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The Sudbury Valley School
"School For a Post-Industrial Society"
by Dan Greenberg

Three hundred years ago, if somebody had ventured the opinion it is possible to create a country in which people from all walks of life, all persuasions, nationalities, and backgrounds could live together in freedom, peace, and harmony, could live happy lives, could realize their personal dreams - a country in which people showed each other mutual respect, in which people treated each other with complete equality, and in which all decisions were made by the mutual consent of the governed, people would have considered that person a crazy utopian and would have brought all the experience of human history from the dawn of time as witness to the impossibility of such a dream. They would have said, "People just don't live that way. It doesn't work. It can't happen."

Happily for us sitting here today, two centuries ago our founding fathers did not treat that dream as utopian and instead found a way to make it possible to put it into practice. They did something unique in the history of the human race. They had before them the task of creating a new country, a new form of government. And they set about this task not by revising existing forms of government, not by starting from the models that they had around them and tinkering with them and adding a little here and a little there, but by sitting together and spending a tremendous amount of time and thought on "zero-base planning", on creating a government from scratch, starting from no assumptions other than those that they were willing to make explicitly at the moment. We have records of their deliberations, and many writings that reveal what they thought and how they came to their conclusions. They proceeded by examining the condition of the human race, the nature of the human animal, and the social and cultural conditions of the world into which the country they were founding was going to be born.

The founders of Sudbury Valley School, beginning in 1965, did much the same thing when it came to education. We too were dissatisfied - dissatisfied with the models of schools that we had available to us at the time, and we had a deep conviction that there was more at stake than just the proper curriculum or the right pedagogical methodology or the right mix of social and emotional and psychological factors that had to be applied to the educational scene. We were convinced that the time had come for complete reexamination of what it is that a school had to be about if it were to serve as an appropriate agent of society in this country in the late 20th century and beyond the year 2000. So we spent several years working on this, trying to gain an understanding of what school is for and how the goals of schools can best be realized.

Now, it's pretty much generally agreed that there are two major roles that a school fills. One is to provide an environment in which children can grow to maturity, from a state of formative-ness and dependence to a state of independence as adults who have found their unique way of personal expression in life. The second goal is social rather than individual. The school has to be the environment in which the culture prepares itself for its continuation from generation to generation. This is a goal that a community requires of its educational system if it wants its way of life to survive.

There is no guarantee that the social goal and the individual goal will mesh. In an authoritarian society, for example, where the lives of every single individual are controlled by some central authority, the social goal promulgating the authoritarian system is in clear conflict with any primacy given to the individual goals of the people in that society. One of the functions of a school in an authoritarian society must therefore be to subject the individual to severe restraints in order to force that individual to meet the needs of society as a whole. The educational systems of highly authoritarian regimes play down individual variation and individual freedom and effectively try to eliminate them.

On the other hand, in anarchistic educational systems, the individual is focused on, almost entirely to the exclusion of society. The individual is elevated above all else and modes of social interaction and cultural survival are given very little attention.

When we started thinking about Sudbury Valley School, we had no way of knowing whether there would be any way of harmonizing individual needs and social needs in the United States today. We started by examining the social side because it was clear to us that no school could possibly survive if it didn't meet the needs of modern American society. It might survive as a fringe school for some few discontented people who perhaps wanted a different way of life in this country. But as an institution that was meaningful to the mainstream of American society, there was no

hope for it to survive unless it could tie into the deep needs of American culture in this era. So we set about asking ourselves, "What is it really that the society wants today in order to flourish?"

The key to the answer to this question was the realization that the United States is fundamentally a free market economy in which personal freedom is maximized on a social level. Ours is a society which, as a community, extols personal freedoms for its individual members and has social ways of guaranteeing these freedoms through the grant of rights and redress to individuals. In addition, the United States, in 1965, was clearly entering an economic era which was a novelty on the world scene - namely, the post-industrial economic era, which was beginning to be recognized as a reality. Today, of course, the image of a post-industrial society is commonplace. The key concept which differentiates a post-industrial economy from an industrial economy is the realization that in a post-industrial society, in principle, every task that can be defined by a set routine can be taken out of human hands and put into the hands of some sort of information processing machine. The main difference between an industrial and a post-industrial society lies not in the presence or absence of produced goods, but in the means by which those goods are produced. In an industrial society it is essential to have a virtual ARMY of human beings who are fit somehow into the mechanism of the overall industrial machine, who play an integrated role in the production process as parts of the machine.

The strength of the industrial society was that by using machines, it could magnify many, many thousandfold the ability of the society to produce material benefits for its members. But the machines couldn't do this alone. The machines were not sophisticated enough to carry out this process unaided. In order to make it happen what was needed was human intervention and human help. Human and machine became as one, something that probably has never been better illustrated than in the great classic film "Modern Times" that Charlie Chaplin produced over fifty years ago.

The deal that was made by various societies, one after the other, when they chose to enter the industrial era was to agree to forfeit much of their humanity, much of their freedom as individuals, in order to benefit as a society from the wealth and prosperity that the industrial era promised. This isn't an altogether ridiculous deal by any means. It's perfectly understandable that human societies that for thousands of years had accepted as inevitable the grinding poverty and deprivation and misery of the overwhelming majority of people - it's not surprising that such societies, when faced with the promise that miraculously and with incredible suddenness virtually the entire population could raise its standard of living and survive in a relatively

comfortable manner, chose, one after another, to sacrifice willingly some of their personal freedoms, many of which were illusory anyway, to achieve that goal.

The post-industrial era is of a different nature, however. The post-industrial era ask no sacrifice of the material benefits that the industrial era provided. On the contrary, the development of sophisticated, computer-driven machines and information processing systems has promised an even greater degree of national wealth and diversity. But the demands on the individual are now completely different. In the post-industrial society there is essentially no place for human beings who are not able to function independently. There is no room for people trained to be cogs in a machine. Such people have been displaced permanently from the economic system. The needs of a post-industrial society, regardless of the governmental structure, are for people who can be independent, entrepreneurial producers of economic benefits. People have to take initiatives, to think for themselves, to create for themselves, to become productive for themselves. In a post-industrial society, there is no longer a mass of predetermined slots into which to fit people. The economic demands of post-industrial America are something that you hear from personnel directors in every industry and company today, small or large. The demands are for creative people with initiative, self-starters, people who know how to take responsibility, exercise judgment, make decisions for themselves.

This meant to us that a school in post-industrial America, in order to serve the culture, has to have the following features: It has to allow for a tremendous amount of diversity. It has to allow for people to become, on their own, selfstarters, initiators, entrepreneurs. And, at the same time, it has to allow children to grow up completely at home with the cultural values of our country, especially such essential values as tolerance, mutual respect, and self-government.

We then looked at the requirements for individual realization. These too had undergone a rather interesting change of perspective through the work of psychologists and developmental theorists. The commonly accepted model of the human had been that of a tabula rasa, a clean slate, born as infants with basically nothing in their heads and therefore growing up to be what other people have written on that slate. That's a model that put a tremendous responsibility on the people around the child who write on that child's slate. In a sense, that model was the utter negation of the individual as an independent being, and the subjugation of the individual will to the influences of those around it who impose their wills and their intellects on it from infancy onwards.

But Aristotle, 2,000 years ago, and developmental psychologists in recent times, developed other models that seemed to us, when we were creating Sudbury Valley

School, to be much more realistic and much more in line with what we saw to be the nature of the human species. These people considered children from birth as being naturally curious, as being active participants in the learning process - not born with blank minds but, on the contrary, born with information processing systems in their brains which require of them, demand of them, by nature, to reach out, to explore, to seek to understand the world and make sense of it, using their sensory interactions and their agile brains to build pictures of reality - world views - in their minds that enable them to function in the world. In our view there was no such thing as a passive child. Every child is active. Every child we had ever seen, certainly in early infancy, was devoured with curiosity, was energetic, was able to overcome almost every barrier, was courageous, persistent, and constantly seeking to meet every challenge that came their way. And these are traits that we saw continuing year after year in children as long as it wasn't forced out of them by some crunching outside intervention.

So it seemed clear to us that the ideal environment for children to attain the full realization of their inherent intellectual, emotional, and spiritual potentials had to be one which, subject only to constraints imposed by safety, is totally open for exploration, free of restraints, free of external impositions; a place where each individual child would be granted the freedom to reach out everywhere and anywhere they wished so that they could follow through on all of their curious probing.

This realization came upon us like a thunderclap because we saw such a beautiful fit between the needs of society today and the needs of the individual. Both society and the individual in modern post-industrial America require that schools be an environment in which children are FREE, and in which children can LEARN HOW TO USE FREEDOM, how to be self-governing, how to live together as free people in peace and harmony and mutual respect. Not an environment in which one group dominated, or exercised power over another. Not an environment in which children were put into any sort of externally imposed track, or forced to think about prescribed subjects. But an environment in which children and adults alike work together to guarantee free accessibility to the world, to the greatest extent possible, for each and every child And that, in effect, is what Sudbury Valley school is about.

If you come to Sudbury Valley, the first impression you get is that of a regular school in recess. You notice children, outdoors and indoors, freely going on and off campus, freely walking about, moving from room to room, changing from group to group, talking, interacting, reading, playing. So much playing! More than anything else, the children at Sudbury Valley School, of all ages, play. The better they are at playing,

the better they are at fashioning new models with which to understand the world. Play is the greatest teacher of all. Every innovative adult who has ever written about the creative process has talked about the extent to which he or she played with new ideas, moving freely in and out of new, original conceptions of the world without being hampered by preconceived notions of reality. The children at Sudbury Valley know how to play. They know how to take their play seriously. They know how to play with intensity and with focus.

Sudbury Valley is a community governed by itself. Every child in Sudbury Valley has a vote in every matter that pertains to the school. The school is governed by a School Meeting in which four-year-olds have the same vote as adults. Every decision in the school is made by that School Meeting. The budget, the hiring and firing of staff, the letting of contracts. In the Sudbury Valley community, no adult wields any particular power over any child, nor does any child wield power over any other child. All decisions are made in the School Meeting or delegated by the School Meeting to people elected on a temporary basis to fill a particular need. Our community is a model of democratic governance, much like the New England communities that we serve.

The children at Sudbury Valley, from age four and up, by being free, learn how to function as free people in a free society. They learn how to find their own pursuits. They learn how to occupy themselves. They learn how to create their own environments. They learn how to respect each other. They learn how to cooperate. They learn how to use the School Meeting to legislate community rules, and to forge compromises when there are mutually exclusive demands made on property, or on places, or on activities. They learn how to meet challenges. They learn how to overcome failure since there is nobody there to shield them from failure. They learn how to try something and relish success, and they learn how to try something and fail at it - and try again. All of this takes place in an environment in which there is absolutely NO outside intervention of curriculum, of guidance, of grading, of testing, of evaluation, of segregation by age, or of the imposition of arbitrary outside authority.

The school has now been running for 24 years. It has in it children of all ages. We have 125 students now and we have an incredible record of fiscal success as well as educational success. When we first started, people looking in from the outside said that if children have a real say in financial matters, their inexperience will lead them to squander the resources of the school in a profligate manner. They'll buy candy. They'll waste their money on trivialities. The facts speak otherwise. The ability of children to govern themselves is in no way less impressive than that of adults. Our school has never received one cent of government subsidy, endowment, foundation money, or any other outside funds. It is totally tuition-based. The tuition in 1968 was on a par with the public school expenditures in the schools around us - \$900 per pupil. Today, 24 years later, at a time when educational costs have soared in other schools, and when all we hear is that not enough money is being spent on education, Sudbury Valley School costs about \$3000 per pupil, less than half the per pupil costs of the local public schools. And that's the whole cost, including capital expenses and including all the other hidden costs that other schools write on different sets of books. The tremendous efficiency of our fiscal operation is due entirely to the manner in which decisions are made by the entire school community, and due to the extraordinarily modest expenditures required by students who are eagerly and intensely pursuing their passionate interests.

Educationally, the Sudbury Valley School has had a remarkable record. The students are bright-eyed, intelligent, articulate, and are equally comfortable conversing about ideas, climbing trees, hanging out with children ten years older or ten years younger - even with adults. They have mastered pursuits as varied as calculus, photography, French horn, skateboarding, pottery, poetry, bookkeeping, pathology, backwoods survival, leather-working, carpentry - the list is almost as long as the number of people who have been enrolled. Despite the fact that when we started people said that our students who wanted to go on to college would never be admitted because they had no grades, no transcripts, no school recommendations, our record has been an unbroken one. We have a 100 percent rate of acceptance into colleges, trade schools, art schools and the like for every single student who has ever wanted to continue their formal education. Our students present themselves to college Admissions Officers as people who are self-contained, who know why they want to go on with their studies, who understand who they are, and who have figured out how they want to carry on with their lives. The Sudbury Valley graduate has a degree of self-knowledge, self esteem and an awareness of his or her own strengths that is unexcelled in schools today for people of comparable age.

We feel that Sudbury Valley is a superb model of an educational environment for post-industrial America. The joy, happiness, pleasantness, friendliness, and warmth

that extend to anyone who is part of the school community is palpable. Trust, too, is everywhere, and everywhere to be seen. Belongings lie unguarded, doors unlocked, equipment unprotected and available to all. We have open admission - everyone can attend. And by walking across the threshold, become, in an instant, part of the warmth and trust that is the school.

Sudbury Valley School is a true democratic republic of children and adults working together. Does it sound utopian? It may, but no less utopian than the United States of America sounded when people first heard about it in the rest of the world. Our school, we feel, is indeed a utopia that is as real as the country of which it is a part.

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