

## Chapter 37

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# Schooling

**N**ot just the bosses in an authoritarian, hierarchical, bureaucratic organization, but the organization itself seems to say to us: We think you are a passive animal who cannot move on your own; you must be pushed, enticed, threatened. Without supervision, you are competent to do only very insignificant, detailed tasks. You probably do not want to do what we want you to do. The only way you can have any power over your life here is to obey—to show us that you are willing to have very little power over your life here. And power is zero-sum. You must compete for it. If others have it, you do not; if you have it, they do not.

That description fits bureaucratic organizations the world around, and almost all organizations larger than perhaps 15 or 20 members are bureaucratic. I could pick any sort of organization—business, governmental, educational, sport, military—to illustrate the scrabble for degrees of freedom typical of bureaucratic organizations. I will describe public schooling in this chapter, because most of my own work outside the college classroom has lain with public schools.

Almost all schools immerse you in the bureaucratic kind of life. Go to mathematics class when the bell rings even though you may just now be finding the right words for an essay. Work at doing what the teacher assigns to everybody in the class today even though you want to work at something else, are ready to do something else, or are already doing something else. Answer short, little questions that can be answered with one word or a check-mark. Your function in the organization is to be processed in step with a hundred or a thousand other human-units selected for processing by the impersonal procedures of the school.

Do not challenge the teacher's criteria for judging good work, even though you have in mind a purpose for the work different from the teacher's. Work alone, excluding others, even though you know the work

would go better if others helped. Try to get a better grade than Joe even if Joe is your best friend.

In 1971, Spencer Wyant, then a graduate student, handed me a definition of education:

**EDUCATION:** Registered students receive documented facts taxonomically arranged in authorized courses based on recommended materials by recognized experts commissioned to develop authoritative interpretations under the tutelage of a certified teacher to satisfy institutional requirements and thus to be awarded a legitimate degree from a chartered institution which permits them to become licensed to practice sanctioned endeavors in reputable disciplines.

Those authorized channels leave little space for a path of one's own making. The educational authorities, especially in universities, proclaim themselves the bearers of liberation (via the liberal arts), and in the next sentence declare that your liberation will require you to confine yourself to authorized courses, to recommended materials by recognized experts, to thinking the thoughts on Wednesday that are assigned to be thought on Wednesday, and so on. Freedom, they imply, can be achieved only by having little of it. It is true that we often make a small free space for ourselves by throwing up a dike against a sea of threatening restrictions. That is the symbolism of the ivory tower.

As in non-educational organizations, the bosses of schools try to protect their own degrees of freedom by reducing the degrees allotted to their underlings. That method is seductive, but it does not work very well. The more you tie down your underlings to restricted ranges of behavior, the more you must tie yourself down to making sure they stay within those ranges. In many schools, for example, teachers are reluctant to leave a classroom of students for even a few minutes for fear all hell will break loose while they are gone.

**RESTRAINT**

I know you have yourself had a good many years of experience in classrooms, but I will give a few examples here to stir your memories. Susan Gonzales (1991, p. 12) wrote to the *Utne Reader* to say:

I was a successful student in suburban, white, middle-class schools. . . . I got mostly A's, achievement and citizenship awards, . . . . The system worked for me . . . or did it?

Now, as I watch my daughter and her friends go through public school, I am forced to acknowledge my long-buried feelings: my anger at being corralled with no regard for my will in the matter, then cajoled with rewards and threatened with punishments; my hatred of the bells, the buzzers, and the whistles of yard attendants, which ate holes into my brain and bones; my fear, once I came to accept that the system was a fit judge of me, of not meeting the mark, of not being good enough; my frustration at having to fit my complex thoughts into . . . true or false, correct or incorrect; my sorrow at losing the time and the energy to explore the world on my own and listen to my soul's voice.

Harry Wolcott (1974, p. 417), with a class of Kwakiutl pupils, assigned them to write essays on "If I Were the Teacher." This is part of the essay handed in to him by a fifteen-year-old girl:

The first day in school I'd tell the pupils what to do. . . . And give the rules for school. . . . And if anybody's late, they have to write hundred lines. . . . First thing they'd do in the morning is Arithmetic, spelling, language, Reading. And in the afternoon Science, Social Studies, Health, and free time. And if nobody works they get a strapping. . . . And if they get the room dirty they'll sweep the whole classroom. . . . And if anybody talks back. They'd get a strapping. If they get out of their desk they'll have to write lines. If they don't ask permission to sharpen their pencil they'll get strapping. If they wear hats and kerchiefs in class they'll have to stand in the corner for one hour with their hands on their heads. . . . If they make a noise in class, they all stay in for half an hour. If anybody talks in class they write lines about hundred lines. If anybody's absent they have lots of homework for the next day. And if anybody fights they get a strapping. . . . And on Christmas they'd have to play or sing.

Wolcott made an analogy to a prisoner-of-war camp in which teachers are charged with recruiting prisoners into the teachers' own society. The teachers encourage the prisoners to defect and offer them the skills they will need to live effectively in the teachers' society. Wolcott wrote that a teacher in that role soon realizes that—

his pupils may not see him playing a very functional role in their lives other than as a representative of the enemy culture. . . . He realizes that [much of] the energy and resources of prisoners are utilized in a desperate struggle to survive and maintain their own identity. . . . The teacher recognizes that the antagonism of his pupils may be addressed to the whole cultural milieu in which they find themselves captive rather than to him as an individual. . . . If this is how things seem to the prisoners, the teacher realizes that a modification of a lesson plan or an ingenious new teaching technique is not going to make any important difference to them. Taking the view of his pupils, the teacher can ask himself, "Just what is it that a prisoner would ever want to learn from an enemy?" (p. 421).

I'll add something to that. Imagine how you would feel if you were required, by law, to spend the greater part of every day, Monday through Friday, along with 25 or 30 other detainees, in a room where you would listen to a person lecturing to you, hour after hour, about topics most of which had very little interest for you, and imagine that this grinding routine was going to go on year after year, into the far future. Imagine that the lecturer would scold you when you gave evidence of being bored. Imagine that the lecturer would frequently put quizzes and tests in front of you, full of questions about which you cared very little, and that some days, periodically, would be devoted to nothing but answering those questions on those tests. Imagine that if you failed to guess too many of what the lecturer called the "right" answers to the quizzes and tests, you would be sentenced to repeating an entire year of those same lectures and quizzes and tests.

An article in *TIME* magazine (Wendy Cole, 2001) reported on nightmares, stomachaches, vomiting, insomnia, and depression that come upon some elementary-school children as testing time approaches. You may remember, too, the heightened rate of delinquency that occurs in at least some cities