

## Lifting the Veil of Shadows off the U.S.A.'s Schools

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There was a group of people at my high school, Eagan High, that were known as The People Under the Stairs. They were very nice kids. They were mostly suburban white kids who dressed in black and hung out underneath the main set of stairs. The People Under the Stairs were the misfits and the Goths of our school. Many of them wore trenchcoats and black make up, and most listened to depressing alternative or industrial music. Many of them were fascinated by dark poetry, Anne Rice's vampire novels, and movies like The Crow. Most of The People Under the Stairs that I knew were quite strange and creative, but there wasn't one person who defined the group because they were all very odd people, and that's why they hung out together. They were the misfits, the ones who didn't belong, except to each other. I was friends with most of them.

I've been out of high school for over three years now, but I am still in contact with many of those so-called Goths. I couldn't really say that I was one of them, since my tight circle of friends were misfits even among the outcasts, probably because we were apt to hang out with all sorts of people, even jocks. Like in Columbine High, jocks and Goths were mortal enemies because one group was most definitely "in" and the other group wanted to be as far "out" as possible. Fortunately, things never got as out of control in Eagan, Minnesota as they did in Littleton, Colorado. I would take any friend I could get in high school, and anybody who thought they could be choosy with their friends would get burned sooner or later.

High School is a hellish existence that bears a striking resemblance to a prison. I've been saying for a long time that school is the punishment for the crime of being young. Perhaps this is because I went to a school of over 2,000 and because our administration was very restrictive. We were not able to leave during the lunch hour, and there was always

a security guard on patrol who was inevitably nicknamed the “Rent-a-Cop.” There is now a sign in the parking lot that claims much more power of search and seizure than any responsible judge would allow, but this has not been challenged yet. This helps to create an atmosphere of fear and suspicion in the school which simply is not conducive to learning. The teachers and the administration struggle for superiority over the trouble-making kids, while the rest just try to get through the day.

Kids in their most delicate hour, adolescence, are shipped daily to a huge structure made of steel and brick, where they spend their time getting indoctrinated by teachers, or fending for their social survival. Some kids’ insecurities cause them to bully other kids, and a cruel cycle emerges. Kids are forced to form cliques because of the theory of safety in numbers. It ends up being very much like something you might see on the Animal Channel. The bullies and jocks are pack hunters much like lions, while the rest of us are the herd of zebras who try to stay away. Like zebras, the kids will not try to help their fallen comrades and will run faster instead. The teachers and administrators complete the metaphor as the camera crew which observes and never interferes unless they are directly threatened. However, because of the obsessive weight-lifting of the jocks, many of the older high schoolers could bench press several of the teachers. The teachers know and fear this idea. If the “zebras” would only unite, they would be able to defeat the jocks, but these kids, myself included, are as nonviolent as zebras. Of course, the bullies don’t actually eat other kids, but the mental and social humiliation from endless verbal jabs sometimes kills kids just as effectively as a pack of lions.

I don’t think I have to go over the details of the Columbine Massacre, because its still fresh in our minds after how the media sensationalized the whole affair. This was certainly not the first school shooting, which have been happening in and around school in the inner city for many years, but Columbine was a school of mostly white kids from an affluent suburb named Littleton. The name “Little-town” probably struck a chord in middle class America. While America searches for answers the media has been championing the easiest answer, which can be summed up as, “Guns are bad.” If only the answer were that simple. It remains to be seen if America is brave enough to admit that there wasn’t just one cause, but many. Even harder for us to admit will be that a big part of the problem was the school system and the jet-setting parents.

Blaming the whole problem on guns is certainly an enticing idea. It can't be doubted that the direct reasons for the deaths at Columbine were gunshots, but if one seriously considers the situation, it becomes clear that the guns did not make the boys shoot people. The boys made the guns shoot people. Guns, schools, and children have existed simultaneously in this country for well over two hundred years, and this has only become a problem recently. Many people have decided to blame the media itself, movies, the Internet, video games and all sorts of entertainment. The problem arises when it becomes clear that the people blaming TV, film, and computers have used the aforementioned mediums and have not killed dozens of people. If it were true that TV or movie violence caused these heinous crimes, then I should have shot people long ago because I've seen lots of violence, real or otherwise.

Many kids have fantasies about killing classmates or teachers because of all the horrible things that happen in school, most of which teachers never even hear about. I'm not talking about smoking in the bathroom. Schools have become bigger and more impersonal through the years. Columbine and Eagan high schools both hover at around 2,000 kids. The adolescents become more and more isolated, and the pressures from society, teachers, and their peers become more intense. I know much more about this subject than any of the so-called "experts" who appear regularly on TV to regurgitate a safe, non-controversial thought about what's wrong with kids or society or entertainment or guns. Today, schools are too big to take the time to help the quiet kid who's having trouble fitting in. A big part of the problem is that a kid can't help his or her social life by fraternizing with the teachers, and the guidance counselors are worth about as much to kids as a box of Legos from Uncle Stewart.

The various pressures in our society tug children in all sorts of different directions. Sex is always a big worry, and so is finding some friends (or a friend) to sit with at lunch. Schoolwork takes a backseat to myriad other problems facing kids these days. Although there are friends to be found among the 4.0 GPA clique, it's certainly not for everybody and often comes at the expense of many other things. Gym class is always a tough class for those without much athletic prowess. There are so many different classes and quarters in a high school career that it's simply not possible to have a friend in every class, and the ever-present danger of group projects looms menacingly. These are just a few of the pressures

children have to deal with on a daily basis.

The Columbine Massacre has only caused schools to change for the worse. Now they are even more lonely and oppressive. Video cameras monitor kids constantly, and metal detectors create extra hassles at entrances. Kids sacrifice many (but not all) Fourth Amendment rights at the door. They should play "Eye of the Tiger" at beginning of each school day because each day is a struggle for survival. Some schools have even banned trenchcoats because of the two rogue members of The Trenchcoat Mafia. That kind of specious reasoning is akin to painting a house yellow to enable it to withstand earthquakes. Many of my good friends have worn trenchcoats and they are some of the nicest people around.

Instead of fearing the outcasts, we should take the time to try and understand what they are rebelling against. There is much to rebel against in this society for those who haven't conformed completely yet. We are awash in rampant consumerism, and the glorification of sports idols, but we don't praise courageous loners who stand up for what's right, or cool kids who befriend losers. There is no modern day James Dean to show kids that it's cool to be different. Instead, kids today have "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," "Dawson's Creek" and "Beverly Hills 90210." These shows are so far divorced from reality that kids watch them as a form of escape from their regular lives. Some kids even try to live life like the people in those soapy shows.

I wish some adults who still look like high schoolers would go undercover in schools around the nation and experience that oppressive feeling of being lost and alone that most kids experience everyday. It would be especially bad as a new student, and I bet that the adults would have a harrowing experience despite the stable adult lives they would temporarily leave behind. If our nation took a serious look at our decrepit school system, we would find ourselves amazed that there haven't been more school shootings. Most of the problems take root when the kids first begin to go to school.

I worked as a child supervisor at the YMCA for two consecutive summers with kids from the ages of 5 to 13, and I got to know how kids that age perceive the world, and what they have to deal with. We usually had a problem with kids who had either too much or not enough discipline at home. It was usually apparent when their parents came to get them. Many of the kids have divorced parents and all of the situations that arise from that, such as

step-parents and step-siblings. Some of them don't know one of their biological parents and others were adopted. Of course, some kids have physical or mental disabilities (the latest phrase to describe them is "Special Needs"), and many of them are on some form of mind-altering substances. Some for depression, others for hyperactivity, and others for no reason what so ever. All of the kids I saw were separated from their parents for around 6 to 12 hours a day. They were all well aware of pop culture icons like the Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears and most of them were often given spending money which they would use to load up on massive quantities of sugar and pop, to which nearly all kids are hopelessly addicted. These children live in a shallow, consumerist culture which teaches that money and violence solve problems. They live in a world where problems are "solved" in a half-hour for sitcoms and an hour for dramas and adventures. They live in a society that hands out mind, body and soul affecting drugs at a very young age in an attempt to correct personality "defects." They live with their parents, which can be really good, really bad, and anywhere in between. They are often at the mercy of other kids who want to hide their own insecurities by bullying others.

Today, kids in the United States live in a wealthy society, but they usually end up in the custody of commercial day care operators or in the clutches of state or church-run schools for many hours a day so their parents can go to work and earn more money. Supposedly, the point of this money-driven mind set is that with more money the whole family can somehow obtain more happiness. Ruthless advertisers know exactly how to market products to kids and present a scenario where life will be meaningful if only they would just buy (or convince their parents to buy) the product. They promise that endless fun will ensue. Many parents wonder why their kids are so materialist, and yet few parents teach their children any deep spirituality. Today's children are limited to a religious experience of going to church and trying to sit quietly while the priest babbles on about something they don't understand. In western society, most kids are taught that God is far, far away from them. The material world seems much closer and much more important. We need to explore a new and more fluid spirituality, one that doesn't contain dogma, but has a deep love of all nature and human life. We need to seek the truth in all things and shrug off the oppressive millenia of tradition that has been piled upon the major, established religions. Kids are innately spiritual, and they will learn and speak the truth if only we will let them.

It's not easy to be a kid today, nor was it in the past. Most adults remember childhood as an innocent, yet hellish experience. However, when adults try to improve life for the next generation they often end up making things worse. They may try to make lots of money from working ten hours a day at a job they hate, but that won't make life any better for kids. One of the kids who committed the Columbine Massacre lived in a million dollar house and could probably have had any material object he wanted. It sure didn't make him happy; It made him hollow. He chose to fill this emptiness with hatred. This was the true cause of the Columbine Massacre. That fateful decision was made by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. No one else had as much to do with the massacre as they did. However, our society has to share part of the blame for creating the situations which made the killers' lives a living hell. In a society that values its money above its children, can we really expect tranquility?

These problems have been bubbling beneath the surface for a long time, but they've only recently started to boil over. Maybe it's time that we finally stood up as a country and admit that we've made a mistake. We've set up our lives and our schools incorrectly. We pay too much heed to materialism, and not enough to the subtle spirituality of nature. Kids should be taught to learn anywhere and everywhere, because learning is what life is all about, and yet that powerful nucleus of curiosity that powers each child is exactly what is darkened by our public schools. The concept of learning becomes attached to hated homework and structured classtime, in their minds. Why should the government grade, regulate and categorize learning as if they know what the truth is. We must set our minds, and our children's minds free from the authoritarian nature of school, and to let them find their own truth. It is time for the United States to learn the terrible truth about its schools.