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Do Sports Build Character?

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Parents' Rights and Responsibilities In Educating Their Children

This significant subject has been discussed many times in past School of Living journals and books. Now, the experience of concerned and well-known School of Living members, the Cole family, Bear Lake, Mich. (story, page 1) brings it to us with all the shock and vividness that comes when one's close friends are involved in an important controversy. Your editor postpones editorializing, to allow hearing from the Coles, and several who were asked for comment, in the following:

Coles Prefer Withholding Action

From Darrel Cole: "The more I think about and discuss our school situation, the more I feel it would be a mistake to take it to court. We have no knowledge of similar cases in Michigan for precedent, but we feel we would have little to gain in view of the cost of legal action. What good can come to my family as a result of going to jail? Am I wrong to feel that 'Moral and Maternal Withholding Action Is A Proper Response'?"

"The idea that parents should be able to meet someone else's preconceived standard of education before we may be permitted to educate our children at home, is one reason for more and more legislation relieving parents of our responsibilities, and passing them on to the state. Education is not a rightful function of government. The real question is, whether or not I should submit to compulsory education of my children by government. What bearing has the educational background of parents, who wish to accept their natural responsibility to educate their own children?"

"For the larger goal of the effect generally, IF . . . I were to decide a fight were in order, and I had reason to expect good news coverage, I would, after permitting myself to be jailed again, embark on the most sensational fast since Gandhi! Under such circumstances, I'm sure that anyone desiring to expound constitutional principles in my behalf would have a substantial audience."

"We are beginning plans for a 'mobile homestead.' The prime requisite will be an occupation which will not be dependent on permanent location. This I am preparing myself for now. Next will be to devise some sort of mobile home that can fit the budget (also a family of seven), by next September. Some will say that a life of travel is a severe price to pay to escape the educational 'system.' We feel that this particular form of 'withholding action' is a good excuse to travel, so that we can enjoy many advantages that travel can give. Therefore, it will not be a 'price to pay' but an interesting and rewarding way of life to experience. We can discuss this when we see you in July. In the meantime, we're very anxious for comments, suggestions, etc., from interested Green Revolution readers."—Darrel Cole

"P.S. The boys were just given a Standardized Reading Test, showing that both 7-year-olds are reading in Grade 2.5, or age 7 yrs., 8 mos., while 5½-year-old Glenn is reading in Grade 2.9, or 8 years, 1 mo."

Money Pressure

From a California educator: "Every state grants funds to local schools on the basis of attendance. The basic California law provides \$2 for each day from state funds for every child in school. You can understand why school officials make such a fuss about kids not attending. With three children not in school, that's \$6 a day the school would not get; \$30 a week; and for a 180 day year the school would be losing \$1080 on the Cole family."

"I am sure this is the main motivation behind pursuing people and forcing them to register their children. Officials care little whether kids learn anything at all, as long as they stay there the required number of hours to qualify for that state gravy. Truant officers are very busy because of this \$2 a day

business, to get the unenthusiastic to school or to get the parents to verify the absentee is sick. In the latter case the \$2 is forthcoming. The handout goes up to \$2.50 per kid in high school out here. So there's a combined attack on absenteeism and dropoutism. Part of the community wants these unskilled teenagers off the labor market, and the school bureaucracy wants that \$2.50 per youngster. My guess is that absenteeism in San Bernardino, with large Negro and Mexican population, costs the various schools close to a million dollars in state funds."

"There seems little in a practical way to combat this kind of centralized educational coercion, short of creating one's own school. Can't the Coles band with a couple other families to create their own private school? In California the law is conducive to multiplying private schools. Fighting school people is about as rewarding and effective as attacking a bowlful of jello with a hat pin."

Develop Legislation For Educational Experiments

From Dr. Arthur E. Morgan, former president of Antioch College, founder and director of Community Service, Inc., Yellow Springs, O. [This is a summary of a longer article which will appear in full in *A Way Out* later.—Ed.]

"A fundamental and revolutionary change in human relations has been in process. In the Western world for centuries, and in America since its beginning, the basic unit of society was the family. The culture of the past was largely transmitted by the intimate relations of the family and close neighborly associates. Excellence of individual character was also the outcome of family standards and aspirations."

"With the spread of knowledge and literacy, it was recognized that highly valuable elements of culture were not effectively disseminated by informal contacts. More formal instructions with the help of qualified teachers could help. Thus the school emerged, as an invaluable supplement to—but not displacement of—the common life."

"But there were two layers in our social structure—the masses and the classes. The privileged had access to organized schools, but the masses did not. About 300 years ago, governments began making formal education available to all, first on a limited scale, then widely in the common school. Children of the lower classes were considered economic assets. These parents could not always afford the luxury of school; the children must help support the family. Young children worked 12 and 14 hours a day on farms and in mills. One way to offset this exploitation was compulsory education, although this action was not intended to take children from the homes. Not until the last two to four generations has the public school interfered with the home as the dominant influence on young people."

"Today the danger is greatly in the other direction. With both parents working, with the family meal a rare occurrence, the reality of family relationships is weakening. From school, college and university, a person may acquire literacy, science, social theory, formal philosophy, art, technology and current interests. But the deeper traits of character—mutual consideration, cooperation, sharing of opportunities and burdens, and a wholesome outlook on life, are generally determined early by informal, imitative associations of family and neighbors. It is the part of social wisdom not to discourage intimate family relationships; laws that force parents to give up their relations with children for a large part of the time are a miscarriage of legislation and call for correction."

"The experience of the Cole family is a case in point. It is not the only case nor the only state where authority in education has come to act with provincial dictatorship. Formal education is a supplement to the education in general life. If that fact is ignored and if formal education sees itself as the important agency for human maturing, the results to our society may be disastrous. Some of these results are in evidence."

"In the overall purpose of optimal maturing of human personality, varied activities and steps may be necessary and appropriate. One of these is to allow and encourage free exploration—to permit and encourage the initiative of concerned families and small groups to act with freedom from academic convention in assisting the maturing of personality."

"As a specific step to that end, it would seem desirable to enact legislation to provide that individual families, or small groups such as Amish or Mennonite communities, should have freedom to work out their own way. A few decades of such freedom would disclose any modification of it which might be needed in the public interest. We should remember that our social order is still to some degree a process of exploration and experiment, and the American public school system is not yet a paragon of perfection."

Other Experiences Result From Inner Conditions

From Katherine Mathesius, Beaver, Pa., who taught four children at home for several years, some until their eighth birthday, comes the following remarks. All are in school now, daughter Peg loving it, the boys happy enough, get good grades, but are great outdoors men. She had difficulties, but feels that young children should be protected from vaccination and compulsory education, and "all the other inhuman, negative aspects of daily life. But even from them, positive lessons can be learned."

"Congratulations to the Coles for doing what they think is right! They have lived through some experiences that could help them understand themselves and their situation much better than ever if they are able to think about them. How and why do we get into such trouble? Is there some powerful State out to get us and to force us against our will to conform to unfair laws? It would almost seem so. But deeper understanding of Life proves that there is an ordered pattern to our activities . . . full of opportunity for us to solve our personal problems."

"If we think clearly we realize that the State is not separate from man, but a reflection of his own state of mind. When one becomes aware, asks questions and demands answers, he may find himself at variance with the State in which he lives. He may break a law. Usually the actual law broken is not the real issue involved, but his feeling that he must break this law is Life's way to produce a situation that will invoke still stronger feelings, that may induce more serious probing. This may help to balance out some of one's own wrong ideas about human relationships."

"Until we no longer expect, demand, need or want master-slave relationships, our problems will come disguised as laws that hold and bind us where we would prefer not to be. But our wrong ideas about who I am and who you are, are behind the facts that certain laws, customs or traditions concern us personally. The thoughts we have sent out return to us through political, social, civic and personal institutions we live under."

"The stronger we feel, the deeper we think, the better

chance we have of working our way out of our wrong attitudes into positive, creative ways of seeing things."

Problems of Living Involved

Certainly the comments made here point to the many aspects of living we need to understand to deal with this situation effectively. At first glance, it is the Educational Problem; but very obvious is the Political Problem—of legal coercion. Both Dr. Morgan and the California educator bring up the Possessional (economic) Problem, leading us to ask, Why the division of our culture into the "privileged" and "the masses"? Why the need for pressure for attendance funds? etc. Mrs. Mathesius raises questions on the Nature of Man, the Nature of the Universe, and the whole incident makes us wonder about Problems of Value—why the preference for status and material things, over human maturing and growth. Is there any one problem, which on examination, does not call for a comprehensive understanding that would result from a general adult education in major problems of living?

For reading we present again, Borsodi's *Education and Living* (\$3.50); *Schools and the Means of Education*, by Willis Nutting, of Notre Dame University; chapter 17, "Educating Our Children at Home," in *Go Ahead and Live!*; and a 50c pamphlet, *Private Schools for All*, by C. Johansen, 825 Walnut St., Roselle Park, N. J.—MJL

Do Sports Build Character?

In his book (1959) *Schools and the Means of Education*, Dr. Willis Nutting (Notre Dame University) examines the role of the home, the neighborhood and work in an adequate education. The following summarizes his chapter on sports, titled

Holy War

Few doctrines of our time are more generally accepted than that sports build character. Whose character?

The watchers? Is their character being built? In what direction? It is supposed they are being built up into a unity by identifying with a common effort toward victory. There is common effort in the great uprush of mob emotion—the shouting, screaming, booing, weeping and cursing that surrounds the contest night after night during the winter months.

Victory. But what kind of victory? Of good over evil? Right over wrong? Truth over falsehood? No, just bare victory for victory's sake. And the sobs, desolation, emptiness that follows defeat—all this is simply over defeat. Here we have a great striving, partaken of by a whole school and by all those related to the school, and a great evaluating, which has nothing to do with any goal of intrinsic value. A ball in a basket!

Wisdom and Significant Goals

A wise man chooses his goals with deliberation; he strives for what is good and true. He does not enter a contest (except purely for relaxation) without being sure of the goodness of what he contends for. And his effort and enthusiasm is proportionate to the value of his goal. . . . In high school basketball we have a serious and intense dedication of a whole community out of proportion to the value to be achieved. The average student-spectator learns an unreasoning giving of loyalty, a devotion to victory without regard to the moral value of what is fought for. For him the game is not a sport. It is a holy war. This is not training in character. It is training in unwisdom.

The Players

Is their character being built? What is happening to the team during the hours of often grueling practice, the exhortations of the coach, the enthusiasm of the pep meetings, the adulation of the student body after victory or the withdrawal of interest after a string of defeats? Are they

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engaging in a sport, a relaxing and health-giving experience?

They are fighting a holy war, in which victory is expected of them by the students, teachers, coach and the town. They have a sacred duty. Their time, education, social life and often their health—all these are to be sacrificed for victory. If the team members take the oratory, the pep meetings and the prayers of the coach seriously, they become men dedicated to victory in the same way a man devotes his life to wiping out polio.

There is wisdom, nobility—even greatness—in a man's dedication of himself to a cause if the value of the cause is in some way proportionate to the sacrifice involved. What value is a football touchdown? All concerned have agreed that a ball placed beyond the white line contributes so many points to a possible victory. Is it any part of educational excellence or honor to excel in this kind of thing? When a team member learns to make a large sacrifice for so irrelevant a reason, is he learning wisdom in the school? Or is this serious miseducation in the relative value of things?

Detracts from Joy of Work

Hard physical effort can be a joy. Love of work brings a quiet joy, not hectic and charged with intoxication, but life-long satisfaction. Joy in competitive sport is a heady, habit-forming thing. Given free reign, football and basketball crowd out other forms of physical exertion.

The youth of America have been brought up on sports. They have learned sports are fun. But they have also learned something else; that other physical exertion is work, unpleasant and to be avoided as much as possible. Thus physical education in schools, the sand-lot baseball, the little leagues which we have thought to be character-building, have produced a generation which cordially dislikes the work that is the lot of every man.

The real function of athletics is healthful reaction for those who want it. Yet in most of our schools, it leads participants to dedicate themselves to causes not worthy of such dedication; encourages in the community a set of false values; pushes aside other forms of physical and mental endeavor that are more valuable in building character. In allowing the domination of sports, educators have become misleaders of the community.

Publications For The Homesteader

National Stock Dog magazine, quarterly, \$2 a year, \$5 for 3 years. E. G. Emanuel, Rt. 1, Butler, Ind. 46721

Peace of Mind Thru Nature, \$1. Backwoods Journal, Paradox 5, N. Y. \$2 a year, sample 35c.

Hygienic Review, \$4 a year. Herbert Shelton, Editor. Box 1277, San Antonio, Texas.

California Homeowners, quarterly, \$2 a year. 1561 N. Gower, Los Angeles 90028

Dairy Goat Journal, monthly. \$2 a year. Box 836, Columbia 35, Mo.

American Rationalist, \$4:50 a year, liberal religious viewpoint. Box 742, St. Louis, Mo.

Mankind Go Home, by Russel Jaque, simple life, handcrafted. \$2 from School of Living.

The book, *Human Ecology*, by Robert Waller, editor of *Mother Earth* magazine, discussed in our editorial last month, is \$4.50 from School of Living.