

Some Thoughts on Freedom in Learning:

An Interview with Peter Foti

This article was published in 2006 in the Hungarian journal Tani-tani. Peter Foti is a parent and educational researcher interested in democratic education.

Peter:

We are of the same age, both of us born in 1956, what in the history of Hungary was a very remarkable date. There is a family story, that my grandmother was pushing me in a baby-wagon from the center of Budapest, where the fight between the Russian and Hungarian troops was very intensive, into an outlying district. As I became 6 and I went to school in 1962, the repressions were to end, and fortunately I never endured such a terrible time again. From the very beginning I was told the communist theory, and we viewed the USA as our main enemy. I always learned that 1956 was a counter-revolution, where people wanted to re-establish capitalism. It lasted for me a long time, to overcome these views. As I finished the Technical University, as an electrical engineer, I was also very interested in history. This was the time when the liberal opposition was formed in Hungary, an illegal opposition, with their underground newspapers. I was not very active, but I distributed illegal materials, and helped to transport a simple copying machine to print a small illegal newspaper. In August, 1968, when Russian, Hungarian, Polish, Bulgarian, and East German troops were occupied Czechoslovakia, I was 12, and I remember the long trains full of military tanks and trucks going through the village where I spent my summer holidays.

In 1988 I discovered the books of Thomas Gordon, a disciple of Carl Rogers, and I was very much influenced by him, and attended some seminars about better communication between child and parents, child and teachers. I don't know how much Thomas Gordon is known in the US, but he was the first American who influenced me very much. After my son was born in 1999 I became active again. I discovered Summerhill, and the writings of John Holt. I published several articles about Summerhill in Hungarian.

Ron:

Your introduction is very interesting, because our stories seem to be parallel. When I was a child, the political climate in the U.S. was, of course, the mirror image of yours: we were constantly taught that the Soviet Union and its communist allies were our bitter enemy. I

believed this, and even as a young teen, when many my age were rebelling against the political system and especially against the Vietnam war, I remained conservative and "patriotic," and thought that the peace activists were communists. I grew up in Chicago, and my vivid memory of 1968 is of watching helicopters bringing soldiers into the city to put down the massive protests that were taking place there that summer. My political and philosophical views changed gradually after I entered college and began to discover that the world is far more complex than I had been told. I studied Marx for the first time, and although I never became a Marxist, I started to realize that the capitalist system was, perhaps, not perfect after all, and was not necessarily the final achievement of human civilization. I continued to explore, and when I came across the literature of humanistic psychology, my worldview opened to new possibilities.

Yes, like you, it was the work of Carl Rogers that opened the doors. I knew of Thomas Gordon's work (in fact, I corresponded with him in the months before his death because he contributed a chapter to a book I was editing), but originally, in the mid-1970s, I was directly influenced by Rogers and also by Abraham Maslow. They suggested to me that human nature is capable of wonderful possibilities that we do not sufficiently encourage in modern culture. Their work led me to believe that the terrible violence, exploitation and suffering that characterize history are not inevitable aspects of society, but can be overcome when human beings are supported in their quest for self-actualization. I started to become interested in new ideas that were emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, which emphasized spirituality, ecology, global consciousness, and cultural evolution. Many of these ideas were expressed in the so-called "New Age" movement and I became interested in that, but eventually I found much of it to be simplistic and politically naive. Eventually, I became associated with the philosophy of holism, and that has been the focus of most of my academic work. I have been inspired by the writings of American cultural historians such as Theodore Roszak, Morris Berman and Jeremy Rifkin, radical theologians like Matthew Fox, radical scientists such as Fritjof Capra, and the philosopher Ken Wilber. Another important holistic thinker is Ervin Laszlo, a Hungarian.

At first I received a masters degree in psychology, but then I discovered the work of Maria Montessori and decided that the field of education offered me a perspective for understanding the influence of culture on the development of human nature. I took Montessori training and worked with young children for two years, but I was discouraged by the

conventional beliefs of their parents, who did not want me to give their children so much freedom! I returned to graduate school and studied the cultural roots of educational beliefs. I learned how modern school systems evolved, and intensively studied the various radical and alternative educators of the last two centuries. I saw profound similarities in their foundational beliefs, even though their methods have differed, and I realized that these similarities reflected a holistic worldview. Thus, I am an advocate of holistic education, an inclusive philosophy that embraces Montessori as well as Steiner, Holt and homeschooling as well as Dewey and progressive education, and other approaches.

Peter:

Before going into the details about what happened in the 1960s and 70s in American education, I want to make a general overview about the education system. I just start again with my personal experiences. In Hungary at that time, there was no private sector in education, similarly to the economy. I went to school at 6 into the school near to us. The elementary education lasted 8 years, then you had to choose between gymnasium and other forms of secondary education. In the elementary school first I learned reading, writing, counting. Later on we learned history, literature, geography and so on. We received notes [grades] and there were good performers, and bad, and we thought, who has good notes, has good abilities, and who receives bad notes, has not so good abilities. Everybody knew that there are better and worse schools, but it was informal. No school made any “marketing.” Alternative pedagogy was something capitalistic. I must add, that in some aspects, we learned things that are ok for me: we learned that woman are equals, and they deserve equal wages (which they never received, however). We learned that differences between cities and villages will vanish (they never vanished). Otherwise we learned many ideological stupidities like: the communist party is always right, and so on. We received books in school, every school the same, cautiously controlled by the communist party. The enemy lived outside the country. The whole education system was based on rote learning, you had no choices at all. Anyway I was a good learner, so I have only few bad experiences. So I could continue in a “good” gymnasium. I became critical about this system very late.

How would you describe the American elementary school system at the 1950s? How much was private? What kind of alternative schools existed? What kind of freedom did teachers have in choosing books and educational methods? What kind of schools did black

children attend?

Ron:

Until the mid-1960s, most Americans strongly supported the public school system. They saw it as a way for children from all backgrounds to have an equal chance for success in their careers and lives. Of course this was not true for everyone. As you imply, schooling for black children (and many other poor children) was usually inferior. But there was enough truth in this myth to persuade middle class Americans that the schools provided equality of opportunity. And there have been many efforts to make the schools more democratic and fair; while these efforts have often failed, it is true that many legal decisions by the courts, and laws passed by Congress and some states in the 1950s and 1960s, significantly expanded the educational rights of many children. Racial segregation in schools became illegal, for example, and children with handicaps were guaranteed the right to learn.

In the late 1950s, after the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the U.S. became very concerned about educating more scientists in order to win the "space race" and stay ahead of the Soviets in military technology. This pattern of using education to serve the needs of "national security" became very powerful, and in the 1980s many government agencies and private foundations demanded more rigorous schooling to ensure that the U.S. would remain superior in the world economy. It is quite obvious that the public school system serves the needs of the economic system and its ruling elite. But until the 1960s there were not many alternatives. Religious families--especially Catholics--could send their children to religious schools, and there were other private schools that promised a better education for those who could pay a high fee. But even these private schools were essentially conservative, even authoritarian. There were only a few progressive schools.

The massive cultural upheavals of the 1960s changed the educational landscape. Students, parents, and many educators protested against the schools. Radical books, such as Neill's *Summerhill* and Holt's books, were read by many thousands of people. Hundreds of "free schools" were started. These were non-government schools (i.e. private) but they were not elitist; in fact they were centers for radicals. Educational ideas such as Montessori and Steiner education began to become more recognized. And many innovations were introduced into public schools, including "alternative" public schools and "schools of choice." For a few years (around 1970-72) it looked as though there was going to be a genuine educational

revolution. But then the political climate became much more conservative.

Until the 1980s, there was some freedom in public schools for local communities and teachers to make decisions about what to teach, how to evaluate learning, how to deal with school management, etc. States had a great deal of independence from the federal government in educational policy. There were definite limits on what teachers or communities could decide, especially in more conservative states, such as in the South. But whatever freedom teachers and communities did have before the 1980s has been completely destroyed by the policies of the federal government over the last 25 years. Now there is a law, dishonestly called "No Child Left Behind," that forces public schools all over the country to meet rigorous standards and to test students relentlessly. Teachers have very little freedom to use their own judgment. Because of the radical ideas of the 1960s and then the authoritarian concentration of power in the national government after the 1980s, there are now millions of families choosing alternative schools or homeschooling. The conservative politics of our country lead to an ironic educational situation: On one hand conservatism supports the economic elite and believes in authoritarian types of schooling that train young people to serve the economic system. But on the other hand, conservatism values "free enterprise" so highly that it welcomes all private schools (or "parental choice") over state-run public schooling. So the culture becomes more repressive, but at the same time there are more openings for homeschooling and radical alternative schools. One example of this is the movement for "charter" schools; they receive state money but are run by independent educators. We are now living in a very confusing time in education.

Peter:

The leaders of America, as well as all around the world, use democracy as a means to have legitimacy, but their democracy is a technocratic democracy, meaning only to vote every 4 years, and decide which group of leaders will rule. As a contrast Neill supported direct, or participative democracy, where people meet personally. I think another aspect of the success of the Summerhill book was that such a place actually existed. Neill was stubborn, and successful to maintain Summerhill for 40 years. It would be nice to know more historically, about the organizations supporting free schools in the USA, and also more about the first schools. You also mention in your book *Free Schools, Free People* that Neill was in a

certain way simplistic. Was it a problem?

Ron

I think you have identified the issue exactly: There is a difference between genuine, participatory democracy, such as what Neill (and most other alternative educators) propose, and technocracy, where "democracy" means voting for which elites will rule. John Dewey, the great American philosopher of the early twentieth century, addressed this problem in great depth, and his writings on progressive education are primarily concerned with it. What I find interesting is that Dewey did not view democracy simply in terms of personal freedom; he emphasized the communal nature of it, the collaborative effort to achieve a common good. He saw personal freedom as one important element, but not without the context of community and collaboration. I don't see this in Neill's ideas. This is one of the primary reasons that I think his writing was too simplistic. He made some very extreme statements, claiming that children are naturally good and should have complete freedom (except when they interfere with others' freedom)--but this neglects the social, communal aspect of human life, as well as the "shadow" side of our nature. I, too, believe that human nature is potentially good--recall my agreement with humanistic psychology's emphasis on self-actualization--but a more sophisticated and holistic understanding must also recognize that humanity is capable of tremendous negativity. The seeds of violence, greed, and other harmful things are also in our nature, and personal freedom, by itself, is not enough to deal with them.

So as Dewey emphasized, and also holistic educators such as Montessori and Steiner, the art of education does not lie simply in leaving children alone, but in providing a social and moral environment that encourages the goodness within them. Adults may need to guide children's activities and design the learning environment in some aspects; this is not "coercion" but the responsibility of mature, moral human beings to share with those who are immature and inexperienced.

You ask about the organizations supporting free schools in the 1960s and 70s. The schools formed networks, which produced publications and held conferences. But there was very little financial or political support for these schools. They all struggled, and the vast majority of them only endured for a few years. They were so entirely countercultural, that the resources of mainstream society were not available to them. I believe that radical educational change will only take place when the culture as a whole begins to change and to open to new

ideas. This started to happen around 1970 but the mainstream society quickly ended it. Perhaps it is beginning again today, with all the social movements for "green" business, organic agriculture, alternative medicine, non-dogmatic spirituality, democratic politics, human rights, peace and so on. I hope these movements will be more successful than the radical movements of the past generation.

Peter:

There is so much to reflect, I don't know where to start. One point is that alternative educators support genuine participatory democracy. I would say, that as far as I know, it does not fit to Montessori. I see that Montessori had a very good idea, that children need another way to learn than adults, more slowly and through experience. This was really a good idea, but she very much believed in science, in which I don't believe. I also do not believe the new psychology to be a science. There is now such a thing as "human science." We can influence each other, but there is not any "truth" about society. As you also know, Montessori was already popular in the USA at the beginning of the 20th century, and later rediscovered. On the other side Neill was new. He became popular, because he believed that there is an alternative to traditional schools, not only as a reform school, but fundamentally different. He believed in original good, instead of original sin. He was against the religious dogmas of all three big monotheistic religion, Judaism, Christian, and Islam. He was an optimist, and trusted children. Neill had also proved that freedom does not lead to chaos.

John Holt tried to find out obstacles to genuine, deep learning. In a way he rediscovered and extended what Montessori had found out some 60 years before him. Neill and Holt have found each other, and I think they are complementary. Holt also approaches the problem of original good or original bad. He says in *Instead of Education* that human nature is malleable. Yes we are good, if we have good experiences, but if we are neglected, or deprived, we are able to be bad as well. Holt also realized like Neill, that any coercion is bad, even if it is meant to be benevolent. This does not mean that we don't want to teach our children, or transfer our values, but it does mean, that any coercion makes harm. We can act on our values, we can explain them, but from the point that we try to nag children, they will understand that nagging is ok, and this will be the message, and not the content we intend to transfer.

Anyway I am very interested in the history of the Montessori method in the sixties,

and later, and also would be very interested to know about other alternatives, like Waldorf schools, at that time. As far as I know, there were some hundred small independent schools all around the USA at the beginning of the 70s. I am also interested in the political program of George McGovern, who was a presidential candidate in 1972, and who had close connections to Holt. Later he wrote a new introduction to a new edition of Holt's *How Children Fail*.

Ron:

I'll start with the point you make about "human science. " I agree with you: Science cannot identify the ultimate truths of human experience, and the attempt by modern culture to find answers in science is reductionistic. In other words, questions of meaning, value, purpose, soul, and ultimate reality lie outside the realm of objective, empirical science, and science can only pretend to answer them by reducing them to pragmatic, materialist questions. That is why modern schools are so obsessed with measurable scores. The question of democracy/freedom/trust in children cannot be answered scientifically. I don't think there is one correct truth. Neill's and Holt's trust in children is not right or wrong. Montessori's belief that the learning environment for children should be carefully arranged by adults is not right or wrong. The human being is influenced by so many factors, and each person is so different from every other, that a sensitive educator--what I call a holistic educator--should engage in the teaching process with a blend of freedom and structure that is appropriate to the learner and to the situation. It is true that a Montessori classroom is not a "democracy" in the sense that Summerhill is; but if Montessori was seeing something about young children's development--that many of them can develop their own powers more effectively in an environment that is specially crafted rather than left random and completely open--then a Montessori education can also promote democracy in adult society.

What Neill lacks (among other things) is a developmental perspective. A 5 year old experiences the world differently, and thinks differently, and has different goals and expectations, than a 10 year old or 15 year old or adult. It appears that a 5 year old does not need to live in a fully democratic environment in order to embrace democratic values as an adult; the young child seems to need safety, security, love and attention, and any teacher who provides these, "democratic" or not, is serving most young children very well. Again, I do not say that Neill is "wrong." Giving young children such freedom is not an entirely bad thing, in most cases. But I still think a philosophy of complete freedom and democracy for all children

of all ages is going to miss some important aspects of their development.

Before we can discuss your point that "any coercion makes harm," we should carefully define the word "coercion." If you mean that any adult action to restrain a child, or to require a specific behavior, no matter what the context, is harmful, then I do not agree. I believe that there are times--educationally, morally, and for reasons of safety or simple politeness--when adults can and should intervene in children's behavior. Some people find many more times to intervene than I do. I am not very interested in controlling children. But I do think there are some contexts, some situations, where the adult is more wise, more experienced, and more responsible than the child, and should make demands on the child that are appropriate to the situation. Developmentally, children need such guidance, such structure, to some degree. For me, "coercion" would mean an unreasonable, unwarranted attempt to control the child, an exercise of authority for the sake of power or the adult's pleasure. This, I would agree, is harmful.

Now I'll turn to your question about Montessori. Around 1960, a few American parents became very interested in this approach and sought to bring it to the U.S. Some of them became frustrated with the ideological rigidity of the international Montessori organization, so they started an American Montessori Society and introduced Montessori's ideas in a more flexible way. Within a few years, Montessori became more and more popular here. Middle class and upper middle class parents liked the aesthetic beauty and orderly environment of Montessori schools, and the children were obviously happy and creative in these environments. Later, Montessori programs were introduced in poor communities as well, just as the original Montessori school in Rome (in 1907) was developed to serve the poorest children. Children in these schools performed far better than in the normal public schools serving poor communities. By the 1980s, there were dozens of public schools that adopted Montessori approaches.

You ask about George McGovern, the Democratic candidate for president in 1972 whom Holt supported. McGovern was probably the most progressive candidate we have seen in the last half century. He was completely against the Vietnam war, and was a strong supporter of civil rights, women's equality, protection of the environment, and so forth. He was defeated by Nixon by a wide margin, because he was too liberal for mainstream American values. I thought it was important to explain, in my book, that Holt was allied with McGovern, because most liberals would think of Holt as a "libertarian"-- someone who values

individualism so much that he is against social institutions. In our country this is usually associated with very conservative politics. But Holt's social philosophy was essentially liberal; he did believe in social welfare, in the common good, in government being of service to people in need. He was not a classical American conservative. His criticism of schooling, although it has been echoed by many conservatives, was based on a deeper critique of modern authoritarian institutions. Although McGovern would have supported public schooling, he too was anti-authoritarian.

Peter:

I was thinking a lot about the problem of coercion, and I think we can talk a lot more about it, and try to understand each other. Maybe I can formulate our difference, that you are coming from Montessori, and trying to understand - with reservation - Neill, and I am coming from Neill, and trying to understand - with reservation - Montessori. At the moment I am rereading the book of George Dennison, *The Lives of Children*, which describes a very special free school in 1964/1966. This school was special, because the money come from a donation, and so the parents hadn't had to pay. So this school was open to poor people's children. The book describes how children, if they have a human -- I also can add free -- environment, are able to develop. In the state school system many of these children were on the way to becoming criminal, or at least a brutal, racist, autocratic person. In the First Street School many of them were able to overcome their previous attitudes, and restart, and instead of fighting with the world, they were returning to being curious children. This was also the secret of Homer Lane and Neill. A better more human environment. The most important part of this environment are the grown ups, who agree - not in every aspect, but principally -- with what John Holt formulated in an interview:

QUESTION (from the editors of Education News, New York City):

If America's schools were to take one giant step forward this year toward a better tomorrow, what should it be?

ANSWER (from John Holt) It would be to let every child be the planner, director, and assessor of his own education, to allow and encourage him, with the inspiration and guidance of more experienced and expert people, and as much help as he asked for, to decide what he is to learn, when he is to learn it. How he is to learn it, and how well he is learning it. It would be to make our schools, instead of what they are, which is jails

for children, into a resource for free and independent learning, which everyone in the community, of whatever age, could use as much or as little as he wanted.

I think this is something that a Montessori educator can accept as well. It is very important what kind of persons a child finds around him, what are the agreement between the grown ups, what kind of material, tools he finds there, and what are the rules, how you can use, change these resources. Maybe on these lines we can avoid an endless discussion about coercion.

I think one hidden agenda in Summerhill is that the community is "led" by the big kids, and this kind of leadership is formed by longer periods. The small children are there and if they are attending the meetings, they learn there how to argue, and they hear a lot before taking part in the discussions, led by one the big kids. It is also important that the chair of the meeting changes at every meeting, so there is no one person concentrating power. I am very happy, that in the school where my son is going now, there is a weekly discussion about proposals and problems moderated by one of the children.

Ron:

I am glad that you mention Dennison's book. I think it is one of the very best writings on education ever produced. (John Holt thought so, also.) Dennison presented a very holistic perspective: He understood the value of freedom, without losing an awareness of the social, psychological and cultural contexts of individuality. In this regard he was influenced by John Dewey. For me, Dewey's ideas, even more than Montessori, provide a thorough, reasonable foundation for understanding the limitations of individual freedom. What you say about the importance of the "kind of persons" who teach is certainly something we agree on. And I like the quote from Holt in a general sense. But there is one thing he says that Montessori, or Dewey, or any educator who is not ideologically committed to complete personal freedom must question: that the student should only receive "as much help as he asked for" and to "decide [entirely on his or her own, according to Holt] what he is to learn." If we accept the importance of the social environment in personal development, then the educator does have a role, and a responsibility, to occasionally provide guidance, and to introduce areas of knowledge, even before the child is aware enough to ask for them. I think Dennison would accept this point of view, don't you?

Good point: at Summerhill, the older children participate more actively in democratic

meetings while the younger children usually watch and learn. This does reflect their developmental differences. I don't think it's a bad thing for young children to take part in such meetings. I've seen them take place at the Albany (New York) Free School, and while the younger children can get impatient and inattentive at times, it is obvious that they are learning a great deal about human relations, self-expression, forming ideas, and other important matters. I only ask, is it necessary for children to take part in democratic processes at a very early age for them to develop democratic habits and ideals later in their lives? You know, it is ironic for me to be taking this position, because I am often in conversation with Waldorf (Steiner) educators and I argue the opposite side: I say that children should have more freedom than they do in Waldorf schools. Steiner believed that young children need strong adult guidance in order to fully develop democratic consciousness as adults. On the face of it, his view seems counterproductive. How can children learn to be free if their activities are so controlled by adults? But Steiner had a very complex, esoteric belief system to back up this view, which I won't even try to explain. All I can say is that for some reason, most young people who go through a Steiner school actually do turn out to be original, independent, creative thinkers and confident people.

I have not known enough people who went through different alternative schools, and there is very, very little research done on this, to say anything definite about what effects it has to learn in alternative ways. It is such a complex question! First you have to ask what kinds of families would send their children to a democratic school or a Waldorf or Montessori school? Certainly the personalities and values of the parents have as much of an influence as the type of school the children attend. Then you need to consider the different temperaments that people naturally have. A democratic school might work very well for some personalities but not for others.

I have heard about young people who thrive in college and careers after a free education, and others who thrive after a Montessori or Waldorf education. For that matter, many of us thrive despite our conventional public school training. And I have heard about young people who have many life problems, or have little sense of purpose, despite having gone to some kind of alternative school. We may not completely change someone's life by sending him or her to a particular school. We need to be careful about advocating one educational approach because it matches our own ideological bias, without seeing how different children experience the approach in different ways. Let us be open, sensitive, and

responsive to the young people themselves, as we best understand what they need at different points in their development. Surely they need good doses of freedom, but they also need other things, more or less at different times and depending on their temperaments.

Peter:

I think your last words complete the interview. Thank you very much.