

The Second Coming of the One-Room Schoolhouse

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The anthropologist did not look up from his charts as Herbert eased his frame into a nearby comfortable chair in the lounge of the Explorers' Club. From the paneled walls, masks used in primitive ceremonials stared down unblinkingly. Herbert, an educator ever eager to learn, ventured a conversational gambit, "What are you doing?"

"Extrapolating," responded the anthropologist briefly.

Herbert thought of several facetious comments he might make. But he sensibly refrained. "Extrapolating what?"

"Educational trends," said the anthropologist. "Like everybody else these days, I am speculating on the future. Right now I am extending our current educational trend lines into the decades ahead. They point inexorably to one conclusion."

"Which is --?"

"The return of the one-room schoolhouse."

"Impossible," said Herbert indignantly. "The one-room schoolhouse belongs to earlier centuries. A return to the obsolete one-room schoolhouse is unthinkable. What a peculiar conclusion!"

"That's what I used to think," said the unruffled anthropologist. "But consider my educational trend charts. As an educator, you are no doubt familiar with the present trend to the nongraded school. What do you think of it, Herbert?"

"An excellent innovation which I support wholeheartedly," exclaimed Herbert.

"Restrictive grade levels are eliminated. All young children are placed in a primary group. Older children are placed in an intermediate group. Junior high school students are--"

"Extend this trend," suggested the anthropologist. "The logical extension is to eliminate grade lines from the school as a whole. So the one-room schoolhouse, a completely nongraded school, will return."

"One swallow does not make a summer and one trend does not make a peculiar conclusion," said Herbert confusedly.

"Consider also," said the anthropologist remorselessly, "the growing trend in schools toward using older students to help younger students. The one-room schoolhouse is admirably adapted to this innovation and was long famous for so doing. Or take independent study, now a thriving trend. The one-room schoolhouse offers great opportunities for independent study while individuals are not engaged in group activities, such as recitations. Or consider today's emphasis on each child progressing at his own

rate of learning, Clearly the most desirable current educational innovations are best implemented in the one-room schoolhouse."

Herbert said, "But today American education is housed in big buildings --"

"True," interrupted the anthropologist. "But we are talking of trends and particularly the trend from present bigness toward future smallness. Surely you have observed that discussion today deals with the desirability of small schools, mini-schools, alternative schools, street academies, the new English primary schools, yet unborn private schools which will grow from the voucher plan, and so forth. Or haven't you been listening to the compassionate critics as they describe their open classrooms, their classes in the corridors, their unadministered schools? Today criticisms of centralization and bureaucracy are heard everywhere. Decentralization and simpler organization are the order of the day. Or haven't you heard the vigorous critics of compulsory education protesting against the giant educational bureaucracies in the cities? Extrapolate, sir - and you have the return of the one-room schoolhouse."

"But the scholars in the social foundations have taught us that it is society which shapes educational developments, not individual critics," said Herbert. "Our society is bureaucratic and the Establishment is --"

"Spare me your tedious recital," said the anthropologist. "Again you are describing the present and ignoring the trends into the future. As the counterculture prevails over the Establishment, the bureaucracy will wither away. Small schoolhouses will prevail. With the greening of America, the one-room schoolhouse will come back into its own. Buses will be used for educational travel, not for carrying students back and forth between home and school. Big schools will become obsolete and may be converted to other uses."

"Such as the making of sandals or the processing of marijuana?" inquired Herbert delicately.

"I will ignore that latter comment, Herbert," said the anthropologist. "Instead, I will generously recognize that you are correct in pointing out that society shapes educational developments. And tomorrow's counterculture - which will be different from today's Establishment - will shape the education of the future."

Herbert abandoned ideology and resorted to an expedient argument. "A one-room schoolhouse in the countryside~ is all very well. But where would you locate your one-room schoolhouses in the city? This is an urban nation. Surely there aren't enough empty stores in our cities."

The expedient argument did not deter the anthropologist. "On the rooftops," he said.

"The rooftops?" inquired Herbert incredulously.

"Come, Herbert," said the anthropologist. "Have you never flown over an urban area in a helicopter as you traveled from an airport to the center of a city? Have you not noticed the incredible expanse of rooftops below inhabited only by pigeons and solitary snipers? The rooftops of our cities are our great unused urban resource. They constitute the urban frontier. They top luxury apartments and slum tenements impartially; they cap

warehouses, factories, museums, and theaters. They await the second coming of the one-room schoolhouse!"

"And - ?" said Herbert inarticulately.

"Can you not see the happy children climbing the stairs or riding the elevators from their homes to the one-room schoolhouses on the rooftops above?" asked the anthropologist rhapsodically. "Can you not hear the pealing of the bells over the city as the one-room schoolteacher pulls the bell rope or clangs a hand bell in the doorway?"

"I assume," said Herbert dryly, "that there would be a privy behind each one-room schoolhouse and that the students will sit around a potbellied iron stove as they study their McGuffey Readers."

The anthropologist was obviously offended. He folded his charts and rose. "You have descended to satire, Herbert," he said. "That is unforgivable in serious discourse. I am sure you recognize that only extremists will insist on privies and potbellied stoves and McGuffey Readers. The characteristic one-room schoolhouse of the future will be a modern and well-equipped school. It will be as new and shiny and efficient as the mobile homes in which Americans increasingly live and the campers in which they increasingly travel and the mobile libraries through which they increasingly supply their schools. Farewell, Herbert." The anthropologist walked away.

Relenting, he turned in the doorway of the Explorers' Club lounge. "I must admit, Herbert, that one thing gives me pause, with respect to my prophecy. I suspect that after thousands upon thousands of one-room schoolhouses are established on the urban rooftops, a few radicals will propose something they may call consolidation. They will suggest connecting the one-room schoolhouses on the rooftops through a network of science laboratories and industrial arts shops and such, through auditoriums, gymnasiums, and lunchrooms--and even administrative offices for a new bureaucracy!, They will suggest the creation of a complex of interconnected buildings covering the city and crossing its streets. And they may prevail."

"Do not despair," said Herbert. "Even if consolidation were achieved, would not future generations eventually notice the available roof space topping the giant new education complexes?"

The anthropologist's face brightened. "There may be hope for us yet, Herbert," he said.

On the walls, the masks used in primitive ceremonials exchanged winks.

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