



Back to School with John Taylor Gatto

In a letter to the Wall Street Journal in 1991, the three time New York City Teacher of the Year and current New York State Teacher of the Year resigned, saying that he no longer wished to "hurt kids to make a living." Upon hearing about this story 21 years later, I decided to investigate what drove a great teacher to say that. You could say that I was already predisposed to many of John Taylor Gatto's ideas because I am a product of the public school system and have had to work very hard to retrain my mind and teach myself critical thinking.

After spending countless hours and 13 years in public school, I have to wonder if that was the best use of my time. "Lies My Teacher Told Me" by James W. Loewen and the documentary, "Waiting for Superman," opened my mind to rethinking education in the U.S. Would I have been better educated foregoing college for a trip around the world or going straight to work after the government no longer compelled me by law to sit in a room and stare at a chalk board?

I was definitely taught to "memorize the dots, but not connect the dots."¹ In George Carlin's famous stand up, "The American Dream," he quips "They [the owners of this country] don't want a population of citizen capable of critical thinking...They want obedient workers. People who are just smart enough to run the machines and do the paperwork and just dumb enough to passively accept all these increasingly sh**tier jobs with the lower pay and longer hours and reduced benefits, the end of overtime, and the vanishing pension that disappears the moment you go to collect it...It's a big club and you ain't in it."²

The Origins of Compulsory Schools

Gatto believes the US compulsory school system is designed after the Prussian (current day Germany) School system that was implemented between 1806 and 1819. He defines the Prussian School System as an "educational system deliberately designed to produce mediocre intellects, to hamstring the inner life, to deny students appreciable leadership skills, and to ensure docile and incomplete citizens - all in order to render the populace "manageable."³

To make his case he says, "William James alluded to it many times at the turn of the century. Orestes Brownson, the hero of Christopher Lasch's 1991 book, *The True and Only Heaven*, was publicly denouncing the Prussianization of American schools back in the 1840s. Horace Mann's "Seventh Annual Report" to the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1843 is essentially a paean to the land of Frederick the Great and a call for its schooling to be brought here. That Prussian culture loomed large in America is hardly surprising, given our early association with that Utopian State."⁴

¹ Gatto, John Taylor, *Weapons of Mass Instruction: A Schoolteacher's Journey Through the Dark World of Compulsory Schooling* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2009), XX.

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JChUO4TLjnY>

³ Ibid., XX

⁴ Ibid., XX

Gatto paints the picture of the ruling families in the United States bankrolling forced public schooling to create a working class that would be obedient to corporations and the government. These ruling elite wanted a subservient people that could be managed and less likely to question authority. H.L. Mencken wrote in 1924 that "The aim [of public education]...is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality."⁵

According to Gatto, the leader of this movement was Horace Mann who brought compulsory school to Massachusetts in 1849. Many other states had public schools, but it wasn't until 1864 that the District of Columbia became the second state to make school compulsory.⁶ In exchange for his service, Mann was promised and given Daniel Webster's seat in Congress.⁷

Before becoming one of the worst U.S. Presidents, Woodrow Wilson was the President of Princeton University. In 1909 he said "We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class, of necessity, in every society, to forgo the privileges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks" in a speech to the New York City School Teachers Association.⁸ Gatto discusses several foundations and eugenicists that were influential in trying to create their version of Utopia by separating children at early ages and sending them through the machine of compulsory schooling.

I have been challenged to learn more about how some of the brightest people our country has known were educated. Jefferson, Washington, and Lincoln had very little formal schooling. What methods did Francis Collins' mom use to home school her son on a farm in Virginia that helped him one day head the Human Genome Project? Gatto emphasizes over and over that work experience at a young age is invaluable and that healthy children should naturally want to start becoming adults around the age of seven. He states, "You only need to read Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography... or Andrew Carnegie's to realize that the whole concept of adolescence is a fantastic lie invented at the beginning of the 20th Century by a fellow named G. Stanley Hall who was Wilhelm Wundt's right hand man... at the University of Leipzig in Germany...He invented adolescence. And adolescence is a fantastic lie that supports the monumental jobs project called secondary school. Adolescence has been willed into existence as a pseudo-scientific excuse to extend tutelage as an aid in synthetically extending childhood."⁹

Education in the U.S. is Broken

School literally started with a bang this year for Perry Hall High School in Maryland when a student shot a poor kid with Down's syndrome.¹⁰ Who can forget the thirteen people killed at Columbine High School in 1999? In August, a teacher in Arlington who is a 28 year old married mother of three was convicted of 16 counts of inappropriate relations with students.¹¹ I could go on and on about the teasing, fighting, and dangers of going to school.

Gatto notes that in most schools the students are bored and the teachers who grew up in the same boring compulsory system are even more bored than the students. He quit going into the teacher's lounge because it became a toxic place full of bored teachers who did nothing but complain about how their kids didn't care about learning the way they were teaching. According to Gatto, schools were

⁵ Ibid., XVI.

⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸ Ibid., XX.

⁹ <http://vimeo.com/7410421> at 34 minutes

¹⁰ <http://abcnews.go.com/US/maryland-school-shooter-assembled-shotgun-school-attack/story?id=17087340>

¹¹ <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/08/17/texas-teacher-convicted-after-sex-with-5-students360911/>

designed on purpose to be ineffective. The best teachers are stymied by bureaucracy and children are sent to day prisons and forced to learn things they don't see a use for. The districts have become giant jobs projects to reward the politically connected and to keep hard working young adults out of the work force so they can't compete for jobs of older Americans.

Not only is K-12 broken, but so are our Universities. Gatto cites a 2006 University of Connecticut study that measured 14,000 students at 50 colleges. It found that at 16 of the 50 schools, graduating seniors knew less than they did when they were incoming freshman. The remaining 34 schools saw no "measurable change" in the five academic areas that were tested.¹² That was my experience. I graduated from one of the "top business schools" in the country and can remember virtually nothing that I learned in the classroom. I think I would be more "educated" today if I would have used the three years spent in college working or traveling.

A 2006 study by the National Commission on the Future of Higher Education found that only 31% of college educated Americans can fully comprehend a newspaper story, down from 40% a decade ago.¹³ Our society has become insane. It saddens me that so many students today are pressured by parents and educators to get a degree in worthlessness and start their lives as debt slaves to a broken system. Gatto has helped me see that there is a large difference between educated and schooled.

Success Stories of the Educated Unschooled

One of the best things about *Weapons of Mass Instruction* is the many examples of successful people who got their own education outside of the school system. Gatto claims that our system schools children, but doesn't educate them. Below is a brief list of some of the successes that Gatto has compiled:

Sir Richard Branson- When he was only four years old, his mother asked him if he could find his way home from a part of London that he had never been in. He credits this lesson along with his frequent 100 mile bike rides as a teenager as some of his most influential learnings.¹⁴ In high school he started a magazine called *The Student* and his parents supported their dyslexic's son's decision to drop out and build his Virgin empire. Today at 62, he is number 255 on the Forbes Billionaire list with an estimated net worth of \$4.2 billion.¹⁵

Kip Tannel and John Mackey- Gatto paints the two as bored poker playing University of Texas students with bad grades. They dropped out of college to do something useful with their lives and meet needs that current retailers were not meeting. Tannel founded the Countainer Store in Dallas, Texas and Mackey went on to forever change the grocery industry with his Austin, Texas based Whole Foods Market.

Danica Patrick- She dropped out of high school and moved to London by herself to learn to drive race cars.¹⁶

¹² Ibid., 38.

¹³ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴ Branson, Richard, *Screw It, Let's Do It (Quick Read)* (London, England: Virgin Books, 2010), 63.

¹⁵ <http://www.forbes.com/profile/richard-branson/>

¹⁶ Ibid., 30.

Ingvar Kamprad- was a dyslexic degreeless fish peddler when he came up with the idea of IKEA stores. Today he is worth \$31 billion.

Admiral David Farragut- I was shocked to learn that at the age of nine he was commissioned a midshipman in the US Navy¹⁷ and at age 12 he commanded the captured British ship, the USS *Essex*. He delivered the ship from the coast of Peru to port in Boston!

George Washington, Benjamin Franklin (worked 60 hours a week at 12), Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Edison (ran his own business at 12), Andrew Carnegie, John Rockefeller, Herman Melville and Mark Twain were all educated but they were not products of a school system.¹⁸

Solutions

The one Gatto book I have read was light on the techniques he used to win all of his teaching awards. From what he did divulge, it sounds like he interviewed each child with their parents and gathered a real understanding of who they were, where they came from, and what they wanted out of life. He then created an individual lesson plan for each child. He believes in open source learning where students have very little discipline and anyone can be a potential teacher for the student.¹⁹ Students should approach the mechanics, seamstresses, cooks, and authors that have the knowledge that the student is most interested in.

Gatto does not believe in the formal classroom that we have today. He would take his classes without permission into public meetings, workplaces, courthouses, and have the children act in dramatic troupes before any group that would listen to them.²⁰ He wanted them to learn independence, critical thinking, and to be adults. He is not afraid to tell people that looking your best matters and that eating junk food served at school and sitting in desks all day aids in childhood obesity. Gatto knows you learn and grow the most during hard times and failure. He quotes Robert Kiyosaki as wanting to "build it [an educational system] around making mistakes." In Gatto's experience, you become educated by "sharpening your own personal feedback loops through experience and mistakes."²¹

He believes that parents should treat children as adults once they reach age seven and that they should be included in adult conversations and work as they did in the 1800s in the U.S. He is very critical of child labor laws because they prolong childhood and prevent children from learning how to add value to their community. He thinks school categories such as gifted-and-talented and learning disabled are for the most part myths.²² Most of his students were in partnership with him to be educated. For the students "too broken to want an education," he would school them in the hopes that they would see the amazing progress in the other students and that they would embrace his personal lesson plan for them.²³

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Farragut

¹⁸ Ibid., XV.

¹⁹ Ibid., 31.

²⁰ Ibid., 103.

²¹ Ibid., 51.

²² Ibid., 85.

²³ Ibid., 106.

Gatto believes that the government should have very little involvement in education and property owners should not have a gun to their head and be forced to support a broken system. He believes that a free market system where parents select their teachers based on skill and competence is best. Bureaucrats and central planners should not determine what an "education" is and schools should be allowed to experiment and compete with each other. Gatto states "Monopolies suppress initiative, make poor use of feedback from customers who have nowhere else to go, and generate an aversion to truth."²⁴

I barely scratched the surface with some of the ideas I have learned from Gatto. I plan on reading another one of his books and have an interest in further investigating the life of Horace Mann. I don't agree with everything he writes and I don't have the answers. I found his works to be challenging and they brought a fresh perspective to which I had not been exposed. I hope you will look further into these ideas in your search for truth.

Markets

It is hard to believe that natural gas prices were over \$13 per million BTU in the summer of 2008 and crashed all the way to \$1.90 this April. As I write, prices are just above \$2.60 per million BTUs in the U.S and over \$11 in Europe.²⁵ Horizontal drilling and fracking have given the U.S. a huge cost advantage over most of the world. If you aren't familiar with how this technology works, please watch this helpful two minute video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0kmskvJFt0>



The incredible collapse of U.S natural gas prices. Source: Think or Swim.

²⁴ Ibid., 153.

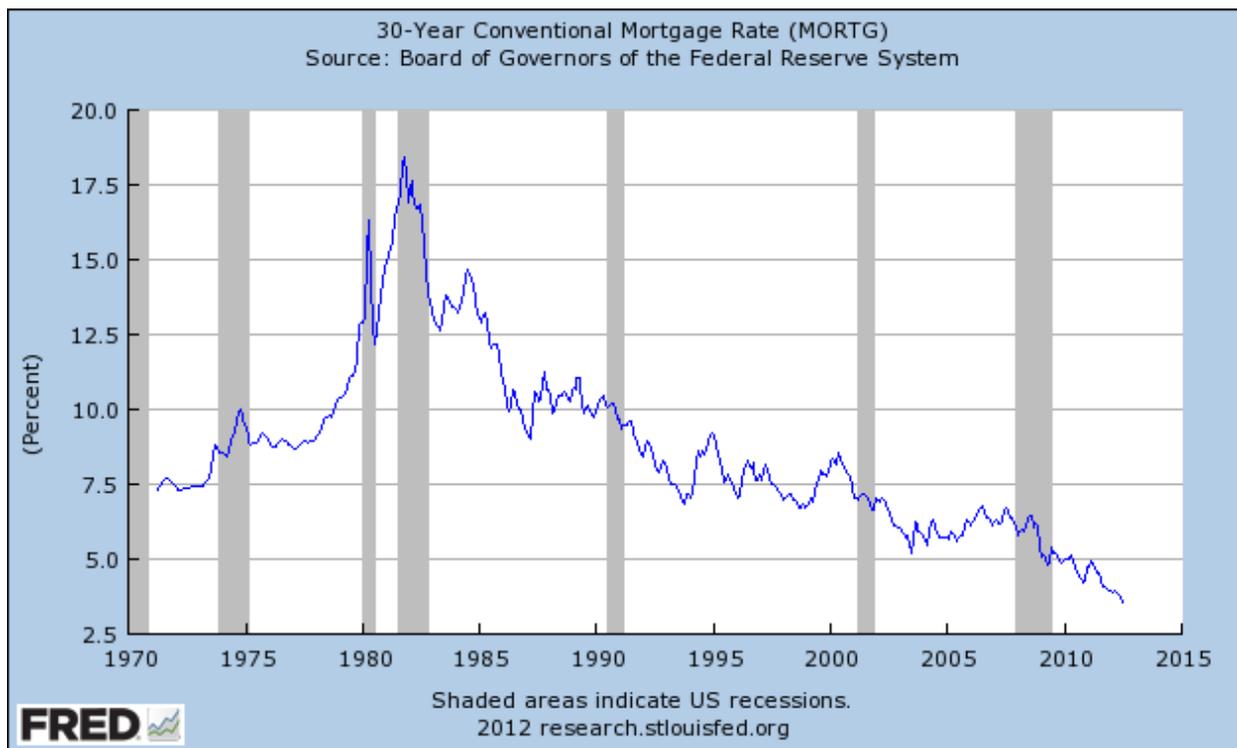
²⁵ http://ycharts.com/indicators/europe_natural_gas_price

I expect that many car companies will start making compressed natural gas vehicles for the 2014 model year and I will definitely consider purchasing one because the per gallon gas equivalent of natural gas is about \$1 per gallon of gasoline.²⁶

One of the best ways to take advantage of low natural gas prices is to go to a website like www.chooseenergy.com to shop prices for your electricity bill. I hadn't thought about this in awhile and was able to lock in a 2 cent per kilowatt hour savings by signing a year contract with a provider.

In addition to the abundance of natural gas, low interest rates are also giving many Americans a lot more discretionary income. In late July, the yield on the ten-year government bond hit an all time low for the 230 plus years that we have been a country. For the first time since I bought my house in 2003, I decided that I could not pass up the opportunity to refinance it.

Mortgage rates could go lower, but in my opinion this is a really good time to get a quote if you are considering refinancing. If you plan on staying in your house for a long time, make sure to compare the interest savings between a 15 year and 30 year mortgage. Many people are clearly out of work and have underwater mortgages, but there are thousands of people saving hundreds of dollars per month by locking in these low rates. Lower housing costs and energy costs free up millions of dollars per month for Americans to spend on other things.



Mortgages are close to all time record lows. Source: St. Louis Fed

²⁶ http://www.cngprices.com/cng_links.php



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