The Compassion Our Children Deserve

An Interview with Alfie Kohn

*A former teacher, Alfie Kohn is one of the foremost educational theorists writing today. His books span a range of topics, including the problems with reward-based education (*Punished By Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*); the deleterious effects of competition in learning (*No Contest: The Case Against Competition*); and the naturalness of altruistic behavior in humans (*The Brighter Side of Human Nature: Altruism and Empathy in Everyday Life*). He has authored many articles, too, also on a wide variety of subjects, and has been interviewed in many venues, including the "Today" show and "Oprah." His newest book,* The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards,"* was published in September 1999.*

At a recent "Growing Without Schooling" conference, where Alfie spoke, our Executive Editor, Ron Miller, met with and interviewed him. We present below a transcription of that exciting and informative interview.

Ron Miller: If I read your work correctly, a central theme runs through your books. Step by step, you have been building a strong argument that American culture is too competitive, too individualistic, too materialistic, to be a truly humane and democratic society. In *The Brighter Side of Human Nature*, in fact, you claim that this is "one of the world's most competitive and un-generous societies." Your books draw upon extensive social science research and moral philosophies and point the way toward a more compassionate and cooperative culture.

Here's the question: Do you have still more to add to this argument or will you be turning to other topics in your future work?

Alfie Kohn: I don't know. There's no ten-year plan. If there is some conceptual continuity in my different books, it has to be retrofitted. In retrospect, I can see certain connections that were not planned when I set out. For example, the book on competition led to new questions, such as, if competition turns out not to be an inevitable part of human nature, what about other unsavory elements—such as selfishness or aggression? That led to *The Brighter Side of Human Nature*. Similarly, *No Contest* led me to realize that one of the reasons competition turns out to be counterproductive is its status as an extrinsic motivator—something outside the task—that's used as an artificial inducement to get people to do things. The question eventually suggested itself: What about other extrinsic motivators? Hence, the work on rewards was born. In the last nine or ten years, I've been gravitating increasingly toward education, and the last few books that I've done have been on that topic, trying to deal with both the academic and non-academic arenas, and trying to reach audiences of educators and the general public. I'm thinking these days about doing a book on parenting at some point, but I don't know if and when I'll end up writing that. I can only hope that whatever I end up writing next won't lead readers to say, "But hasn't he covered this territory already?"

RM: I'm struck by the hostile reaction that your writing provokes among some reviewers.

AK: Me, too.

RM: For example, last year, in *Phi Delta Kappan*, a widely respected professional education journal, one writer who claimed to be liberal basically accused you of endorsing a communist ideology because you dare to question the value of ruthless competition. And a recent review of your book in the *New York Times* calls your writing "hyperbolic," saying that your claims about what's wrong with our schools are highly exaggerated. And yet many of us find your analysis tremendously insightful and extremely well documented. So how do you explain the angry resistance to your ideas?

AK: You're right and they're wrong.

[Laughter]

RM: It just occurs to me that "red-baiting" is just about the lowest, most desperate criticism that one can make of another's ideas. So I'm wondering what it is you're saying that sends these critics into such a tizzy?

AK: The article in the *Kappan* that you're referring to was not really about competition. It was a piece called "Only for My Kid: How Privileged Parents Undermine School Reform," in which I talked about how affluent parents of high-achieving kids often unwittingly make common cause with the most reactionary elements in our society by supporting rating structures, awards, tracking, and certain kinds of pedagogy that are not intended to help all kids learn, but rather to help their own kids succeed at the price of others. That article netted me more hate mail than anything else I've ever written, mostly from people who vociferously denied that I was talking about them, and then proceeded to show that I was in fact talking about them. So that one really got under the skin of a lot of people.

But, you know, competition has been called our state religion, and the notion that you can and should control people by dangling rewards in front of them is every bit as central to the American ideology. One of the reasons I think that my stuff so infuriates critics is that I'm trying to ask the radical questions, and I use radical in the original Latin sense of the word, meaning that I'm trying to ask root questions. I'm not asking about whether one incentive plan is better than another, but what the effect is of any kind of reward system; I'm not talking about how we overdo competition, but rather about how there's something inherently problematic about an arrangement in which you have to fail in order for me to succeed. Also, in those two books and some of my others, I've tried to look across different arenas of society, at work, at play, at school, at home, and thus there are that many more people to be offended.

RM: Your books recognize the political dimension of our social and educational problems: The interests of powerful people and institutions are served by our remaining isolated from each other, by our being in competition with each other for rewards and personal success, and by our thinking that it is human nature to be this way. What is it going to take to make the cultural, political, and educational changes that we need? Is it enough for you and me and our colleagues to keep writing books and publishing magazines that show that a more humane society is really possible, or do we need something more drastic?

AK: Well, I don't know if it's enough. I'm not sure what else I can do, except to invite people to reflect on the dominant ideology, and to invite those around me, in turn, to bring others in on this process. I don't know what it will take. I try to take gratification from small signs of progress. If I thought when I wrote *No Contest* that ours would be a non-competitive society within the decade, you know, I would have been condemning myself to cynicism and depression. But we work to create pockets of resistance and sanity; we do what we can. We act as if our actions can make a difference. And that requires, I think, an emphasis on community. You correctly identify, I think, in my work a concern about an overly individualistic sensibility. I have little in common with many libertarians who are focused mostly on government as the enemy and the isolated self proudly carrying on the struggle against the big government, because I think that while that correctly understands the importance of autonomy, it overlooks the equally vital component of community.

I've been in some alternative schools, for example, where there's so much emphasis on freedom that there isn't an "us" to figure out how to be free together. And I think that's much of what's wrong with our whole society. We have to resist not only the movement towards privatization of public schools, but also this whole noxious movement to define democratic public schools as "government schools" and the demand for separation between schools and states. This is complicit with, I think, the worst aspects of what is oppressive in our society—that which divides

us from one another. So the communities need to be built within classrooms, within families, among families, and throughout our society, so that, as the later and more mature Camus said, "I rebel; therefore, we are."

RM: This is so important. I think that this sensibility does get lost. People are fighting so hard for their freedom that they lose the sense of social responsibility that needs to accompany that.

AK: Right.

RM: So people who, say, are turning to homeschooling, maybe out of desperation, maybe out of a sense that public schooling just does not nourish children, and that "I've got to take care of my children"—how does that fit into a democratic culture? What happens if we go that route?

AK: I'm certainly sympathetic with those who have just reached a point of utter frustration and see this as the best option for their own children. It troubles me, on some level, because I suppose I haven't reached a point yet where I've given up on public schools, and I want to put my energies into re-imagining public schools and expanding on exciting pockets of truly student-centered learning that exist in schools that I see all over the country. Nevertheless, if one is faced with a choice of a neighborhood school that is simply dreadful and teaching one's own, who am I to condemn that?

Nevertheless, the more I've come to understand about how learning happens, the more impressed I am with the importance of a well-functioning community within a classroom and a school, because we learn through conflict that is situated in a caring community. It's precisely from hearing that you read this play in a very different way than I had, or came up with your own theory about why dinosaurs became extinct, that helps me to reorganize my own theories. And that's something that may get lost if there aren't enough learners learning together. However, homeschoolers have been very resourceful, in many cases, at trying to jerry-rig their own community and taking advantage of certain courses and facilities that public schools offer, and sometimes making their own opportunities—not just to socialize, but to learn together, and I think that's all to the good. Then you might have the best of both worlds.

RM: Your line of thinking seems to follow directly from John Dewey himself and the whole "progressive" tradition. They strongly emphasize that the meeting of different ideas is really what generates critical thinking and creativity.

AK: That's right. And Piaget's sort of narrower, but more scientific vision, about what it means to construct meaning and how that ultimately happens in a social environment. Constructivists argue among themselves about a narrowly individualistic notion of cognition as opposed to a social interaction approach, and the Piagetians retort that, in fact, the social stuff is inherent in Piaget's original theories. Who gets the credit here, whether it's Piaget or Dewey or Vygotsky or somebody else, doesn't matter to me, as long as we recognize that it's not just *nice* to be hanging out with others, from a social point of view, but that the social element of learning is critical to making sense of ourselves and the world. So anyone who chose to homeschool one hopes would do everything possible to create a social environment in which that can happen.

> Communities need to be built within classrooms, within families, among families, and throughout our society.

RM: I'm often struck by the paradox in working for democratic forms of learning in public education, because if our culture is fundamentally competitive, that's going to dictate what goes on in public schools. They almost have to reflect what the dominant forces in society want. So, it just seems paradoxical and very difficult to me to try to make the changes there; that's where the resistance is going to be.

AK: Well, you could make the same argument about families, which reproduce elements of the society at large. If it's possible for a family to escape or even subvert disturbing elements of the popular culture, it just might be possible for that to happen in classrooms as well. I don't have to speculate about that; I've seen it happen. I think I would say that a disproportionate number of progressive classrooms are in private schools. But that doesn't mean (a) that a disproportionate number of private schools are progressive—which is not the case—or (b) that there aren't also some extremely exciting counter-examples that somehow manage to survive in public schools.

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I suppose you could argue, with the grand sweep of history, that if the good stuff ever took root in enough places that some elements would rise up to prevent it from happening. I'm not some sort of historical determinist, in this sense, and I think it's vital to work with the public schools, not only because I think it's feasible to escape certain elements of the culture at large, but because if we don't do that then the schools are extremely effective at perpetuating these things and thus they become causal agents. I'm not willing to let that happen in an institution that educates 90 percent of American children.

RM: So one of the things that you have done recently to have some impact on public education is to set up a national network of activists in each state who are working to oppose the agenda of standardization and high-stakes testing. What are the goals of this network, and how is it working out so far?

AK: The goal is contained within your question. You're right: Educators and parents, I think, are increasingly frustrated by a top-down, heavy-handed, corporate-style, test-driven approach to school reform that speaks the language of tougher standards and raising the bar and accountability, all of which I believe are squeezing the intellectual life out of classrooms. There are lots of people, especially educators, who are sickened by this, and the question then is, how can we best activate them, organize them, mobilize them, help them work with parents to see that this is not in the best interest of their children?

We're in a very dark period in American education, in which teachers have to find their voice.

I don't have any staff, and I'm not affiliated with any organization, so all I've tried to do is, through my website, create an area where I offer a rationale for opposing this and practical strategies for doing things that range from meeting with your local newspaper reporters to tell them that every time they publish a chart with their local schools' test scores they're making our schools a little bit worse, all the way to organizing boycotts of a standardized test. And another part of the website has a list of the state coordinators. But it's not like I have the ability or time to oversee operations; I've just had people say, "I'd like to be the coordinator for my state," and that's good enough for me. If they want to take this on, I send them a message suggesting some things they might do: set up their own state websites, create lists through phone trees and listserves, and so on—and then go to it. I provide some encouragement periodically.

Most of the people who are truly active, whose names are on this website, were already active, and I'm just sort of plugging into things that they've already been doing. There are a couple of moms in Columbus, Ohio, who have been enormously effective at opposing that state's proficiency test, and a coordinator in Michigan is a fellow at Wayne State University who's put together something called the Rouge Forum, which is all about social change, as well as boycotting the Michigan state test. And then other people who've been active—and I mean truly an interesting conglomeration of people—parents, teachers, administrators, university folks, and others. If other people are doing this independently, as seems to be the case—parent groups in Wisconsin and Virginia, people in the whole language movement around the country—that's terrific. I just want to make sure we're not duplicating our efforts and that we're learning from each other about how best to become politically effective.

What's strikingly important to me is that we not view this tougher standards movement as being like the weather, something to which you simply have to accommodate yourself, but rather that we see it as a series of political decisions and institutions that are imposed and therefore can be *opposed*. For example, when I go crusading about the country, I like to quiz people by asking them how many standardized tests Japanese students take before they're in high school. And the answer is zero. What's really interesting is why the answer is zero, and that's because some years ago, the Japanese teachers, through their union, simply refused to take part in a testing program that the government was about to impose—and the Japanese do not have a reputation, collectively, for being troublemakers, either. They in effect said, "It's not that we're afraid of being held accountable or putting in more time; it's that this is patently destructive to students' learning, and we will not be part of it." There was a similar boycott in the early 90s in Great Britain. The question is, how do we rise to the occasion as necessary?

RM: It amazes me that we haven't. We have the model of the civil rights movement and the free speech movement in the 60s, and I wonder why. It seems to me that, in the United States more than anywhere, we should have a massive civil

disobedience movement, an educational rights movement, and I just don't see it happening; maybe you do.

AK: Well, the civil rights movement took a long time; that's the first fact to console ourselves with. If you start your clock in 1959, it looks as if things sped into action immediately. If you start with the Civil War, look how long it took. The second point is that teachers are remarkably apolitical in many cases; they have been systematically de-skilled and are, in many cases, simply too busy, as they see it, to become active in this sort of thing. A third concern is that, while there was the civil rights movement in the U.S., what strikes me is the difference between American unions and unions in, say, Europe—the latter often leading the fight for social justice, whereas American unions, across the board, are often mostly about putting a little more money in their members' pockets. You know, in other countries, they have their own newspapers and political parties. Thus, I guess it shouldn't be that surprising, even though it's frankly sickening, to see the American Federation of Teachers—especially under its previous leader, Al Shanker, whom one person referred to as the Rush Limbaugh of education—sounding themes that are indistinguishable from corporate groups on pedagogy, even though they differ slightly on some issues like vouchers, for example.

So, I think we haven't hit bottom yet. We're in a very dark period in American education, in which teachers have to find their voice. They're already on the defensive—especially when people are ready to bash unions, to the point that unions have censored themselves. And without unions, it's very hard for teachers to organize themselves. For example, a teacher stood up last year in Massachusetts and refused to give the Massachusetts standardized test, the new one; he did this all alone. He just said, "I can't be party to this," and made very little impact, positively or negatively. He wasn't penalized for it, but neither did it start up a real conversation, not nearly as much as the effort of some parents and students to boycott the test. But, immediately I dreamed of, say, 60 percent of the faculty at a given school saying we will not break the shrinkwrap on these standardized tests. As we know, you feel alone or helpless when it's just one or two of you, but there is enormous power in collective action.

Teachers already understand how destructive these tests—and the whole tougher standards sensibility that gives rise to the tests—really can be. So I don't think we want to wait for history to unfold itself, but I think we have to be patient with some of these things, too. Some educators I know repudiate the notion of a pendulum swing in education, because they argue that things are getting better, that if you look over the decades, each time the pendulum goes back, elements of progressive learning have been incorporated and have suffused the system. I would desperately like to believe that; I'm not sure it's true, because American schools have been remarkably traditional, even during the periods like the late 60s and early 70s, when they were thought to be havens of progressive extremists. Holt himself said that in interesting ways.

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RM: Actually, I've just finished a manuscript for a book on the free school movement—how it evolved into the public alternative school movement, and public schools of choice—and it was very clear that these ideas blossomed and were then immediately put down, that they really had very little substantial impact on American education.

AK: Even during the time when they were at their peak, they didn't affect that many students.

RM: Right. They made a lot of noise, the press thought it was interesting for a couple of years, and then they got bored with it and that was the end of it.

AK: So, what's your theory of why that was the end of it?

RM: Well, several scholars talk about the "conservative restoration." Nixon came in, and there was a deliberate effort to reorient public opinion away from liberation, and radical education, and freedom, and all these things they were talking about in the 60s. "Put your nose back to the grindstone because you've got to make sure you get a job." That was the beginning of the back-to-basics movement.

AK: Well, that raises the question, though: Why would these conservatives even have taken note if it hadn't made a substantial impact at the time?

RM: Well, it was disruptive. The 60s and very early 70s caused a lot of disruption, but it was an active minority that was doing it. The silent majority was in favor of repressing this and going back, as I read it.

AK: Because we're talking, on the one hand, about the big social movements, which did in fact make a substantial impact on American culture, much of which, like feminism, has continued, and, on the other hand, we're talking about what goes on in classrooms, and the extent to which you have less teacher-centered learning, which I don't think has ever changed that much.

It's interesting. I mean, in *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, I also argue that good teaching is very difficult to implement effectively and sustain. I think there's an inherent problem; the playing field is not level, because, frankly, any moron can stay one chapter ahead of the kids in a "bunch-o'-facts," textbook-driven lesson, whereas, to help kids become thinkers, the teacher has to be able to do some serious thinking and to be willing to give up a lot of control. That asks a lot. So, we're always going to be at a disadvantage for the kind of pedagogy that's most effective.

Educators and parents are increasingly frustrated by a top-down, heavy-handed, corporate-style, test-driven approach to school reform.

RM: That's a big part of the problem.

A couple more questions. We've been talking about these big social and political issues. A lot of your work, though, is really about the intimate details of parenting and the kinds of interactions that are most healthy for children, that will help them develop into autonomous and self-confident human beings. For readers of our magazine who may not be familiar with your work, can you briefly summarize what your findings are and what you recommend to parents as a style of being with children that truly encourages their healthy development?

AK: Well, I recommend taking children seriously. This sounds like an unobjectionable cliché, but in fact in actual practice it's not all that common. It means looking at things from the child's point of view, and questioning one's own requests and demands, instead of looking for slightly nicer ways of getting compliance. I make the distinction between "doing to" and "working with." And then I go the next step to suggest that a lot of common practices are just versions of doing-to, although they're sometimes gussied up as though they were really more humanistic or democratic than they are.

For example, we like to refer to punishments as "consequences"—in particular, "logical consequences," which I like to call "punishment lite." This allows us to continue punishing, but with impunity. Similarly, a lot of parents and teachers seem to believe that dangling goodies in front of kids to reward them for compliance is appreciably different from threatening them when they don't comply, whereas I think that punishments and rewards are two sides of the same coin. And that coin does not buy very much. This includes offering verbal doggy biscuits to kids when they jump through our hoops, in the form of saying "Good job!" which frankly for me is like nails down a blackboard, this constant need to judge kids and tell them how to feel, in order to manipulate them, in many cases. Not all praise is distinctly manipulative, but even the kind that is more innocuous in the motive that drives it may, nevertheless, be less than ideal in terms of its effect on the child.

In another book *[No Contest]*, I talk about the importance of rethinking the attitudes and institutions that lead kids to try to beat their peers. I have people come up to me all the time and say, "We only ask of our Zachary that he do his best." I respond, "You're not fooling Zachary!"—not if you offer more attention, approval, and affection when he comes home and says, "I was number one in class" than when he comes home and says, "I did my best." Often, there's a hidden motive; we want triumph more than collaboration or even excellence. So, we have to introspect about the effects of, on the one hand, ways we perpetuate competition—"Okay, kids! Who can get into their pajamas fastest?"—and, on the other hand, the respects in which we use groovier versions of carrot-and-stick control. A lot of it comes down to our willingness to give up some control and to treat kids, not as equals, but as people deserving of trust and respect such that our own convenience is not the only thing driving our interactions and interventions.

And that's hard to do! You and I are both parents. We know the incredible temptation to resort to clever techniques for getting kids to do what

we want them to do. The question is, even when it works in the short term, what is the long-term cost to kids' sense of autonomy, their commitment to being decent people?

For example, two recent studies show that kids who are frequently rewarded and praised by their parents are somewhat less generous than their peers. If we adopt a sort of mindless Skinnerian approach of reinforcing even really important values like compassion, let alone obedience to adult-generated rules, the question becomes whether these traditional approaches are likely to be effective in the long run. And I mean effective at even our own goals for kids, which is why, in seminars with parents and teachers, I almost always begin by asking, "What are your long-term goals for these kids? How do you want them to turn out long after they've left you?" All around the country, parents and teachers, elementary and secondary, urban and rural, private and public, all say the same kinds of things. They want them to be responsible, respectful, caring, happy, decent lifelong learners and problem-solvers, and so on. Then what I do—and this, I again realized in retrospect, has become kind of a *modus operandi* for me—is to say, in effect, "You say you want this, so how come you are doing that? Your day-to-day practices with kids, at home or at school, actively impede the realization of your own goals for kids. You say you want them to be responsible, and yet here you are, giving them stickers or time-outs, which undermine responsibility. Just as I say to teachers, you say you want kids to be lifelong learners, and here you are, giving them grades, which research indicates undermine their interest in the learning itself. So something's got to give once there is a kind of dissonance that's created here."

RM: Yeah, but I want to follow up on one statement you stuck in there, very quickly, about how difficult it is to do this. As a parent myself, I feel a tremendous tension between everything I have studied and believe in about alternative education and freedom for children and all of what you're saying, on the one hand, and the day-to-day realities of living with very active children and the stuff that it brings up in me that is not entirely rational. So, I don't want to leave parents with the impression that "You should be doing this, because it is better." It is very, very tricky.

AK: But just because it is tricky doesn't mean it's not better.

RM: It's the *should*, I guess, that I'm looking at here.

AK: Well, if the *should* seems not just prescriptive, but rigid or unforgiving, then that's not the impression that I mean to communicate. But there's a big difference between forgiving yourself for an occasional lapse, as a parent, which I certainly need to do for myself, and on the other hand not even recognizing that it is a lapse. There are parents who find themselves occasionally threatening their kids—"If you don't do this, I won't let you do that"—and feeling bad about it and really thinking about whether there was something else they could have done. There are parents who say, "Good job," and then reflect, "Is that because the kid needed to hear it or because I needed to say it?" I have no problem with parents who are thinking through this stuff.

> **To help kids become thinkers, the teacher has to be able to do some serious thinking and to be willing to give up a lot of control.**

I have a problem with parents who never even dreamed that there was something wrong with this. Or parents who demand respect from their kids, and you watch them for two minutes, and you can see how disrespectful they are to their own children. They interrupt their kids but demand that their children never do the same to them. They announce suddenly that it is time to leave the playground, in ways that are just absurd. They berate their kids.

Haim Ginott [the author of *Between Parent and Child*] asked us to imagine what it would be like to talk to our friends the way we talk to our kids. You know: Our friend forgets an umbrella. We start chiding him: "Why are you so forgetful? You'd forget your own head if it wasn't attached!" You'd never dream of talking to a peer this way, but we belittle children. Even basically loving parents do. Sure, it takes time, and care, and skill and effort, and above all, courage, to see misbehavior as a problem to be solved together, to effect a "working with" relationship. By contrast, to say "Good job" when your kid does what you want or "You can watch extra TV if you clean up your room" or "If you disobey me one more time you are grounded this weekend"—these things take no time, no effort, no skill, and, above all, no courage.

So, it's a demanding business, and it is more

demanding for parents who have dead-end jobs at which they're controlled all day and come home exhausted and dispirited. I'm not a purist, in that sense, but I don't think that either realism or empathy should prevent us from distinguishing between basically good and not-so-good ways of parenting or teaching.

RM: It seems analogous to the situation in schools; the kinds of teaching that we want to see happen are much more difficult. The kind of parenting that we are talking about here is more difficult. But we need to make the effort.

AK: It begins with the courage to question one's own request. Or, in the case of classrooms, not only whether the teacher's request for how kids are acting makes sense, but also expectations regarding what the kid is doing. You know, there's a buzzword in educational circles of "on-task" and "off-task," and teachers often complain that their kids are "off-task." And when they do that, an army of consultants stands ready to give them techniques for getting kids back on task. Those techniques often resolve themselves into variations on bribes and threats, of course. But if a teacher comes to me and says, "My kids are off-task," my first response is going to be to ask, "What's the task?"

And I tell the story of a year when I was teaching, sometime ago, when I had a class of kids who must have gotten together at night to figure out how to make my life a living hell, because they couldn't have been that good at it spontaneously—it was awful!—and had an administrator asked me whether or not I needed anything, which, incidentally, no one ever did, I would have responded, "I need some kind of classroom management program, because my class is out of control." Back then I thought that a good class meant one that was in control. But it took me several years to realize that the kids weren't trying to make me miserable; they were trying to make the time pass faster. And when I look at what I was giving them to do in class, I don't blame them. I had units that might as well have been called, "Our Friend the Adverb." You know, there is no member of our species who would find this stuff intrinsically motivating. *Of course* they were acting out! But how much more convenient is it for me to take the advice of classroom management specialists, most administrators, or, in a different context, discipline consultants for families, and assume that whatever I wanted them to do was the point of departure, as opposed to having the courage to look in the mirror and ask whether the curriculum—or the extent to which I had succeeded or failed at creating a sense of community in the classroom—might have had something to do with the kids' behavior?

RM: This leads into my final question. Can you tell us more about your career? How did you evolve from a classroom teacher into an author who has written some very important books? Were you already thinking along the lines of these progressive and radical questions when you were a teacher?

AK: Not really, not in pedagogical terms. You can find in universities lots of dyed-in-the-wool lefties, the content of whose courses are all about social justice and oppression and patriarchal hegemony and liberatory praxis and all the rest of it. When you look at how they run their classrooms, though, you discover teacher-centered traditionalism. It is interesting to speculate on why this is. It may tell us something about these individuals psychologically and their need for control, or it may simply say that many instructors, especially at the college level, have never been invited to think for two minutes about how people learn, or what a good classroom looks like. Dewey said that even if teachers go through great education training programs, those teachers don't teach the way they were taught to teach. They teach the way they were taught. And as soon as you have trouble with these new-fangled techniques, you slide back into those old comfortable shoes where you're the teacher and you make all the decisions, and where it is basically didactic in form, and so on.

So, I did one thing I'm proud of, toward the end of my teaching career. That was saying to the students, "I have to give you a grade at the end, which I detest, but one thing I cannot do in good conscience is put a grade—a number or letter—on anything you do in here, and I won't. I will write you a comment, if I have time, or, better yet, sit down and talk with you. That, of course, is even better than a narrative assessment, because it has the potential of being a two-way conversation."

At the time, I was teaching kids in a college prep program, the sort who have been prepared since they were infants to get into Harvard, a process I have come to call

"Preparation H." And I realized that, by not giving them grades day-to-day, I might be having the opposite effect of what I had intended—namely to make them think about their grades all the more, since they couldn't see them. So I said, "If you absolutely have to know what grade this assignment would get, come up and talk to me and we will figure it out together." The amazing thing was that, even at the secondary level, and even with these Preparation H kids, I found that, when I took responsibility for not pushing grades into their faces, they stopped asking and started becoming more engaged in the subject matter.

That anecdote also speaks, I think, to the earlier question about making change in microcosm, even when there are elements of the system itself that seem to be pushing toward something far less beneficial. Most of the time, though, in class I was not doing stuff that I was altogether proud of even then, and much of it makes me wince even more in retrospect. I took time off from teaching and was writing on broader issues, not just on education—the book on competition, the book on altruism, the book on rewards—and then I started finding myself thinking even more about the application to the classroom. I learned much more about education from watching teachers who were more talented than I was, as well as from reading research, and listening, and reading the ideas of other educators. So it is not a clear line of sight between what I was doing in the classroom and the ideas that I have been writing and learning about more recently.

RM: Do you think you will go back to teaching? Do you miss that contact with young people?

AK: I miss the ability to develop ideas and relationships over time, as opposed to doing shorter seminars, which are like one-night stands. But I like the idea of having at least the possibility of having some impact on a much larger number of people. And so when I think about changing classrooms as a way of helping to change society, it's possible that I am using whatever talents I have in the most effective way by talking and writing to more people who might then take back some of these ideas into their own classrooms and families. I'm not ruling out the idea that I might teach another course, but for now I'm content with what I'm doing.

RM: Well, I hope you continue doing it. It has made a great impact on a lot of us. Thanks for your time.

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