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The End of Education

Neil Postman is University Professor and Chair of the Department of Culture and Communication at New York University. Among his twenty books are studies of childhood (The Disappearance of Childhood), public discourse (Amusing Ourselves to Death), education (Teaching as a Subversive Activity), and the impact of technology (Technopoly). His interest in education is long-standing, beginning with his experience as an elementary and secondary school teacher. He lives in New York City.
n considering how to conduct the schooling of our young, adults have two problems to solve. One is an engineering problem; the other, a metaphysical one. The engineering problem, as all such problems are, is essentially technical. It is the problem of the means by which the young will become learned. It addresses the issues of where and when things will be done, and, of course, how learning is supposed to occur. The problem is not a simple one, and any self-respecting book on schooling must offer some solutions to it.

But it is important to keep in mind that the engineering of learning is very often puffed up, assigned an importance it does not deserve. As an old saying goes, There are one and twenty ways to sing tribal lays, and all of them are correct. So it is with learning. There is no one who can say that this or that is the best way to know things, to feel things, to see things, to remember things, to apply things, to connect things and that no other will do as well. In fact, to make such a claim is to trivialize learning, to reduce it to a mechanical skill.

Of course, there are many learnings that are little else but a mechanical skill, and in such cases, there well may be a best way. But to become a different person because of something you have learned—to appropriate an insight, a concept, a vision, so that your world is altered—that is a different matter.
For that to happen, you need a reason. And this is the metaphysical problem I speak of.

A reason, as I use the word here, is different from a motivation. Within the context of schooling, motivation refers to a temporary psychic event in which curiosity is aroused and attention is focused. I do not mean to disparage it. But it must not be confused with a reason for being in a classroom, for listening to a teacher, for taking an examination, for doing homework, for putting up with school even if you are not motivated.

This kind of reason is somewhat abstract, not always present in one’s consciousness, not at all easy to describe. And yet for all that, without it schooling does not work. For school to make sense, the young, their parents, and their teachers must have a god to serve, or, even better, several gods. If they have none, school is pointless. Nietzsche’s famous aphorism is relevant here: “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how.” This applies as much to learning as to living.

To put it simply, there is no surer way to bring an end to schooling than for it to have no end.

By a god to serve, I do not necessarily mean the God, who is supposed to have created the world and whose moral injunctions as presented in sacred texts have given countless people a reason for living and, more to the point, a reason for learning. In the Western world, beginning in the thirteenth century and for five hundred years afterward, that God was sufficient justification for the founding of institutions of learning, from grammar schools, where children were taught to read the Bible, to great universities, where men were trained to be ministers of God. Even today, there are some schools in the West, and most in the Islamic world, whose central purpose is to serve and celebrate the glory of God. Wherever this is the case, there is no school problem, and certainly no school crisis. There may be some disputes over what subjects best promote piety, obedience, and faith; there may be students who are skeptical, even teachers who are nonbelievers. But at the core of such schools, there is a transcendent, spiritual idea that gives purpose and clarity to learning. Even the skeptics and nonbelievers know why they are there, what they are supposed to be learning, and why they are resistant to it. Some also know why they should leave.

A few years ago, I had a sad conversation with a brilliant and popular philosophy professor at Principia College, in Elsah, Illinois. Principia was and, as far as I know, still is, the only institution of higher learning of the Christian Science Church. He told me that his years at Principia had been the happiest he had known, but that he had taken a job at a secular university because he no longer believed in the tenets of Christian Science. The courses he taught, I should say, did not include discussions of, let alone instruction in, those tenets. No one other than himself need ever have known of his disaffection. But he no longer believed in the purpose of the institution, and every course, irrespective of its content, was infused with the spirit of a narrative he could not accept. So he left. I have always hoped that this forlorn professor eventually found another god to serve, another narrative to give meaning to his teaching.

With some reservations but mostly with conviction, I use the word narrative as a synonym for god, with a small g. I know it is risky to do so, not only because the word god, having an aura of sacredness, is not to be used lightly, but also because it calls to mind a fixed figure or image. But it is the purpose of such figures or images to direct one’s mind to an idea and, more to my point, to a story—not any kind of story, but one that tells of origins and envisions a future, a story that constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a
source of authority, and, above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose. A god, in the sense I am using the word, is the name of a great narrative, one that has sufficient credibility, complexity, and symbolic power to enable one to organize one’s life around it. I use the word in the same sense, for example, as did Arthur Koestler in calling his book about communism’s deceptions and disappointments The God That Failed. His intention was to show that communism was not merely an experiment in government or social life, and still less an economic theory, but a comprehensive narrative about what the world is like, how things got to be the way they are, and what lies ahead. He also wished to show that for all of communism’s contempt for the “irrational” narratives of traditional religions, it relied nonetheless on faith and dogma. It certainly had its own conception of blasphemy and heresy, and practiced a grotesque and brutal method of excommunication.

By giving this example, I do not mean to suggest that gods must fail—far from it, although, of course, there are many that do. My own life has been contemporaneous with the emergence of three catastrophic narratives: the gods of communism, fascism, and Nazism, each of which held out the promise of heaven but led only to hell. As you will see if you proceed to succeeding chapters, there are several other gods that have captured the hearts and minds of people but that, I believe, are inadequate to provide a profound reason either for living or for learning. And if you proceed even further, you will see that I believe there are life- and learning-enhancing narratives that are available if only we would give them sufficient attention: These are gods that serve, as well as gods to serve.

Nonetheless, my intention here is neither to bury nor to praise any gods, but to claim that we cannot do without them, that whatever else we may call ourselves, we are the god-making species. Our genius lies in our capacity to make meaning through the creation of narratives that give point to our labors, exalt our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to our future. To do their work, such narratives do not have to be “true” in a scientific sense. There are many enduring narratives whose details include things that are false to observable fact. The purpose of a narrative is to give meaning to the world, not to describe it scientifically. The measure of a narrative’s “truth” or “falsity” is in its consequences: Does it provide people with a sense of personal identity, a sense of a community life, a basis for moral conduct, explanations of that which cannot be known?

You will recognize that this kind of storytelling goes by many different names. Joseph Campbell and Rollo May refer to it as “myth.” Freud, who understood better than anyone the creative source and psychic need of such tales, nonetheless called them “illusions.” One may even say, without much of a stretch, that Marx had something of this in mind in using the word ideology. But it is not my point to differentiate with scholarly nuance the subtle variations among these terms. The point is that, call them what you will, we are unceasing in creating histories and futures for ourselves through the medium of narrative. Without a narrative, life has no meaning. Without meaning, learning has no purpose. Without a purpose, schools are houses of detention, not attention. This is what my book is about.

The most comprehensive narratives are, of course, found in such texts as the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita. But beginning in the sixteenth century, at least in the West, there began to emerge narratives of a different sort, although with power enough to serve as alternate gods. Among the most enduring is the great narrative
known as “inductive science.” It is worth noting of this god that its first storytellers—Descartes, Bacon, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton, for example—did not think of their story as a replacement for the great Judeo-Christian narrative, but as an extension of it. In fact, the point has been made more than once that the great age of science was based on a belief in a God who was himself a scientist and technician, and who would therefore approve of a civilization committed to such an enterprise. “For all we know,” Eric Hoffer wrote, “one of the reasons that other civilizations, with all their ingenuity and skill, did not develop a machine age is that they lacked a God whom they could readily turn into an all-powerful engineer. For has not the mighty Jehovah performed from the beginning of time the feats that our machine age is even now aspiring to achieve?”

Galileo, Kepler, and Newton would largely agree, conceiving of God, as they did, as a great clockmaker and mathematician. In any case, there is no doubt that from the beginning of the age of science, its creators believed in the great narrative of Jehovah. Their discoveries were made in the service of the Judeo-Christian God. And could they know of Stephen Hawking’s remark that the research permitted by the (now abandoned) supercollider would give insight into the mind of God, they would be pleased. The difference between them and Hawking is that Hawking, as an avowed atheist, does not believe what he said. To him, the story of Jehovah’s wonders is only a dead metaphor, perhaps a tale told by an idiot. Apparently, the great story of science, all by itself, is enough for Hawking, as it has been for many others. It is a story that exalts human reason, places criticism over faith, disdains revelation as a source of knowledge, and, to put a spiritual cast upon it, postulates (as Jacob Bronowski has done) that our purpose on Earth is to discover reliable knowledge. Of course, the great narrative of science shares

with the great religious narratives the idea that there is order to the universe, which is a fundamental assumption of all important narratives.

In fact, science even has a version (of sorts) of the concept of the “mind of God.” As Bertrand Russell once put it, if there is a God, it is a differential equation. Kepler, in particular, would probably have liked that way of thinking about the matter; and perhaps that, after all, is what Stephen Hawking meant. In any case, the great strength of the science-god is, of course, that it works—far better than supplication, far better than even Francis Bacon could have imagined. Its theories are demonstrable and cumulative; its errors, correctable; its results, practical. The science-god sends people to the moon, inoculates people against disease, transports images through vast spaces so that they can be seen in our living rooms. It is a mighty god and, like more ancient ones, gives people a measure of control over their lives, which is one of the reasons why gods are invented in the first place. Some say the science-god gives more control and more power than any other god before it.

Nonetheless, like all gods, it is imperfect. Its story of our origins and of our end is, to say the least, unsatisfactory. To the question, How did it all begin?, science answers, Probably by an accident. To the question, How will it all end?, science answers, Probably by an accident. And to many people, the accidental life is not worth living. Moreover, regarding the question, What moral instruction do you give us?, the science-god maintains a tight-lipped silence. It places itself at the service of both the beneficent and the cruel, and its grand moral impartiality, if not indifference, has made it welcome the world over. More precisely, it is its offspring that is so welcomed. For like another god, the God who produced a Son and a Holy Ghost, the science-god has spawned another—the
great narrative of technology. This is a wondrous and energetic story, which, with greater clarity than its father, offers us a vision of paradise. Whereas the science-god speaks to us of both understanding and power, the technology-god speaks only of power. It demolishes the assertion of the Christian God that heaven is only a posthumous reward. It offers convenience, efficiency, and prosperity here and now; and it offers its benefits to all, the rich as well as the poor, as does the Christian God. But it goes much further. For it does not merely give comfort to the poor; it promises that through devotion to it the poor will become rich. Its record of achievement—there can be no doubt—has been formidable, in part because it is a demanding god, and is strictly monotheistic. Its first commandment is a familiar one: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” This means that those who follow its path must shape their needs and aspirations to the possibilities of technology. No other god can be permitted to impede, slow down, frustrate, or, least of all, oppose the sovereignty of technology. Why this is necessary is explained with fierce clarity in the second and third commandments. “We are the Technological Species,” says the second, “and therein lies our genius.” “Our destiny,” says the third, “is to replace ourselves with machines, which means that technological ingenuity and human progress are one and the same.”

Those who are skeptical about these propositions, who are inclined to take the name of the technology-god in vain, are condemned as reactionary renegades, especially when they speak of gods of a different kind. Among those who have risked heresy was Max Frisch, who remarked, “Technology is the knack of so arranging the world that we do not experience it.” But he and other such heretics have been cast aside and made to bear the damning mark of “Luddite” all of their days. There are also those, like Aldous Huxley, who believed that the great god of Technology might be sufficiently tamed so that its claims were more modest. He once said that if he had rewritten 

*Brave New World,* “... he would have included a sane alternative, a society in which ‘science and technology would be used as though, like the Sabbath, they had been made for man, not (as at present and still more so in the *Brave New World*) as though man were to be adapted and enslaved to them.”

Although both my words and tone will suggest I believe with Frisch and Huxley that the technology-god is a false one (I do, of course), I will hold that point until later. Here, I wish to stress that all gods are imperfect, even dangerous. A belief too strongly held, one that excludes the possibility of a tolerance for other gods, may result in a psychopathic fanaticism. That is what Jesus meant (and Huxley in referring to it) when he said, “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.” We may recall here a remark made by Niels Bohr that bears on this point. He said: “The opposite of a correct statement is an incorrect statement, but the opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth.” He meant to teach us, as have other wise people, that it is better to have access to more than one profound truth. To be able to hold comfortably in one’s mind the validity and usefulness of two contradictory truths is the source of tolerance, openness, and, most important, a sense of humor, which is the greatest enemy of fanaticism. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly better to have one profound truth, one god, one narrative, than to have none.

What happens to people when they have no gods to serve? Some commit suicide. There is more of this in the United States, particularly among our young, than in most other places in the world. Some envelop themselves in drugs, including alcohol. Some take whatever pleasure is to be found in random violence. Some encase themselves in an impene-
trable egoism. Many, apparently, find a momentary and pitiful release from dread in commercial re-creations of once-powerful narratives of the past.

I have before me an account of the proliferation of “theme parks” in both the United States and Europe. As I write, one of them is about to arise in Poland, where, according to Travel and Leisure magazine, its staff will dress in replica uniforms of the Luftwaffe and Wehrmacht to inspire nightly dances at “Hitler’s Bunker Disco.” Another, an amusement park near Berlin, will take as its theme “East Germany under Communism.” Its service people will pretend to be agents of the secret police, and will put those making critical remarks about the government into a fake jail. Across the ocean, near Atlanta, Georgia, an amusement park is being developed around the theme “Gone With the Wind Country.” Not to be outdone, the Walt Disney Company, whose prosperity is entirely based on the timely and romantic re-creation of narratives, has drawn up plans for still another amusement park near Manassas, Virginia, with the theme “The Civil War Experience.” Apparently, the exhibits are to include a dramatization of the experience of slavery—whether for it or against is not yet clear (nor indeed, as I write, is the future of this project).5

Is all of this a mere rehearsal for the mass consumption of “virtual reality,” as Joy Gould Boyum suspects? Are we being readied for a time when we will not require expensive theme parks to re-create the nightmare or fantasy of our choice, but can materialize either with the press of a button? Whether we are or not, what is certainly happening here is, to use Rollo May’s phrase, a “cry for myth.” Nightmare or fantasy, these parks allow one to inhabit a world where some powerful narrative once held sway, a narrative that gave people a reason for living, and in whose absence a kind of psychic trauma ensues. Even if a narrative places one in hell, it is better to be there than to be nowhere. To be nowhere means to live in a barren culture, one that offers no vision of the past or future, no clear voice of authority, no organizing principles. In such a culture, what are schools for? What can they be for?

There was a time when American culture knew what schools were for because it offered fully functioning multiple narratives for its people to embrace. There was, for example, the great story of democracy, which the American artist Ben Shahn once proclaimed “the most appealing idea that the world has yet known.” Alexis de Tocqueville called it “the principle of civic participation.” Gunnar Myrdal encapsulated the idea in the phrase “The American Creed,” which he judged to be the most explicitly articulated system of general ideals of any country in the West. The first chapter of the story opens with “In the beginning, there was a revolution.” As the story unfolds, there arise sacred words such as “government of the people, by the people and for the people.” Because he helped to write the story, Thomas Jefferson, the Moses of the great democracy-god, knew what schools were for—to ensure that citizens would know when and how to protect their liberty. This is a man who produced an essay that could have cost him his life, and that included the words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” It would not have come easily to the mind of such a man, as it does to political leaders today, that the young should be taught to read exclusively for the purpose of increasing their economic productivity. Jefferson had a more profound god to serve.

As did Emma Lazarus, whose poem celebrates another once-powerful American narrative. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,”
she wrote. Where else, save the great narrative of Jesus, can one find a story that so ennobles the huddled masses? Here, America is portrayed as the great melting pot. Such a story answers many profound questions, including, What are schools for? Schools are to fashion Americans out of the wretched refuse of teeming shores. Schools are to provide the lost and lonely with a common attachment to America's history and future, to America's sacred symbols, to its promise of freedom. The schools are, in a word, the affirmative answer to the question, Can a coherent, stable, unified culture be created out of people of diverse traditions, languages, and religions?

There have been, of course, other narratives that have served to give guidance and inspiration to people, and, especially, that have helped to give purpose to schooling. Among them is one that goes by the name of the Protestant ethic. In this tale, it is claimed that hard work and a disciplined capacity to delay gratification are the surest path toward earning God's favor. Idle hands do the Devil's work, as do lustful and, often, merely pleasurable thoughts. Although this god of self-control is a legacy of the Calvinist Puritans who founded America, its power extended to many of the huddled masses who came from quite different traditions. They, of course, brought with them their own narratives, which in the context of America served—we might say—as "local gods," but gods with sufficient power to give point to schooling.

Here I can offer my own schooling as an example. I grew up learning to love the American Creed while at the same time being inspired by a more "tribal" story, to which I had (and still have) considerable attachment. As the child of Jewish parents, I was required to go to two schools: the American public school, in which the names of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Tom Paine, and Lincoln were icons, and a "Jewish" school, in which the names of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel, Leah, and Moses were equally sacred. (It should be noted that the democracy-story has almost no significant women; the chosen-people-story has plenty.) As presented to me, the democracy-story did not conflict with the chosen-people-story; neither did the great melting-pot-story, nor, astonishingly enough, did the Protestant-ethic-story (perhaps because it is not much different from "Jewish guilt," which proceeds from the assumption that whatever happens, it is your fault).

The point is (putting guilt aside) that the great American narratives share with my tribal one certain near-universal themes and principles—for example, family honor, restraint, social responsibility, humility, and empathy for the outcast. Integrating these narratives was not difficult for me or for my public school classmates, who were, among others, Irish, Greek, Italian, and German, and who had their own tribal tales to enrich and mesh with the great narratives being taught in school.

I might add that it did not occur to many of us that the school was obliged to praise our tribal stories or even to discuss them. For one thing, we did not believe our teachers were qualified to do so. For another, the teachers gave no hint that they thought it within their province. For still another, our classes were far too multicultural to make it a practical goal. The schools, it seemed to us, had no business to conduct with "ethnicity." (The term itself, incidentally, was unknown to us at the time, since it was first used in 1940 by W. Lloyd Warner and did not enter common usage until much later.) The promotion of ethnicity, we believed, was the responsibility of the home, where, among other things, a "tribal" language could be spoken freely (in my case, Yiddish) and where religious traditions and holidays were honored and "non-
American" food was consumed. The task was also taken up by one's church or synagogue, by fraternal organizations, and even to some extent by local political associations. Some of our ethnic stories were also told in the popular arts—in movies, for example. In this respect, the Irish did extraordinarily well, being depicted in many films as hardworking, family-oriented, fun-loving people whose priests sang liltily and whose nuns were beautiful. The Jews and Italians didn't fare as well, the Greeks were ignored, the blacks were humiliated, and, of course, the Germans were savaged. Nonetheless, we did not expect the schools to make compensation. Only to make Americans.

I am aware, of course, that the situation I have just described was not entirely uniform or, I should say, satisfactory. As early as 1915, grievances were expressed against the melting-pot metaphor and more particularly against its supposed reality. While it was conceded that the American Creed was based predominantly on an Anglo-Saxon tradition, the argument was made that its principles were being enacted largely by immigrants, who enriched it by their own traditions and who, in any case, would not abandon their tribal identities. Thus, the idea of cultural pluralism entered the schools, mostly beginning in the 1930s. This meant that in many public schools (not mine), the history, literature, and traditions of different immigrant groups were included as part of the great tale of the American Creed. I do not know if the self-esteem and ethnic pride of the children of the huddled masses were elevated by cultural pluralism. Probably yes in some cases; maybe no, with accompanying embarrassment, in a few. Although my own schools were considerably late in adopting cultural pluralism, I do remember an occasion when a teacher, in a rare gesture of accommodation to ethnic diversity, made a point of emphasizing the contribution of the Jew

Haim Salomon to the financing of the Revolutionary War. The financing? I would have much preferred if Salomon had been Paul Revere's backup.

Whatever the gains or losses may have been in the self-esteem of the students, cultural pluralism made three positive contributions toward maintaining the vitality and usefulness of the narratives underlying the public school experience. First, it provided a fuller and more accurate picture of American culture and, especially, its history—which is to say, it revealed the dynamic nature of the great American narratives. Melting pot or not, America was shown to be a composite culture from which, in principle, none were excluded. Second, at no point was the inclusion of the immigrant narratives presented as a refutation of the American Creed. Even the horrendous stories of the massacre of "native" Americans, slavery, and the exploitation of "coolie" labor could be told without condemning the ideals of democracy, the melting pot, or the Protestant ethic. Indeed, such stories often served as an inspiration to purify the American Creed, to overcome prejudice, to redeem ourselves from the blighted parts of our history. Third, the inclusion of any immigrant narrative was not intended to promote divisiveness among different groups. The idea was to show that there were substance and richness in each tribal tale, and that we were better for knowing the gods of other people.

It would seem that certain versions of what is now called "multiculturalism" reject all three of these ideas, and this rejection, I will soon argue, seriously threatens the future of public, as opposed to private, schools. Here, I will say only that the idea of public education depends absolutely on the existence of shared narratives and the exclusion of narratives that lead to alienation and divisiveness. What makes public schools public is not so much that the schools have common
goals but that the students have common gods. The reason for this is that public education does not serve a public. It *creates* a public. And in creating the right kind of public, the schools contribute toward strengthening the spiritual basis of the American Creed. That is how Jefferson understood it, how Horace Mann understood it, how John Dewey understood it. And, in fact, there is no other way to understand it. The question is not, Does or doesn't public schooling create a public? The question is, What kind of public does it create? A conglomeration of self-indulgent consumers? Angry, soulless, directionless masses? Indifferent, confused citizens? Or a public imbued with confidence, a sense of purpose, a respect for learning, and tolerance? The answer to this question has nothing whatever to do with computers, with testing, with teacher accountability, with class size, and with the other details of managing schools. The right answer depends on two things, and two things alone: the existence of shared narratives and the capacity of such narratives to provide an inspired reason for schooling.

2 · Some Gods That Fail

It has not been a good century for gods, or even a good century and a half. Charles Darwin, we might say, began the great assault by revealing that we were not the children of God but of monkeys. His revelation took its toll on him; he suffered from unrelieved stomach and bowel pains for which medical historians have failed to uncover a physical cause. Nonetheless, Darwin was unrepentant and hoped that many people would find inspiration, solace, and continuity in the great narrative of evolution. But not many have, and the psychic trauma he induced continues barely concealed to our own day. Karl Marx, who invited Darwin to write an introduction to *Das Kapital* (Darwin declined), tore to shreds the god of Nationalism, showing, with theory and countless examples, how the working classes are deluded into identifying with their capitalist tormentors. Sigmund Freud, working quietly in his consulting room at Bergasse 19 in Vienna, bid fair to become the world’s most ferocious god-buster. He showed that the great god of Reason, whose authority had been certified by the Age of Enlightenment, was a great imposter, that it served mostly to both rationalize and conceal the commands of our most primitive urgings. The cortex, as it were, is merely the servant of Genitalia. An original but soul-searing idea, it may even be true. All of this not being enough,
argument can be made against educating the young to be consumers or to think about the kinds of employment that might interest them. But when these are elevated to the status of a metaphysical imperative, we are being told that we have reached the end of our wits—even worse, the limit of our wisdom.

3 · Some New Gods That Fail

If one has a trusting relationship with one’s students (let us say graduate students) and the subject under discussion is the same as the subject of this book, it is not altogether gauche to ask them if they believe in God (with a capital G). I have done this three or four times, and most students say they do. Their answer is preliminary to the next question: If someone you love were desperately ill and you had to choose between praying to God for his or her recovery or administering an antibiotic (as prescribed by a competent physician), which would you choose?

Most say the question is silly, since the alternatives are not mutually exclusive. Of course. But suppose they were; which would you choose? God helps those who help themselves, some say in choosing the antibiotic, and thereby getting the best of two possible belief systems. But if pushed to the wall (for example, God does not always help those who help themselves; God helps those who pray and who believe), most say the antibiotic, after noting that the question is asinine and proves nothing. Of course, the question was not asked, in the first place, to prove anything, but to begin a discussion of the nature of belief. And I do not fail to inform the students, by the way, that there has recently emerged at least some (though not conclusive) evidence of a scientific nature that
when sick people are prayed for, they do better than those who aren’t.¹

As the discussion proceeds, important distinctions are made among the different meanings of “belief,” but at some point it becomes far from asinine to speak of the god of Technology—in the sense that people believe technology works, that they rely on it, that it makes promises, that they are bereft when denied access to it, that they are delighted when they are in its presence, that for most people it works in mysterious ways, that they condemn people who speak against it, that they stand in awe of it, and that, in the born-again mode, they will alter their lifestyles, their schedules, their habits, and their relationships to accommodate it. If this be not a form of religious belief, what is?

In all strands of American cultural life, one can find so many examples of technological adoration that it is possible to write a book about it. And I would if it had not already been done so well. But nowhere do you find more enthusiasm for the god of Technology than among educators. In fact, there are those, like Lewis Perelman, who argue (for example, in his book School’s Out) that modern information technologies have rendered schools entirely irrelevant, since there is now much more information available outside the classroom than inside. This is by no means considered an outlandish idea. Dr. Diane Ravitch, former Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education, envisions, with considerable relish, the challenge that technology presents to the tradition that “children (and adults) should be educated in a specific place, for a certain number of hours, and a certain number of days during the week and year.” In other words, that children should be educated in school. Imagining the possibilities of an information superhighway offering perhaps a thousand channels, Dr. Ravitch assures us that:

In this new world of pedagogical plenty, children and adults will be able to dial up a program on their home television to learn whatever they want to know, at their own convenience. If Little Eva cannot sleep, she can learn algebra instead. At her home-learning station, she will tune in to a series of interesting problems that are presented in an interactive medium, much like video games. . . . Young John may decide that he wants to learn the history of modern Japan, which he can do by dialing up the greatest authorities and teachers on the subject, who will not only use dazzling graphs and illustrations, but will narrate a historical video that excites his curiosity and imagination.²

In this vision, there is, it seems to me, a confident and typical sense of unreality. Little Eva can’t sleep, so she decides to learn a little algebra? Where did Little Eva come from, Mars? If not, it is more likely she will tune into a good movie. Young John decides that he wants to learn the history of modern Japan? How did young John come to this point? How is it that he never visited a library up to now? Or is it that he, too, couldn’t sleep and decided a little modern Japanese history was just what he needed?

What Ravitch is talking about here is not a new technology but a new species of child, one that, in any case, hasn’t been seen very much up to now. Of course, new technologies do make new kinds of people, which leads to a second objection to Ravitch’s conception of the future. There is a kind of forthright determinism about the imagined world described in it. The technology is here or will be; we must use it because it is there; we will become the kind of people the technology requires us to be; and, whether we like it or not, we will remake our institutions to accommodate the technology. All of this
must happen because it is good for us, but in any case, we have no choice.

This point of view is present in very nearly every statement about the future relation of learning to technology. And, as in Ravitch’s scenario, there is always a cheery, gee-whiz tone to the prophecies. Here is one produced by the National Academy of Sciences, written by Hugh McIntosh.

School for children of the Information Age will be vastly different than it was for Mom and Dad.

Interested in biology? Design your own life forms with computer simulation.

Having trouble with a science project? Teleconference about it with a research scientist.

Bored with the real world? Go into a virtual physics lab and rewrite the laws of gravity.

These are the kinds of hands-on learning experiences schools could be providing right now. The technologies that make them possible are already here, and today’s youngsters, regardless of economic status, know how to use them. They spend hours with them every week—not in the classroom, but in their own homes and in video game centers at every shopping mall.³

It is always interesting to attend to the examples of learning, and the motivations that ignite them, in the songs of love that technophiles perform for us. It is, for example, not easy to imagine research scientists all over the world teleconferencing with thousands of students who are having difficulty with their science projects. I can’t help thinking that most research scientists would put a stop to this rather quickly. But I find it especially revealing that in the preceding scenario, we have an example of a technological solution to a psychological problem that would seem to be exceedingly serious. We are presented with a student who is “bored with the real world.” What does it mean to say someone is bored with the real world, especially one so young? Can a journey into virtual reality cure such a problem? And if it can, will our troubled youngster want to return to the real world? Confronted with a student who is bored with the real world, I don’t think we can get away so easily by making available a virtual-reality physics lab.

The role that new technology should play in schools or anywhere else is something that needs to be discussed without the hyperactive fantasies of cheerleaders. In particular, the computer and its associated technologies are awesome additions to a culture, and they are quite capable of altering the psychic, let alone the sleeping, habits of our young. But like all important technologies of the past, they are Faustian bargains, giving and taking away, sometimes in equal measure, sometimes more in one way than the other. It is strange—indeed, shocking—that with the twenty-first century so close on our heels, we can still talk of new technologies as if they were unmixed blessings, gifts, as it were, from the gods. Don’t we all know what the combustion engine has done for us and against us? What television is doing for us and against us? At the very least, what we need to discuss about Little Eva, Young John, and McIntosh’s trio is what they will lose, and what we will lose, if they enter a world in which computer technology is their chief source of motivation, authority, and, apparently, psychological sustenance. Will they become, as Joseph Weizenbaum warns, more impressed by calculation than human judgment? Will speed of response become, more than ever, a defining quality of intel-
ligence? If, indeed, the idea of a school will be dramatically altered, what kinds of learning will be neglected, perhaps made impossible? Is virtual reality a new form of therapy? If it is, what are its dangers?

These are serious matters, and they need to be discussed by those who actually know something about children from the planet Earth, and whose vision of children's needs, and the needs of a society, go beyond thinking of school mainly as a place for the convenient distribution of information. Schools are not now and have never been chiefly about getting information to children. That has been on the schools' agenda, of course, but it has always been way down on the list. In a moment, I will mention a few school functions that are higher, but here it needs saying that for technological utopians, the computer vaults information access to the top. This reshuffling of priorities comes, one might say, at a most inopportune time. The problem of giving people greater access to more information, faster, more conveniently, and in more diverse forms was the main technological thrust of the nineteenth century. Some folks haven't noticed it, but that problem was largely solved, so that for almost one hundred years, there has been more information available to the young outside the school than inside. That fact did not make the schools obsolete, and it does not make them obsolete now. Yes, it is true that Little Eva, the insomniac from Mars, could turn on an algebra lesson, thanks to the computer, in the wee hours of the morning. She could also, if she wished, read a book or magazine, watch television, pop a video into the VCR, turn on the radio, or listen to music. All of this she could have done before the computer. The computer does not solve any problem she has but exacerbates one. For Little Eva's problem is not how to get access to a well-structured algebra lesson, but what to do with all the information available to her during the day, as well as during sleepless nights. Perhaps this is why she couldn't sleep in the first place. Little Eva, like the rest of us, is overwhelmed by information. She lives in a culture which has 260,000 billboards, 17,000 newspapers, 12,000 periodicals, 27,000 video outlets for renting tapes, 400 million television sets, and well over 500 million radios, not including those in automobiles. There are 40,000 new book titles published every year, and each day 41 million photographs are taken. And, thanks to the computer, over 60 billion pieces of advertising junk mail arrive in our mailboxes every year. Everything from telegraphy and photography in the nineteenth century to the silicon chip in the twentieth has amplified the din of information intruding on Little Eva's consciousness. From millions of sources all over the globe, through every possible channel and medium—light waves, airwaves, ticker tapes, computer banks, telephone wires, television cables, satellites, and printing presses—information pours in. Behind it in every imaginable form of storage—on paper, on video, on audiotape, on discs, film, and silicon chips—is an even greater volume of information waiting to be retrieved. In the face of this, we might ask, What can schools do for Little Eva besides making still more information available? If there is nothing, then new technologies will indeed make schools obsolete. But in fact, there is plenty.

One thing that comes to mind, of which something will be said later in the book, is to provide her with a serious form of technology education, something quite different from instruction in using computers to process information, which, it strikes me, is a trivial thing to do, for two reasons. In the first place, approximately 35 million people have already learned how to use computers without the benefit of school instruction. If the schools do nothing, most of the population will know how to use computers in the next ten years, just as most
of the population learned how to drive cars without school instruction. In the second place, what we needed to know about cars—as we need to know about computers, television, and other important technologies—is not how to use them but how they use us. In the case of cars, what we needed to think about in the early twentieth century was not how to drive them but what they would do to our air, our landscape, our social relations, our family life, and our cities. Suppose that in 1946, we had started to address similar questions about television: What would be its effects on our political institutions, our psychic habits, our children, our religious conceptions, our economy? Wouldn’t we be better positioned today to control television’s massive assault on American culture?

I am talking here about making technology itself an object of inquiry, so that Little Eva and Young John in using technologies will not be used or abused by them, so that Little Eva and Young John become more interested in asking questions about the computer than in getting answers from it.

I am not arguing against using computers in school. I am arguing against our sleepwalking attitudes toward it, against allowing it to distract us from more important things, against making a god of it. This is what Theodore Roszak warned against in The Cult of Information: “Like all cults,” he wrote, “this one has the intention of enlisting mindless allegiance and acquiescence. People who have no clear idea of what they mean by information, or why they should want so much of it, are nonetheless prepared to believe that we live in an Information Age, which makes every computer around us what the relics of the True Cross were in the Age of Faith: emblems of salvation.” To this, I would add the sage observation of Alan Kay of Apple Computer. Kay is widely associated with the invention of the personal computer, and certainly has an interest in the use of computers in schools. Nonetheless, he has repeatedly said that any problems the schools cannot solve without computers, they cannot solve with them. What are some of those problems? There is, for example, the traditional task of teaching children how to behave in groups. You cannot have a democratic—indeed, civilized—community life unless people have learned how to participate in a disciplined way as part of a group. One might even say that schools have never been essentially about individualized learning. It is true, of course, that groups do not learn; individuals do. But the idea of a school is that individuals must learn in a setting in which individual needs are subordinated to group interests. Unlike other media of mass communication, which celebrate individual response and are experienced in private, the classroom is intended to tame the ego, to connect the individual with others, to demonstrate the value and necessity of group cohesion. At present, most scenarios describing the uses of computers have children solving problems alone. Little Eva, Young John, and the others are doing just that, and, in fact, they do not need the presence of other children. The presence of others may, indeed, be an annoyance. (Not all computer visionaries, I must say, take lightly the importance of a child’s learning to subordinate the self. Seymour Papert’s The Children’s Machine is an imaginative example of how computers have been used to promote social cohesion, although, as I have had occasion to say to him, the same effects can be achieved without computers. Naturally, he disagrees.)

Nonetheless, like the printing press before it, the computer has a powerful bias toward amplifying personal autonomy and individual problem-solving. That is why, Papert to the contrary, most of the examples we are given picture children working alone. That is also why educators must guard
against computer technology’s undermining some of the important reasons for having the young assemble in school, where social cohesion and responsibility are of preeminent importance.

Although Ravitch is not exactly against what she calls “state run schools,” she imagines them as something of a relic of a pre-technological age. She believes that the new technologies will offer all children equal access to information. Conjuring up a hypothetical Little Mary who is presumably from a poorer home than Little Eva, Ravitch imagines that Mary will have the same opportunities as Eva “to learn any subject, and to learn it from the same master teachers as children in the richest neighborhood.”5 For all its liberalizing spirit, this scenario contains some omissions that need to be kept in mind. One is that though new technologies may be a solution to the learning of “subjects,” they work against the learning of what are called “social values,” including an understanding of democratic processes. If one reads the first chapter of Robert Fulghum’s All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, one will find an elegant summary of a few things Ravitch’s scenario has left out. They include learning the following lessons: share everything, play fair, don’t hit people, put things back where you found them, clean up your own mess, wash your hands before you eat, and, of course, flush.6 The only thing wrong with Fulghum’s idea is that no one actually has learned all these things at kindergarten’s end. We have ample evidence that it takes many years of teaching these values in school before they are accepted and internalized. That is why it won’t do for children to learn in isolation. The point is to place them in a setting that emphasizes collaboration, as well as sensitivity to and responsibility for others. That is also why schools require

children to be in a certain place at a certain time and to follow certain rules, such as raising their hands when they wish to speak, not talking when others are talking, not chewing gum, not leaving until the bell rings, and exhibiting patience toward slower learners. This process is called making civilized people. The god of Technology does not appear interested in this function of schools. At least, it does not come up much when technology’s virtues are enumerated.

The god of Technology may also have a trick or two up its sleeve about something else. It is often asserted that new technologies will equalize learning opportunities for the rich and poor. It is devoutly to be wished, but I doubt it. In the first place, it is generally understood by those who have studied the history of technology that technological change always produces winners and losers—which is to say, the benefits of new technologies are not distributed equally among the population. There are many reasons for this, among them economic differences. Even in the case of the automobile, which is a commodity most people can buy (though not all), there are wide differences between rich and poor in the quality of what is available to them. It would be quite astonishing if computer technology equalized all learning opportunities, irrespective of economic differences. One may be delighted that Little Eva’s parents could afford the technology and software to make it possible for her to learn algebra at midnight. But Little Mary’s parents may not be able to, may not even know such things are available. And if we say that the school could make the technology available to Little Mary (at least during the day), there may be something else Little Mary is lacking—two parents, for instance. I have before me an account of a 1994 Carnegie Corporation Report, produced by the National Center for Children in Poverty. It states that in
1960, only 5 percent of our children were born to unmarried mothers. In 1990, the figure was 28 percent. In 1960, 7 percent of our children under three lived with one parent. In 1990, 27 percent. In 1960, less than 1 percent of our children under eighteen experienced the divorce of their parents. In 1990, the figure was almost 50 percent.\(^7\)

It turns out that Little Mary may be having sleepless nights as often as Little Eva, but not because she wants to get a leg up on algebra lessons. Maybe it is because she doesn’t know who her father is, or, if she does, where he is. Maybe we now can understand why McIntosh’s lad is bored with the real world. Or is he confused about it? Or terrified? Are there educators who seriously believe that these problems can be addressed by new technologies?

I do not say, of course, that schools can solve the problems of poverty, alienation, and family disintegration. But schools can respond to them. And they can do this because there are people in them, because these people are concerned with more than algebra lessons or modern Japanese history, and because these people can identify not only one’s level of competence in algebra but one’s level of rage and confusion and depression. I am talking here about children as they really come to us, not children who are invented to show us how computers may enrich their lives. Of course, I suppose it is possible that there are children who, waking at night, want to study algebra or who are so interested in their world that they yearn to know about Japan. If there be such children, and one hopes there are, they do not require expensive computers to satisfy their hunger for learning. They are on their way, with or without computers—unless, of course, they do not care about others, or have no friends, or little respect for democracy, or are filled with suspicion about those who are not like

them. When we have machines that know how to do something about these problems, that is the time to rid ourselves of the expensive burden of schools or to reduce the function of teachers to “coaches” in the uses of machines (as Ravitch envisions). Until then, we must be more modest about this god of Technology and certainly not pin our hopes on it.

We must also, I suppose, be empathetic toward those who search with good intentions for technological panaceas. I am a teacher myself and know how hard it is to contribute toward the making of a civilized person. Can we blame those who want to find an easy way, through the agency of technology? Perhaps not. After all, it is an old quest. As early as 1918, H. L. Mencken (although completely devoid of empathy) wrote, “... there is no sure-cure so idiotic that some superintendent of schools will not swallow it. The aim seems to be to reduce the whole teaching process to a sort of automatic reaction, to discover some master formula that will not only take the place of competence and resourcefulness in the teacher but that will also create an artificial receptivity in the child.”\(^8\)

Mencken was not necessarily speaking of technological panaceas, but he may well have been. In the early 1920s, a teacher wrote the following poem:

Mr. Edison says
That the radio will supplant the teacher.
Already one may learn languages by means
of Victrola records.
The moving picture will visualize
What the radio fails to get across.
Teachers will be relegated to the backwoods.
With fire-horses,
And long-haired women;
Or, perhaps shown in museums.
Education will become a matter
Of pressing the button.
Perhaps I can get a position at the switchboard. 9

I do not go as far back as the introduction of the radio and
the Victrola, but I am old enough to remember when 16-
millimeter film was to be the sure cure, then closed-circuit
television, then 8-millimeter film, then teacherproof text-
books. Now computers.
I know a false god when I see one.

There is still another false god that has surfaced recently, and
we must not neglect it. Like the gods of Economic Utility,
Consumership, and Technology, it leads us to a dead end. But
unlike them, it does not merely distort or trivialize the idea of
public education. It directs us to its end.

This god has several names: the god of Tribalism or Sepa-
ratism; most often, in its most fervently articulated form, the
god of Multiculturalism. Before saying anything about it, I
should specify that it must not be confused with what has
been called “cultural pluralism.” Cultural pluralism is a sev-
enty-year-old idea whose purpose is to enlarge and enrich the
American Creed—specifically, to show the young how their
tribal identities and narratives fit into a more inclusive and
comprehensive American story. The term multicultur-
alism is sometimes used as a synonym for cultural pluralism, and in
such cases, we have a semantic problem that can be clarified
with relative ease. But more often than not, the term is used
to denote a quite different story. In its extreme form, which is
the god I will confront here, I would judge it to be a psycho-
pathic version of cultural pluralism, and, of course, extremely
dangerous. In what follows, I will put quotation marks
around the term multiculturalism to indicate that no argument
is being made against the acknowledgment of cultural differ-
ences among students. I am using the term to denote a nar-
rative that makes cultural diversity an exclusive preoccupation.

Although this god is by no means as widely accepted as
the others I have discussed, there are several states (for ex-
ample, New York and Oregon) that have been deeply influ-
enced by it and serious about urging that schooling be
organized around it. Because of an expanding interest in
“multiculturalism,” as well as the passion of its adherents, it
has been deemed dangerous enough to have provoked the
distinguished historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., to write a refu-
tation of it, The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Mul-
cultural Society. Although Schlesinger’s book will, I believe,
stand as the definitive critique of “multiculturalism,” there is
at least one point he does not stress enough, and which
should be the beginning of any discussion of this reversion to
undiluted tribalism. I refer to the fact that those who advocate
a “multicultural” curriculum, especially those who speak for
an Afrocentric bias, understand better than most (certainly
better than, say, the U.S. Secretary of Education) the need for
a god to serve; they understand that the reason why students
are demoralized, bored, and distracted is not that teachers
lack interesting methods and machinery but that both stu-
dents and teachers lack a narrative to provide profound
meaning to their lessons. It does not go too far to say that the
“multiculturalists” are the most active and dedicated educa-
tion philosophers we have at the moment. They are not espe-
cially interested in methods or machinery and, generally, are
not competent to speak on such matters. But they have a story
to tell, and they believe their story can serve as a foundation
to schooling. The trouble is that it is a terrible story, at least for public schools.

Like many important narratives, this one includes concepts of good and evil. In its most frightening version, evil inheres in white people, especially those of European origin and learning. Goodness inheres in nonwhites, especially those who have been victims of "white hegemony." At least one "multiculturalist," Professor Leonard Jeffries, of City College of New York, has a biological explanation for these characteristics. He believes that the qualities of good and evil are determined by the respective quantities of melanin in the bloodstream of different races: the more melanin, the more good; the less melanin, the more evil. One might say that this is the equivalent of the concept of Original Sin in the Christian story, with this difference: The Christian story provides a means by which Original Sin can be overcome. Jeffries's account of the source of evil leaves no opportunity for redemption.

Of course, many adherents of "multiculturalism" do not agree with Jeffries and, in any case, do not require a biological basis for believing in white, European evil. History, they argue, provides abundant reasons, most particularly in the fact of white oppression of nonwhite people. To "multiculturalists," such oppression is the key to understanding white history, literature, art, and most everything else of European origin. It follows from this that all the narratives of the white, European races are to be seen as propagandistic means of concealing their evil, or, even worse, making their evil appear virtuous. There is no possibility of proceeding in a fair-minded way, the "multiculturalists" believe, unless the narratives of white Europeans are overthrown. A particularly vigorous expression of this view is provided by four authors from the Rochester, New York, school district: "[The] legiti-

mation of dominance, naturalization of inequality, and filtration of knowledge are being challenged in the current debate over what is 'standard' school knowledge. At issue in this debate is the struggle over accuracy versus misrepresentation, emancipatory versus hegemonic scholarship, and the constructed supremacy of Western cultural knowledge transmitted in schools versus the inherent primacy of the multiple and collective origins of knowledge."10

If we leave aside the vagueness, if not incomprehensibility, of such phrases as "emancipatory scholarship" and "inherent primacy," it is clear enough that the authors believe the schools are the battleground where the struggle for a new narrative must be fought. They conclude this paragraph by saying that Eurocentric knowledge must be replaced, since "[such] a singular, monovocal curriculum is one of the last institutional terrains of white, patriarchal, ruling-class hegemony."

This is clearly not the language of "cultural pluralism," which would have among its aims celebrating the struggles and achievements of nonwhite people as part of the story of humankind. In fact, the authors explicitly denounce any efforts to "heroize" (their word) such figures as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Crispus Attucks, and Martin Luther King, Jr. They believe that the "heroizing" approach conceals the "holocaustal atrocities, economic benefits, and dehumanization of [slavery's] perpetrators." Obviously, what "multiculturalism" aims at is not reconciliation with Eurocentric history and learning, but a thorough rejection of it so that a new beginning may be made, a new narrative constructed.

In order to accomplish this, the "multiculturalists" must do two things. First, they must reveal and highlight those ugly parts of history that are usually excluded from the various Eurocentric narratives. Second, they must show that the
more humane parts of those narratives have their origin in nonwhite cultures.

The first task is relatively easy, since all narratives conceal or sanitize unsavory if not indefensible chapters. Narratives are not exactly histories at all, but a special genre of storytelling that uses history to give form to ideals. "The purpose of myth," Claude Lévi-Strauss reminds us, "is to provide a model capable of overcoming a contradiction." That is why no serious harm is done to the great story of Christianity by revealing that a particular Pope was an ambitious, unscrupulous schemer. Neither is it lethal to speak of the Inquisition. The reality is that there has never been a Christian—not even St. Francis or Mother Teresa—who has lived in every particular a Christian life. The story of Christianity is only in part a history of Christians. It is largely the story of the poignant struggle of people to give life to a set of transcendent ideals. That they have stumbled on the way is embarrassing and sometimes shameful, but it does not discredit the purpose of the story, which in fact is about the discrepancy between reality and the ideal.

The same is true of the American story of democracy. To point out that the Constitution, when written, permitted the exclusion of women and nonproperty owners from voting, and did not regard slaves as fully human, is not to make a mockery of the story. The creation of the Constitution, including the limitations of the men who wrote it, is only an early chapter of a two-hundred-year-old narrative whose theme is the gradual and often painful expansion of the concepts of freedom and humanity. How difficult that struggle has been was expressed by Abraham Lincoln in 1856 in a response he made to the presidential campaign of the Know-Nothing party. "Our progress in degeneracy," he observed sardonically, "appears to me pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that 'All men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'All men are created equal, except Negroes.' When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'All men are created equal, except Negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics.' "

The Know-Nothings did not get control, but we know nonetheless how that reversion to degeneracy was stayed, at what cost, and how we have continued the journey that Jefferson charted. That we are far from reaching the goal is made abundantly clear by the robust complaints of those who are not yet adequately represented, including the "multiculturalists." But the point is that it is possible, by ignoring its transcendent ideals, to tell America's story as a history of racism, inequity, and violence. Is this the story we wish to be the foundation of American public schooling? If the answer is, Yes, because it contains truth, then we must turn to the second task of the "multiculturalists" to see if they are mainly concerned with truth-telling. That task is to show that the humane parts of the Eurocentric narrative have their origins in nonwhite cultures. Schlesinger's book documents the failure of "multiculturalists" to come even close to the truth. He shows that according to respected historians, including black historians, most of the claims made by "multiculturalists" are propagandistic fantasies. These include the claims that black Africa is where science, philosophy, religion, medicine, technology, and other great humanistic achievements originated; that ancient Egyptians were black; that Pythagoras and Aristotle stole their mathematics and philosophies from black scholars in Egypt; that most American blacks originated in Egypt; and that the enlightened parts of the U.S. Constitution were based, in some measure, on political principles borrowed from the Iroquois. Schlesinger is so discouraged by the abuse of history reflected in these claims that he concludes:
"If some Kleagle of the Ku Klux Klan wanted to devise an educational curriculum for the specific purpose of handicapping and disabling black Americans, he would not be likely to come up with anything more diabolically effective than Afrocentrism."13

One might reply to Schlesinger that neither historical balance nor truth is the issue here. What is being attempted is the creation of a new narrative, similar in point and method to the process by which, for example, American colonists constructed a mythology of the Pilgrims as democratic nation-builders. In that instance, history was used, invented, or forgotten to suit the needs of the story. The story, as we know, has been hugely successful. Americans know about Miles Standish but not about Squanto and Wituwamet. Americans celebrate, even revere, Thanksgiving, but they do not know (or, if they do, give it little weight) that some Indians call Thanksgiving the National Day of Mourning.

Of course, it is not irrelevant to ask how much truth or falsehood is contained in any narrative. A narrative constructed mostly out of falsehoods usually fails, leaving its adherents bitter and, as Schlesinger reminds us, ignorant. But even if we make a most generous assessment of the facts that form the core of the "multicultural" story, we are left with the question, Can it work?

I believe it cannot, for several reasons. The first is of a practical nature. Why should the public, which is largely of European origin, support a school program that takes as its theme their own evil? Would nonwhites support a public school whose curriculum proceeds from the assumption that nonwhites are inferior? And if the "multiculturalists" reply, That is exactly what happens in most schools, then the remedy is to revise the story so that it allows children of all races to find a dignified place for themselves in it. It is true enough that whites have oppressed blacks, but blacks have oppressed other blacks, and even whites; and whites have oppressed other whites; and Indians have slaughtered whites, and whites, Indians; and Europeans have oppressed Asians, and Asians, Europeans. How far shall we go with this?

If I may amend Niels Bohr’s remark, cited earlier, the opposite of a profound story is another profound story, by which I mean that the story of every group may be told inspiringlly, without excluding its blemishes but with an emphasis on the various struggles to achieve humanity, or, to borrow from Lincoln again, the struggles to reveal the better angels of our nature. This is what once was meant by cultural pluralism.

The argument is sometimes made that a "multicultural" curriculum is justified where an entire student population is African-American (or Mexican or Puerto Rican), as is often the case in our large cities. This might make sense if it were the task of the public schools to create a public of hyphenated Americans. But our students already come to school as hyphenated Americans. The task of the public schools, properly conceived, is to erase the hyphens or to make them less distinct. The idea of a public school is not to make blacks black, or Koreans Korean, or Italians Italian, but to make Americans. The alternative leads, quite obviously, to the "Balkanization" of public schools—which is to say, their end. An Afrocentric curriculum for Afro-Americans? Then why not a Sinocentric curriculum for the Chinese? An Italocentric curriculum for Italians? A Judeocentric curriculum for Jews? A Teutocentric for Germans? A Graecocentric for Greeks?

This path not only leads to the privatizing of schooling but to a privatizing of the mind, and it makes the creation of a public mind quite impossible. The theme of schooling would then be divisiveness, not sameness, and would inevitably en-