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**Spayde, Jon. "Learning in the Key of Life." *The Presence of Others*. Ed. Andrea A. Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Bedford St. Martin's, 2004. 64-69.**

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What does it mean—and more important, what should it mean—to be educated?

This is a surprisingly tricky and two-sided question. Masquerading as simple problem-solving, it raises a whole laundry list of philosophical conundrums: What sort of society do we want? What is the nature of humankind? How do we learn best? And—most challenging of all—what is the Good? Talking about the meaning of education inevitably leads to the question of what a culture considers most important.

Yikes! No wonder answers don't come easily in 1998, in a multiethnic, corporation-heavy democracy that dominates the globe without having much of a sense of its own soul. For our policyheads, education equals something called "training for competitiveness" (which often boils down to the mantra of "more computers, more computers"). For multiculturalists of various stripes, education has become a battle line where they must duke it out regularly with incensed neotraditionalists. Organized religion and the various "alternative spiritualities"—from 12-step groups to Buddhism, American style—contribute their own kinds of education.

Given all these pushes and pulls, is it any wonder that many of us are beginning to feel that we didn't get the whole story in school, that our educations didn't prepare us for the world we're living in today?

We didn't; we couldn't have. So what do we do about it?

The first thing, I firmly believe, is to take a deep, calm breath. After all, we're not the first American generation to have doubts about these matters. One of the great ages of American intellectual achievement, the period just before the Civil War, was ruled by educational misfits. Henry David Thoreau was fond of saying, "I am self-educated; that is, I attended Harvard College," and indeed Harvard in the early 19th century excelled mainly in the extent and violence of its food fights.

Don't get me wrong: Formal education is serious stuff. There is no divide in American life that hurts more than the one between those we consider well educated and those who are poorly or inadequately schooled. Talking about education is usually the closest we get to talking about class; and no wonder—education, like class, is about power. Not just the power that Harvard- and Stanford-trained elites have to dictate our workweeks, plan our communities, and fiddle with world financial markets, but the extra power that a grad school dropout who, let's say, embraces voluntary simplicity and makes \$14,000 a year, has over a high school dropout single mom pulling down \$18,000. That kind of power has everything to do with attitude and access: an attitude of empowerment, even entitlement, and access to tools, people, and ideas that make living—at any income level—easier, and its crises easier to bear.

That's something Earl Shorris understands. A novelist and journalist, Shorris started an Ivy

League-level adult education course in humanities for low-income New Yorkers at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center on the Lower East Side, which he described in his book *New American Blues* (Norton, 1997). On the first day of class, Shorris said this to the students, who were Asians, whites, blacks, and Hispanics at or near the poverty line: "You've been cheated. Rich people learn the humanities; you didn't. The humanities are a foundation for getting along in the world, for thinking, for learning to reflect on the world instead of just reacting to whatever force is turned against you. "Do all rich people, or people who are in the middle, know the humanities? Not a chance. But some do. And it helps. It helps to live better and enjoy life more. Will the humanities make you rich? Absolutely. But not in terms of money. In terms of life." And the Clemente course graduates did get rich in this way. Most of them went on to further higher education, and even the hard-luck Abel Lomas (not his real name), who got mixed up in a drug bust after he graduated, dumbfounded the classics-innocent prosecutor with arguments drawn from Plato and Sophocles.

By deliberately refusing to define poor Americans as nothing more than economic units whose best hope is "training" at fly-by-night computer schools, Shorris reminds us all that genuine education is a discourse—a dialogue—carried on within the context of the society around us, as well as with the mighty dead. School helps, but it's just the beginning of the engagement between ideas and reality—as Abel Lomas can attest.

Shorris' radical idea—more controversial even than expecting working-class students to tackle a serious college curriculum—was to emphasize the humanities, those subtle subjects that infuse our minds with great, gushing ideas but also equip us to think and to argue. As more and more colleges, goaded by demands for "global competitiveness" from government officials and business leaders, turn themselves into glorified trade schools churning out graduates with highly specialized skills but little intellectual breadth, you might think humanities would go the way of the horse and buggy.

"It's an enormous error to believe that technology can somehow be the content of education," says John Ralston Saul, a Canadian historian and critic with years of experience in the business world. "We insist that everyone has to learn computer technology, but when printing came in with Gutenberg and changed the production and distribution of knowledge profoundly, nobody said that everyone should learn to be a printer. Technical training is training in what is sure to be obsolete soon anyway; it's self-defeating, and it won't get you through the next 60 years of your life." Training, says Saul, is simply "learning to fit in as a passive member of a structure. And that's the worst thing for an uncertain, changing time."

Oberlin College environmental studies professor David Orr poses an even fiercer challenge to the argument that education in the 21st century should focus primarily on high-tech training. In a recent article in the British magazine **Resurgence** (No. 179), he defines something he calls "slow knowledge": It is knowledge "shaped and calibrated to fit a particular ecological and cultural context," he writes, distinguishing it from the "fast knowledge" that zips through the terminals of the information society. "It does not imply lethargy, but rather thoroughness and patience. The aim of slow knowledge is resilience, harmony, and the preservation of long-standing patterns that give our lives aesthetic, spiritual, and social meaning." Orr says that we are focusing far too much of our energy and resources on fast knowledge, ignoring all the richness and meaning slow knowledge adds to our lives. Indeed, slow knowledge is what's needed to save the planet from

ecological disaster and other threats posed by technological, millennial society.

"Culturally, we just are slow learners, no matter how fast individuals can process raw data," he says. "There's a long time gap between original insights and the cultural practices that come from them. You can figure out what you can do pretty quickly, but the ethical understanding of what you ought to do comes very slowly."

Miles Harvey, a Chicago journalist who assembled a list of environmental classics for **Outside** magazine (May 1996), reminds us that much of the divisiveness in contemporary debates on education boils down to a time issue. "The canon makers say you've only got so much time, so you have to choose between, say, Shakespeare and Toni Morrison, on the assumption that you can't get to both," he says. "Well, it is hard. The level of creativity and intellectual activity in this country would jump up if we had a four-day workweek."

But suppose we redefined this issue from the very beginning. Suppose we abandoned the notion that learning is a time-consuming and obligatory filling of our heads, and replaced it with the idea, courtesy of Goethe, that "people cannot learn what they do not love"—the idea of learning as an encounter infused with eros. We always find time for what we truly love, one way or another. Suppose further that love, being an inclusive spirit, refused to choose between Shakespeare and Toni Morrison (or Tony Bennett, for that matter), and we located our bliss in the unstable relationship between the two, rattling from book to book, looking for connections and grandly unconcerned about whether we've read "enough," as long as we read what we read with love.

And we wouldn't just read. We would reflect deeply on the relationship between our everyday lives and big philosophical questions—for, as Nietzsche memorably said, "Metaphysics are in the street." The Argentine novelist Ernesto Sabato glosses him this way: "[By metaphysics Nietzsche means] those final problems of the human condition: death, loneliness, the meaning of existence, the desire for power, hope, and despair." The whole world's a classroom, and to really make it one, the first thing is to believe it is. We need to take seriously the proposition that reflection and knowledge born out of contact with the real world, an education carpentered out of the best combination we can make of school, salon, reading, online exploration, walking the streets, hiking in the woods, museums, poetry classes at the Y, and friendship, may be the best education of all—not a makeshift substitute that must apologize for itself in the shadow of academe.

One of the things I like about this in-the-streets definition of education is how classical it is. In what's still one of the best concise summaries of classical education, Elizabeth Sutton Lawrence notes in *The Growth of Modern Education* (1971), that ancient Greek education "came largely from firsthand experience, in the marketplace, in the Assembly, in the theater, and in the religious celebration; through what the Greek youth saw and heard." Socrates met and challenged his adult "pupils" in the street, at dinner parties, after festivals, not at some Athenian Princeton.

Educational reactionaries want to convince us that the Western classical tradition is a carefully honed reading list. But as the dynamic classicist and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who teaches

at the University of Chicago Law School, insists, "The very idea that we should have a list of Great Books would have horrified the ancients. If you take to heart what the classical philosophers had to say, you'll never turn them into monuments. Their goal was to enliven the mind, and they knew that to enliven the mind you need to be very alert to what is in the world around you."

To really believe this casts a new light, to say the least, on the question of what the content of our learning ought to be. In her latest book, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard University Press, 1997), Nussbaum argues compellingly that study of the non-Western world, of women's issues, of alternative sexuality, and of minority cultures is completely in line with classical principles, in particular the Stoic ideal of the "world citizen" with a cultivated ability to put her- or himself into the minds and lives of the members of divergent groups and cultures.

And New York jazz and rock writer Gene Santoro—trained in the classics and Dante studies—points out there's nothing frivolous about paying attention to popular culture: "Popular culture, and particularly popular music, is the place where the dominant culture is most heavily affected by marginal cultures. Jazz, for example, became wide enough to take in much of the range of American reality, from the African American experience to the European classical tradition to the Latin and Caribbean spirit. It's the artistic version of the American social experience, and if you care about this culture, you'll look at it." And, he adds in a Socratic vein, "Jazz can help you think. It's both disciplined and unpredictable. It gives you tradition but doesn't let you settle into preconceived notions."

Colin Greer—co-editor of *The Call to Character and The Plain Truth of Things*, progressive responses to William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*—suggests further ways to make the most of the relationship between books and what's going on in the streets. "You could study the moments of major change in the world," he proposes. "The end of slavery. The early struggle against child labor. Woman suffrage. The organization of labor. People have forgotten what it really took to accomplish these things: What pragmatic things were done and how people learned to be generous and decent to their opponents. It's important to know the real story of how change works, and recognize that to fall short of your highest goals is OK as long as you stick to the struggle."

You get the idea. The American tradition, in learning as well as jazz and activism, is improvisatory. There are as many ways to become an educated American as there are Americans. To fall short of your highest goals—mastering that imaginary "complete" reading list, say—is OK as long as you stuck to the struggle. And the joy.



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