Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture

By Theodore R. Sizer

Launching a Charter Secondary School: Reflections From the Front Lines

At the Harvard Club of New York City, October 23, 1998

Thank you very much. I was enormously relieved by the sense of humor of this organization. We contemplate these earnest Harvard men [indicating portraits on the walls]. There is not a flicker of humor. I started the ball rolling by dumping a glass of wine on my tablemate. It went on and on. It was great. And the disapproval of that general there, the snarl on his face . . . I should also say that this has been a very cruel day in this city for a Red Socks fan. I thought I would avoid the celebration by taking the water taxi down to Battery Park or whatever it is. It is the first time I have ever seen confetti in the street, and every high school student in the city of New York running and shouting, screaming and hollering. So that's why I am glad to be here.

I would like to kvetch a bit. I would like to introduce our discussion about school reform by being contrary in a kind of Friday-night, school principal mode. My God you are tired on Friday night. Basically I am an optimistic person, but I would like to talk about the meaning of a few very common words in the school reform game from a rather sour disposition. Not just to be sour but rather because, in fact, this is the way I feel. Let me say, in all these remarks, that I am a high school principal, and a lot of things I will say in regard to school reform in general might not apply to the schooling of little ones. So if you can adjust to the fact that I am talking about the schooling of adolescents, I won't constantly remind you of it. So let me begin.

We use the word "public" a lot in public education: the reform of public education, the reform of the people's schools. The word *public* has many meanings. Two of them are obvious. Public in the sense that the people control the schools. That is, the people's government controls these schools, or more accurately, the people's *governments* control these schools. It also means that the people finance these schools; these are paid for by us, through taxation.

There is little challenge to these definitions. But I think there is also implied, in the word "public", in public education, the meaning of public as free access, as in "public" transportation or "public" parks. I can take the bus from point A to point B, whatever person I might be. There is no distinction between me and anyone else in the choice of public transportation, or visiting Yellowstone National Park. I might have to pay a bit, but basically these amenities, the bus system, the parks, are provided as a result of public taxation. Most American public schools are profoundly segregated. Which is to say that public schools have restricted access. I may not go to Bronxville High School unless I live in Bronxville. If I live in the Bronx I can't go to Bronxville High School. If I live in Chicago I can't go to Lake Forest High School. If I live in Watts I cannot go to Beverly Hills High School. If I live in St.

Louis I cannot go to Clayton High School. The United States, of all industrialized nations, has the most class-segregated school system in the world. For my money, these are not public schools. The public schools aren't public schools, because only certain of the public may go. And that certainness is not simply the happenstance of geography, it is the harsher reality of economic situation.

We talk about choice in public education, or choice in public and private education, as though this was a new idea. The United States and the colonies before it have always had choice, for those who could afford it. It is a measure of pride for Nancy and me and the others who founded the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, an itty-bitty school with a big, big name, because under the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993, any resident in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts may apply for admission to that school. And admission is on the base of a lottery. You can live in Fishburg or Leominster or Lowell or Boston or Springfield or Worcester or Acton or Groton or Lincoln or Concord and you have equal rights of access. Public charter schools in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts are truly "public" schools. The irony is that we are constantly barraged by the powers that be in the establishment, that we are not public. In fact, the reality is the other way around. That annoys me. It also annoys me that this issue of the socioeconomic segregation of American public education is nowhere on the political landscape. Nowhere. The neglect of this issue is bipartisan. It is no surprise: To face that issue would require considerable political courage, because the rich run this country and the rich don't want to hear it. That is a modest oversimplification, but only modest. Fine, if we are going to have a class-segregated school system, let's argue it, and if we want it in a democracy, let's have it. But let us not confuse a segregated school system with one that is truly public and pretend that you have the latter when, in fact, the former is the rule.

This word education, in virtually all public discussion; education is schooling. The fact of the matter is that most kids learn more outside of school than in it, even if they go to very powerful schools. The educating influences on children in an information-rich culture such as ours is stunning. All one has to do is to look at what the kids wear whether they are in Seattle or Miami, or Portland, Maine, or San Diego. They all look like walking unmade beds. Baggy pants, Michael Jordan shirts, the Nike whoosh. We learn more outside of school than inside school because the greatest system of truly public education this country has ever experienced is in the hands of the mass media. We can say, well, that's not serious schooling. And my argument would be, well, why shouldn't it be, then? The people own the airwaves. If we don't like what the airwaves are providing in the way of serious democratic education, let us take them back.

One cannot talk seriously about education reform without looking at the full cloth of how young people are socialized in this country. And if our objective is less to improve schools and more to learn up a thoughtful and reflective citizen, we have to look at the whole cloth. Again, the silence on that issue is deafening.

Third, and I have strung together some words which we hear often. Good words, strong words. We Americans want our young people to have free, inventive, and principled minds. Free, inventive, and principled minds. Wide agreement. People use different words. Basically Americans say each young person should be able to think for herself or himself. The capitalist system, at the least, and a wise culture beyond that, depends on imagination and invention, and a decent community cannot survive, particularly one as densely populated as ours, unless that community is made up of a sum of principled people. People will think hard about their actions. They will be able to, as a matter of habit, put themselves outside of

their own flesh and reflect upon the impact of what they think and do upon others. I find no one who seriously disagrees with this line of argument, which has been a staple, in a variety of different words, for 200 years.

But you look at the routine now in schools. One, being reinforced, is that the syllabi of schools are being imposed. That small groups of people, few of whom have been elected, decide what is of high standard, what is to be impressed upon the minds and hearts of kids. There is little value placed on invention. Marching to different drummers is cheekiness. You can't fit inventiveness into the rubrics of the examinations, and there is little discussion, beyond hyperventilating rhetoric, about principled lives. Our curricula are overstuffed, put together by special interest groups that present us with world history courses that arise with Cleopatra on the Nile and take us to Bill Clinton. The only way that you deal with this is through a pedagogy of delivery. Sit down, sit still, take out your pen, I'm going to talk fast. If you drop your pen, Andrew Jackson's had it. The whole matter is driven by a coinage of time. Two years is better than one year. Five classes a week shows a higher value placed on something than two classes a week. If one stands back and looks carefully at the routines, which are virtually unchallenged, in the way that high schools work, one comes away puzzled by whether we are serious in creating a citizenry that, as a matter of habit, is inventive, thinks for itself and is principled.

Which relates, in the fourth place, to words that are very much used. "Academic standards", now in current political example, is always preceded by one or both of two words: "tough" or "rigorous". You don't have academic standards, you have *tough, tough, tough.* That is, the word 'standards', unless qualified by 'tough' or 'rigorous', somehow is kind of namby-pamby. Then you reflect on what rigor might be, and it is certainly more than mere display. It is not enough that I can display a recollection of the Bill of Rights; rigor involves the powerful application of the language and meaning behind the language of the Bill of Rights. And further and ultimately, evidence that I understand them. Even though I and another may disagree in a clear sense on our understanding of the ideas behind those words. That's rigorous. God help us if the Americans have a population that can't do that.

That kind of rigor is not what we are talking about. All this fiery talk about high standards ignores what they really are. Much, indeed most, of the testing which is to hold all of us accountable denies the opportunity to display rigorous understanding. So in the name of rigor we are reinforcing nonrigor. Let me tell you, articulating that particular kvetch does not make me popular.

Fifth, there is wide belief that the heart of a school, in what it does, turns on great teachers. Not one or two—thousands of great teachers. People who can push in appropriate ways, child by child, the questions that ultimately will evoke deep understanding in those kids' minds and the habit of using that deep understanding for worthy ends. That's difficult work. That's what we all want. That is the rhetoric of the portion of this massive budget bill that we just passed that says we will spend the people's money to increase the teaching force by 100,000 teachers in the next five years. Strong people take jobs that entrust them with important things. If I am not entrusted with important things, that is, if I am not given the respect reflected by the obligations which I am expected to hold, I do not feel that I am given any trust. You want great teachers, you've got to give them running room. Right now most teachers in the public sector have very limited authority. People other than them decide what they will teach, decide how their students will be assessed, and will decide the nature of that assessment. Which means that I, the teacher, have control neither of what I will teach, to any general degree, and my performance will

have nothing to do with my judgment of student work of high quality. So teachers are defined as people who should be given very limited authority. Furthermore, the latest approach is that the way to improve teachers is to humiliate them. If you single them out, which is to say, not only do we have the strong suspicion that you are not great, we will, on our terms, make a judgment whether you're not great, and if you're not we will go public with that judgment. And furthermore, even if you are great, we won't pay you very much.

I've written three books with the word "Horace" in the title. Horace is a nonfiction fictional character called Horace Smith, which is a bad joke on Horace Mann. Horace Smith is actually four people that I met when I had several years, thanks to generous foundations, to wander among high schools and listen and watch. Horace Smith was this amalgam of wonderful people, people who gave a damn, people who were good scholars. In Horace Smith's case, he had a passion for the theater, and in his high school he gathered the theater buffs. The first book gives it away. It is called *Horace's Compromise.* The point of the matter is that a person of the integrity and ability of Horace Smith had to make all kinds of compromises because no one really trusted him. All of us have to compromise; compromise is a reality of life. The question is, which compromises, selected on which basis? If we want great teachers we are going have to trust them. Nothing very complicated about that. You want a bad medical system? Have some distant unelected board tell the doctors what to do. That's how to get a bad medical system.

The anger that one hears and feels in cities like this. I spent the day on the Lower East Side along with all the Yankees fans. Wonderful people, doing the work of the Lord. And feeling that yet another layer of stridently argued imposition of standardized solutions to complex matters is about to hit them. And you get this mixture (particularly with the young ones, and I spent my time with the young ones today, former students of mine from Brown) which is a kind of combination of gallows' humor and clever ferocity of how to get around it. So this game goes on. Shouldn't be that way. Mark my words, that of those fine young people with whom I had lunch, five of them, I bet only one will be in public school teaching in a big city within five years. And I know that all five would give their right arms to be in it for careers. Those young people are the rule, not the exceptions. And yet we talk about how America needs great teachers.

And the final word, "reform". Lots of talk, lots of use of it. It is re-form. That is form again, form anew, design anew. But what is most striking and most frustrating for those of us who've struggled with American high schools is the persistence of the old ways. Yeah. We're going to reform, but we're going to have grades. There's going to be ninth grade, tenth grade, eleventh grade, twelfth grade, and we're going to retain the hierarchical bureaucracy. You know, the superintendent will tell the assistant superintendent to tell the district superintendent to tell the principal to tell the department chair to tell you what to do.

Furthermore we are expected to engage in this reform, whatever it is, and the percent of the people's money spent in serious redesign is a pittance, which is a measure of the disinterest in reform. Gussying up and threatening the Model T does not make it go 60 miles an hour. See, I warned you this is a Friday night kvetch. It also is not just a game; I feel it deeply. I feel this way on Mondays, too. However, I take hope from it, paradoxically, because those who are, for whatever reason, in electoral politics or have high rank in the business community, or whatever, who have authority for the quality of American schools, are not stupid men or women. Nor are they men and women of weak faith—they give a damn. Therefore, why is it that some of these obvious matters remain relatively unaddressed? I am now convinced,

having listened and watched for 15 years at the high school level, it is this way because we are all confused, we don't know what to do.

Those in positions of authority who take the time to go into schools, attach themselves to a child, or to children, and to shadow those children over time sunup to sundown, will come away deeply troubled. Whether the child is from a middle-class family or a poor family, and yet we don't do anything about it, really. And the answer is we don't know what to do. And when you don't know what to do, you take the familiar and push it harder. And that is where we are. There is a failure of nerve that comes from confusion, honest confusion. In other fields, it is the great universities that lessen the confusion. By and large America's great universities have ignored the hard realities of serious learning of children in schools. There is an elaborate history connected with this. It is an understandable history but it explains, ultimately, why the university voices are so silent on this issue.

Secondly, and poignantly, I believe we are all frightened. We are scared of teenagers. We don't like them in the malls. It was fascinating, I was out in front of the East Side community high school waiting for a ride, which was 40 minutes late, as school was letting out. Kids tumbling out of this building. Oh, they were thoughtless, noisy, pushy, with these great big packs, and they'd turn and smack each other with the packs. Little old ladies, they'd smack them with the packs. Periodically a security officer would come out and say, shoo, shoo, shoo you've got to be on the other side of the street. And they'd give him some gas, and he'd go out and they'd cross the street and they'd say nyah, nyah, nyah and that was it. At one level they were shockingly selfish, thoughtless, boorish kids, and at another level it was high theater. One kid came up to me and said you waiting for somebody? I said, yeah. And he said I'll carry your bags, and he put his hand out like this. It was wonderful. I'm used to kids, or I'm used to most kids, and I wasn't frightened. But if you weren't used to kids, particularly kids of a different race, different language, that was scary stuff, that was a scary street. And that's why security people kept sweeping the street so the passersby wouldn't be frightened. There was no malice in any of these children. They were just being fifteen. We are scared of them, we don't know what to do. We are so scared of them we don't take them seriously. We don't dare take them seriously. We can't bring young people into a principled community and start by fearing them. You can't do it. Parents even are afraid of their adolescent children.

And finally, we seem to lack the collective civic will to do right. I know at one level it is a distorted and trivial comparison to make, but I'll still make it. In this city there are some magnificent school buildings. One has been restored—Julia Richmond High School—this extraordinary building with high ceilings and tiles, this grand auditorium, the cornices. That was a building of which the people were proud. That was a building where young women could get a serious education of which they and we would be proud. There was a kind of assurance behind that pride, maybe naive, but there was an assurance behind it. Reflect today where the great public monuments are and what they are about. The great public monuments are public, they are shopping malls, they are not churches, but shopping malls. What is the most interesting new architecture, is the creation of places that are unreal—Disney World. Or what, about two weeks ago, *The Times* Sunday newspaper called the work of an architect who created these whole places. One in Los Angeles was essentially hermetically sealed public places, but they all were driven by commerce. There is nothing wrong with commerce; it just is not the only thing.

What will it take to have the civic will to build the 1990s versions, yes, in bricks and mortar, but more importantly, as a signal of

commitment, the Julia Richmond High Schools of our time? I find all of this a source of hope. The dour person would say it is so bad it is good, but the contradictions in public discourse, the increasingly tense confrontations, all signal, I think, a growing opportunity for better ideas, coherent ideas. Ones that are rooted in carefully defined words can see the light of day.

Thank you very much.

Robert B. Wolf on Korzybski: Korzybski, who had ample opportunity to observe the destructive effects of commercial competition in Europe, concluded that human standards were but little above the animal standards and that the "survival of the fittest" naturally resulted. It was in the hope that he could find a fundamental distinction between the various classes of life that he began his research by studying the accumulated records of the past.

He first turned his attention to the lowest form of organic life, the vegetable, and very soon found its main function to be the storing up of solar energy. The vegetable organism, which does not move about but is attached to the earth, draws up through its roots the inorganic chemical substances from the earth and forms them into a cell in which the energy of the sun is confined. He therefore concluded that the function of the vegetable class of life is to "bind solar energy." Coal, for instance, is of vegetable origin, and in burning it we release sun power.

He next directed his attention to the records of animal life and at once noted that the outstanding thing which distinguished it from the vegetable is its freedom to move about in space. As all life proceeds by multiplication, i.e., geometrical progression, each species of animal life was soon in conflict with every other species. This animal characteristic of movement *in* space and occupation *of* space resulted, of course, in a struggle for self-preservation. This was especially true in an environment which stimulated rapid reproduction of the species. Darwin observed this when he enunciated the principle of the "survival of the fittest"—no two physical bodies can occupy the same space at the same time.

These observations led Korzybski to his second generalization, namely, that because of this fundamental faculty of movement in space, the animal was destined to increase its power of movement by its occupation of more space. The animal, he therefore concluded, was a "binding space" class of life.

Having concluded that the function of the vegetable was to "bind energy" and the animal to "bind space", he next turned his attention to the records of human activities. He soon realized that the outstanding characteristic which distinguishes the human being from the animal is its capacity to record past experiments, to make them available for future generations.

All of the world's great religions were based upon the recorded teachings of their founders. Our whole system of law is based upon past precedents recorded in our court proceedings, and modern science is primarily an accurate history of the results of past happenings in the organic and inorganic worlds. It is this recording of events in time which is a distinctly human faculty, and through it man becomes conscious of the operation of the principle of causation, for without this power of recalling past events man could not have come to a realization of the absolute unchangeableness of natural law.

This faculty of holding or fixing past events to make the knowledge of them a source of power for future generations is what Korzybski calls "binding time". His third generalization is that man is therefore a "binding time" class of life. The natural effect of this is that each succeeding generation of mankind is able to begin approximately where the preceding one left off, whereas in the animal world each succeeding generation is obliged to begin practically where the preceding one began.

The far-reaching effects of this new realization of human life are expressed by Korzybski in his conception of what human competition should be, namely, competition in time—"survival of the fittest"— yes; but in *time*, not in *space*.

Man, therefore, by the basic law of his nature, is compelled to work for posterity. The animal is conscious of only one dimension of time, the present—man alone consciously uses all three: past, present, and future. This is why real education, by means of the true presentation of the facts of the past, is the only cure for wars; also why humanity must resist any dogmatic attempt to keep the individual in ignorance. [From a discusion of Walter N. Polakov's paper, "Principles of Industrial Philosophy", in *Alfred Korzybski Collected Writings: 1920–1950*, p. 7.]