

The Gifts of The Magi

Literate people don't need special programs to teach them life skills.

By Richard Mitchell

The problems and disorders in education have become more and more visible in the last few years, and even the ordinary citizen who happens to have no children in the schools suspects that something is very wrong, but he will never understand exactly *what* is wrong until he realizes that all our educational problems and disorders, none of which is new, provide endless and growing employment for the people who made them.

Barely-literate children may be suffering and facing whole lives of deprivation, but consultants and remediationists and professors of reading education and tax-supported researchers and the editors and publishers of workbooks and handsome packets of materials are doing very well indeed and looking for even better days to come.

It is important to note, too, that all those profit-makers have not suddenly appeared among us like the wandering bands of looters who can reasonably be expected to show up after the earthquake. They've been around a long time, diligently turning the wheel, professing what must be remediated and remediating what has been professed and enlarging in our society the role of what can only be called the educationist-industrial complex.

Anything that may seem to us a disorder in education is for them a golden opportunity — indeed, since they live by tax money, they cannot make their profits until we *do* see a disorder in education and thus feel obliged to shell out.

Curiously enough, therefore, it is very much in the interest of policy-makers and theoreticians of public schooling that there *be* problems and failures and that we know about them and also, even more curiously, that *any* kind of social disorder at all be made the business of the schools.

We are encouraged thus to hand over to the educationists not only the problem of widespread illiteracy but also the notorious disinclination of voters to trouble themselves by going to the polls, the fear and hatred of each race for the others, and the epidemic of venereal disease among thirteen-year-olds.

As our schools struggle with their massive campaign to rehabilitate our young people, we can naturally expect that they will give it all they have, which means, of course, that what they *don't* have, they won't give. What they do have, *all* they have, is that earnest devotion to the power of suggestion in the cause of social and psychological manipulation, and although their decades of devotion to pious social adjustment may not be the *only* cause of our present disorders, they have certainly not prevented them.

Now the necessary concomitant of the social adjustment theory of education is the denigration of intellectual discipline. Perhaps it is a bit rash, however tempting, to say it is exactly *because* the schools have been preaching vapid and sentimental sermons for 60 years that hosts of newborn children and their mothers will become permanent wards of the state, but it is not a bit rash to suspect that widespread and crippling social disorders of all kinds are directly caused by ignorance and thoughtlessness.

There is only one remedy for ignorance and thoughtlessness, and that is literacy. Millions and millions of children would today stand in no need of sex education or consumer education or anti-racism education or any of those fake educations, if they had had in the first place *an* education.

An excellent model of the genesis of all these fake educations can be seen in the trendy and popular consumer education.

We are told that we need consumer education because people are easily duped by misleading advertising, cannot figure out the per-ounce price of ketchup, and imagine that they can live on Twinkies and Coca-Cola. But the consumer who is duped by misleading advertising does not need consumer education: he needs to know how to read.

The housewife who can't figure out what ketchup costs does not need consumer education: she needs to know how to cipher. And as to those who want to live on Twinkies and Coca-Cola, frankly that's their own damn business and we ought to leave them alone, but we might legitimately provide them with knowledge about biology and chemistry first and *then* leave them alone.

Our problems come not from ignorance and thoughtlessness about sex any more than from ignorance and thoughtlessness about ketchup. They just come from ignorance and thoughtlessness, which are preserved and nourished in our schools by those whose profits lie in 'solving' the problems they have created.

Literacy is not, as it is considered in our schools, a *portion* of education. It *is* education. It is at once the ability and the inclination of the mind to find knowledge, to pursue understand and, out of knowledge and understanding, not out of received attitudes and values or emotional responses, to make judgments.

Literate people are *not* easy prey. They know an inference from a statement of fact, and they are not easily persuaded by pretended authority. Literacy is like the kingdom of Heaven. Those who attain it will find that other things are added unto them.

(Adapted with permission from The Graves of Academe, 1981. Dr. Mitchell is a professor of English at Glassboro State College in New Jersey.)