

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from

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The Outdoors and the Education of Young People

What would you think of a school for boys and young men that placed them on extended excursions in natural settings (mountain ranges, oceans) as a way of teaching skills, self-reliance, and team work? What if they practiced rescue (local fire company, seaside rescue service) as a way of developing strength and compassion? What if character development was as important at this school as academic achievement and technological proficiency? What if physical fitness was central? Would you send your son? Would you teach at such a school?

Such were the Salem School and Gordonstoun Academy, both founded by Kurt Hahn, visionary and altruistic German educator in 1920 and 1934 respectively. Hahn went on to found Outward Bound in 1961 – the genesis and inspiration for the host of outdoor and wilderness programs that populate the landscape today. Today in 2016, not all outdoor programs encourage growth, learning, and character development. Many simply market the thrill and adrenaline rush. But some, including we at *WILD GUYde Adventures*, continue to see great potential for teaching young people (and older) using the outdoors as a classroom and adventure as a methodology. This short essay will simply unpack some of Hahn's core ideas and share some of his thoughts. We will finish with an even more ancient invitation to consider how to properly educate our young people. A question to be asking as you read might be: *How might I apply some of*

these ideas in my parenting or my work with young people (as a teacher, pastor, or scout leader)?

Hahn was an idealist, and also an astute observer of culture. His educational innovations began with his observations of “*The Six Declines of Modern Youth*” (as relevant today as in the mid 1930's):

- Decline of **Fitness** due to modern methods of locomotion
- Decline of **Initiative and Enterprise** due to the widespread disease of spectatoritis
- Decline of **Memory and Imagination** due to the confused restlessness of modern life
- Decline of **Skill and Care** due to the weakened tradition of craftsmanship
- Decline of **Self Discipline** due to the ever-present availability of stimulants and tranquilizers, and worst of all
- Decline of **Compassion** due to the unseemly haste with which modern life is conducted, or as William Temple called, “spiritual death.” (It was reputed that Hahn's favorite

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bible passage was the story of Good Samaritan –the selfless showing of care to the stranger). From these, Hahn’s schools were built on his Four "Antidotes to the Declines of Modern Youth":

- **Fitness Training:** to compete with oneself in physical fitness; in so doing, train the discipline and determination of the mind through the body
- **Expeditions** (land, sea) to engage in long, challenging endurance tasks
- **Projects:** involving crafts, manual skills and artistry
- **Rescue Service:** students at the Salem School manned the local town’s fire company; Gordonstoun Academy students provided the seaside town with ocean rescue.

Consider a few more thoughts from Hahn, to get the flavor of his pioneering educational approach:

As our society has become information rich, it has become action poor. It has become poor in the necessity and possibility for struggle against the environment. As affluence has increased, the young person's environment has become impoverished for responsible and productive action, or any action that tests and develops him.

Expeditions can greatly contribute towards building strength of character. Joseph Conrad in Lord Jim tells us that it is necessary for a youth to experience events which "reveal the inner worth of the man; the edge of his temper; the fibre of his stuff; the quality of his resistance; the secret truth of his pretenses, not only to himself but to others."

There are three ways of trying to win the young. There is persuasion, there is compulsion, and there is attraction. You can preach at them; that is a hook without the worm. You can say, "You must volunteer;" That is of the devil. Or you can tell them, "You are needed." That hardly ever fails.

I regard it as the foremost task of education to ensure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable sprit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self denial, and above all, compassion.

The experience of helping a fellow man in danger, or even of training in a realistic manner to be ready to give this help, tends to change the balance of power in a youth's inner life with the result that compassion can become the master motive.

It is a sin of the soul to force young people into opinions -- indoctrination is of the devil. But it is culpable neglect not to impel young people into experiences.

We must free the sons of the wealthy and powerful from the enervating (strength-stealing) sense of privilege.

So Hahn had a high moral view of education, and its capacity to form and reform the character of young people. Interestingly and not coincidentally, he found in the outdoors the ideal environment for his work. The demands of the wilderness expedition environment, the necessity for teamwork and personal endurance, and the opportunities to demonstrate compassion in rescue or assistance all made this an ideal classroom. Now listen to another story from the past about how to educate our young people. This is Benjamin Franklin's retelling of a true encounter between native American leaders and American colonists in Pennsylvania in 1744.

Savages we call them, because their manners differ from ours, which we think the perfection of civility; they think the same of theirs. Perhaps if we could examine the manners of different nations with impartiality, we should find no people so rude as to be without any rules of politeness; nor any so polite as not to have some remnants of rudeness.

Our laborious manner of life, compared with theirs, they esteem slavish and base; and the learning on which we value ourselves, they regard as frivolous and useless. An instance of this occurred at the treaty of Lancaster, in Pennsylvania, anno 1774, between the government of Virginia and the Six Nations. After the principal business was settled the commissioners from Virginia acquainted the Indians by a speech, that there was in Williamsburgh a college, with a fund for educating

Indian youth; and that if the chiefs of the Six Nations would send down half a dozen of their sons to that college, the government would take care that they should be well provided for, and instructed in all the learning of the white people.

It is one of the Indian rules of politeness not to answer a public proposition the same day that it is made; they think that would be treating it as a light matter, and they show it respect by taking time to consider, as a matter important. They therefore deferred their answer till the day following: when their speaker began by expressing their deep sense of the kindness of the Virginia government, in making them that offer.

"For we know," says he, "that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in those colleges, and that the maintenance of our young men, while with you, would be very expensive to you. We are convinced, therefore, that you mean us good by your proposal; and we thank you heartily. But you who are wise must know that different nations have different conceptions of things; and you will therefore not

*take it amiss if our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same as yours. We have had some experience of it; several of our young people were formerly brought up at the colleges of the northern provinces; they were instructed in all your sciences; but when they came back to us they were bad runners; ignorant of every means of living in the woods; unable to bear either cold or hunger; knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy; spoke our language imperfectly; were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, or counselors; they were totally good for nothing. We are not, however, the less obliged by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it; and to show our grateful sense of it, if the gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons, we will take great care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and MAKE MEN OF THEM."**

Happy teaching out there! **LRZ**

*Charles C. Hughes, *Make Men of Them*, Introductory Readings for Cultural Anthropology, Chicago, IL: Rand McNally & Co., 1972.

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