request is just dishonest. But don't blame me when your microphone gets turned off, and you get escorted out by security.