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The System

To help us understand the value of the educational journey I would like to take you on, we first need to take a realistic look at the realities that are presently in place. I apologize for beginning in such a traditional fashion, but having a clear understanding of where we stand at the outset is the best way to ensure that we can navigate a course to where we eventually want to be. We are where we are for a reason. Past and present political and educational rhetoric calls for the development of a unified educational system that spans an entire continent. Though the system is to be the main responsibility of state and local control, the goal has been to establish some kind of national uniformity. From the smallest classroom in the most rural area of this country to the inner city megaschool, educational practices are expected to meet the same goals and objectives, and each child is expected to be given the same opportunity.

The reality of this expectation, which exists in our national consciousness, is evident in much of what we say, but it is in little of what we do. Holding to the ideal and not the reality, any failure to meet these expectations runs the risk of meeting criticism from parents, social conscience advocates, or anyone else who has an ax to grind or a finger to point at the system.

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This contemplated system must be conducive to the learning needs of inner city children and youth, suburban children and youth, and the children and youth of rural farms and ranches. It must be applicable to the children and youth of every race, language, religion, ethnic group, and socioeconomic background. The contemplated system is expected to house, exercise, transport, nourish, enrich, empower, and educate a population of tens of millions of 5- to 18-year-olds for 6 to 10 hours a day (longer in some cases).

Because of waning parental involvement, this system is expected to motivate the unmotivated; discipline the undisciplined; establish a work ethic; teach and clarify values for those who are confused about what is right and wrong; teach social skills; and provide information on sex, sexuality, and sexually transmitted diseases, and where that fails, provide nursery services and parenting classes for the children of teenage students. Increasing political pressure, from all manner of special interest groups, demands that careful attention be paid to every decision so that nobody will be offended with regard to religious practice, language or innuendo, sexual preference, holiday observance or nonobservance, issues of customs or heredity, treatment of animals, issues of native tongue or dialect, gender, and taste in clothing—just to name a few.

In addition to these essentially noncurricular issues, the system must provide for a bevy of extracurricular activities. Every imaginable sport, club, and organization must be given equal time, place, and support under the umbrella of public education. In addition to the learning needs of children and youth, there is now pressure for the plan to provide adequate remedial education for illiterate, non-English-speaking, and other undereducated adults. In fact, the buildings and all the other resources of the system must accommodate constant use by every imaginable outside group or organization. All facility-related considerations must also encompass strategic planning needs for renovating old and building new facilities.

The system must also provide adequate time and resources for the constant training, updating, enriching, and motivating

of faculty and staff. It must have the ability to adjust to and interface with each new technological and learning tool that comes along. This assumes that there is enough flexibility in the overall training plan to ensure that it can allow for successful midstream course adjustments necessary to meet the demands of future changes and developments that have never been considered.

In this increasingly violent society, the educational system is expected to develop policies and procedures for dealing with gangs, lethal weapons, "kids killing kids" and other forms of violence, drugs, extortion, and prostitution on school campuses. These policies need to interface properly with local law-enforcement agencies and officials; provide adequate protection for students, faculty, and staff; and still protect the legal rights and due process of alleged offenders and the rest of the affected population.

Returning to the curricular needs of the system, in addition to these logistical issues, the results achieved in the classroom must be measured against constantly changing national testing standards and university entrance requirements, and they must compete favorably with the educational efforts of other countries. The system must take into consideration new educational requirements for teaching students during this age of information, with all of its new high-tech industries and the ever-increasing need for students who are well prepared in math and the sciences.

It must allow for the needs of an ever-changing job market where employment for those who drop out of the system is becoming increasingly scarce. In addition, it must also instill in successful graduates the desire and skills to compete effectively in some form of postgraduate training in order for them to be marketable in an evolving job market.

Under the weight of all these requirements, and many more that I have not listed, there is one last issue that needs to be addressed: The public education system has no money and little means for generating income of its own volition. Sometimes, those who are the most demanding and critical of the

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system are the ones least willing to dig into their pockets and pay a fair price for these educational services. Many government officials and citizens alike openly condemn a system that they fail to comprehend and fail to fund fully.

With such an impossible burden to bear, is it any wonder that on every corner we hear that education is failing? Signs of its demise are evident to all who wish to point them out. Purveyors of educational doom use much of this unmet burden to show what is wrong, without acknowledging an ounce of their responsibility or the failure of their own myopic vision.

The worst part of their tirade is that they are flogging a system they don't even understand. Their views are often unrealistic and unfounded, and they tend to do nothing more than demoralize, discourage, and hamstring those who could actually make a difference. Their strident voices and lack of real understanding serve only to further exacerbate the predicament of those individuals whose educational journey is a story of disenchantment and failure.

These critical voices of unknowledgeable outsiders and the disenfranchised students, parents, teachers, and administrators who believe their words are wreaking havoc on our educational system. They breed fear and contempt where hope and awe belong. They turn learning into drudgery, and they turn discovery and personal development into despair. The more we listen to them, the more we risk the loss of the potential of a rising generation. Their voices do nothing more than create an atmosphere of demoralizing fear for students, parents, teachers, and administrators alike.

This debilitating fear is mostly responsible for placing our whole educational system on an apparent verge of collapse. This fear must be replaced with a true and realistic hope. There is much in our system that is exciting, exemplary, and good. Many people who are unable to see this are prepared to dismantle and destroy everything in their attempt to "fix" it. They are treading in dangerous territory. If history is any indicator of the educational future these naysayers hope to build, they will not succeed. We have already been where they

want us to go, and in the mirror of time we can still see the failed images of what their unwise efforts have begotten.

When will we as educators learn to steer a steady course to the future rather than going back and forth between competing shores? When will we find a common ground on which to build the foundation of our profession rather than drift in endless circles of dubious practice and rubrics? Is it really that hard to know what to do?

I submit that the answer is simpler than most experts imagine (though many of my colleagues seem to have a tragic disdain for simplicity). We academicians harbor a heroic love for making problems unfathomable, almost as if their continuation is the purpose of our existence. How often are simple answers rejected by the declaration, "Complex problems cannot be solved with simple solutions"? Too often those who are doing the analyzing make the problem complex. They unwittingly create a wall around the problem itself, hedging up the way for any who would offer a viable solution.

The book *Shantung Compound*, by Langdon Gilkey, describes life in a Japanese internment camp in China during the Second World War. In the initial problem-solving meetings held by the camp leadership, Gilkey discovered the following:

In these nightly meetings I also recognized for the first time the unique character and value of the business mind. The core of its strength was what I might call the "mentality of decision." One or two of these men seated around the table had taken part in academic discussion groups in Peking. There we pondered such abstract issues as peace, international justice, and the relations of ethics or theology to world affairs. I had noted then how strangely silent, though observant, polite, and respectful, these men had been. By contrast, we academicians had fairly flowed with verbiage. And as hour after hour went by with no comment from these business types, I thought to myself in some disappointment and not a little disdain, "Nice responsible men, but hardly bright—surely not able to

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think." Here, however, all was different. The minds of these men accustomed to practical problems, which called for both know-how and decisiveness, clamped onto our situation and dealt with it creatively. What was needed here were concrete answers to technical and organizational problems. (Gilkey, 1966, p. 27)

Often the academic approach to problem solving goes awry because it is based too much in theory and not enough in practical consideration. It focuses on vague similarities and theories that often point to where the problem appears to be, but not where it is in reality. In this context, consider the following problem. Three deer hunters had gone into the forest on their annual hunt. The weather became so threatening that they began to fear for their lives. Their panicked search for shelter proved fruitful when they came across a hunting lodge nestled deep in the woods. Inquiring after a room, they found that there was only one left. They gladly agreed to share. The cost of the room was 30 dollars per night. It seemed a modest price under the circumstances.

Each man contributed 10 dollars, and they retired to their lodgings to sit out the storm. Later that evening, a routine audit revealed to the night manager that these three hunters were overcharged for their room. Their room was on the east side of the lodge, and east-side rooms were only 25 dollars per night. To rectify the problem, the manager called for the bellboy, explained the problem, and handed him a five-dollar bill to refund to the hunters. As the bellboy walked to their room, he decided that it would be hard for the three men to split the five-dollar bill evenly, so he came up with a novel plan.

He knocked on the door, told the hunters that they had been overcharged for their room and gave each man a one-dollar bill from his wallet as a refund. Placing the five dollars in his wallet, he justified keeping the remaining two dollars as a tip. The next morning, after the storm had passed, the hunters continued their hunt feeling good about their warm night's sleep and the seemingly honest treatment they received at the lodge.

This appears to be a very simple story with a rather insignificant and ordinary ending. I hope that a closer inspection will reveal why I have chosen to relate it. Let's begin this inspection by accounting for all the money that was passed around in the story. Following the cash flow, we find that the hunters initially paid 10 dollars apiece for the room, equaling 30 dollars ($3 \times \$10.00 = \30.00). Of that 30-dollar outlay, five dollars was to be refunded to the hunters. Instead, the bellboy kept a two-dollar tip and returned one dollar to each hunter. Having received the one-dollar refund, each hunter now spent only nine dollars on the room ($\$10.00 - \$1.00 = \$9.00$).

Therefore, $3 \text{ hunters} \times \$9.00 = \$27.00$ (the amount that the hunters actually expended for the room). The bellboy kept the remaining two dollars. By adding the amount that the hunters actually paid (27 dollars) to the amount that the bellboy pocketed (two dollars), you are left with a total of 29 dollars ($\$27.00 + \$2.00 = \$29.00$). What happened to the remaining one dollar?

Attempting to solve this problem using this kind of logic could lead a person to believe they have discovered a mathematical black hole. Many individuals have contemplated the seemingly mystical nature of this disappearing dollar bill while missing the simple answer. Twenty-five dollars are in the cash drawer of the lodge, one dollar is in the pocket of each hunter, and two dollars are in the wallet of the bellboy ($\$25.00 + \$3.00 + \$2.00 = \30.00).

The first approach seems logical because it follows the flow of the money. Quickly the application becomes more complex because it mixes where the money was with where the money is. This past/present conundrum distorts the real picture and leads to the incorrect answer. Only by focusing entirely on where the money actually is can we come up with the right answer.

Granted, this is a simple example, but it illustrates the real problems that exist in trying to solve our educational equation. We are mixing where we appear to be with where we think we are, and we have therefore become lost. In this predicament we have not only become physically disoriented, but, in the fear that this disorientation has caused, many have

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also lost their vision and hope. In a fearful and hopeless state, we will never find the answers we seek.

Around us, however, are those who have never been lost. Through it all, they have kept their vision and hope. They have discovered the secret, and they quietly create endless strings of small educational successes while the rest of us busily attempt to make our way through our own discouragement. Many of these successful educators find themselves disregarded and even shunned because of resentment and mistrust from their less successful peers. Rather than examining what these teachers are doing, many disgruntled colleagues see these successes as only a greater evidence of their own failure.

Without hope, any problem remains overwhelming and unmanageable. Those of us who have become hopeless seem to find a macabre solace in the overwhelming size of the obstacles we face. This is because the sheer weight of the problem we perceive justifies our overblown and complicated evaluation of the problem. In our educational world, this lack of hope is easily maintained by looking at and recording any possible problem as a failure. Dropout rates are especially attractive in this regard. A view of the problem, failure by failure, will continue to feed the feelings of wholesale panic that plague many teachers and administrators, but to what end? Will it not lead to the actual failure of the system we have dedicated our lives to sustaining and preserving?

What would be the continued cost of maintaining this pessimistic point of view? Which one of us followed the call to teach for fame or fortune? We knew the price we would have to pay when we entered this arena. We knew the realities of low pay and lack of respect and recognition; and yet our enthusiasm and optimism drove us on. We were the true believers, the banner bearers. We knew that any person—every person—who really reached with all their might for the brass ring of learning and seized it firmly would create a life-long journey of positive personal growth and joy. Many of us chose to teach because of the influence of one beloved mentor who led us to this discovery, and we long to do the same for

others. Most of us came on this crusade for the purest of reasons, but we became lost somewhere along the way.

Were we wrong? Were the goals we set out to accomplish misguided, or has the need for quality education and enthusiastic educators passed? No, if ever there were a time and a need for what we once believed, that time is now. We should refocus our questions on what we can do now. What can we do to return to our first dreams? How can we rebuild our splendid optimism? How can we sustain hope in our students, our colleagues, and ourselves? How can we go back to what we once believed? How can we move forward with a constant hope?

Like the lost mariner, we must fix our gaze on the educational North Star. We must return to the foundation of what we do. As there is little agreement in our field about that foundation, let me offer a strong suggestion: Learning, in its purest form, is still the most exciting and invigorating aspect of human life. It is the major element of our journey that expands our hearts and minds and makes life worthwhile. We must identify these pure elements of learning, and we must hold to them with all we are worth. Our focus should be first on the principles of learning and how and why people open their minds. When we fully understand this phenomenon, we will be prepared to discover ways to create an environment that will naturally encourage this kind of pure learning to happen.