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Book Essay

Foreword to *Einstein and Zen: Learning to Learn* by Conrad P. Pritscher

By Carlo Ricci

What made Einstein such a brilliant Being? Are there ways that we can approach Einstein's brilliance? What are the implications of Einstein's thought for schools and society? What is the connection between Einstein and Zen and what can that mean for the rest of us? In this hopeful book Pritscher brilliantly gives us insights to help all of us approach the wisdom we have come to define as Einstein. Through what he calls Einsteinian mind openers, Pritscher shares with us what we can all do to strive to be like Einstein. The insights are a great and exciting gift for all of us who take the time to read this inspiring and life altering book. For this reason, this book is for educators but even more correct would be to say that this book is for everyone and anyone who wants to strive to be like Einstein or to help others understand how they too can strive to be like what has become synonymous with wisdom and genius: Einstein.

In a more holistic sense this book is about more than mind but also about empathy, compassion and kindness and so much more. Ultimately, the book offers all of us a better way to live by using Einstein and Zen as models of hope toward which we can and should all aspire. Why should we aspire toward this? Because "the community, to Einstein, is more important than the individual. It is posited that this benefit of the community rather than the individual is at the heart of "kind compassionate thought." And so, who would dare argue against a kinder, more compassionate world?

When Pritscher first asked me if I would be willing to write the preface I was thrilled to be asked and even more thrilled that Pritscher wrote another book about Einstein and education. As I was thinking about how to approach this I started to read the book and highlight the passages that resonated with me. After reading the first page it was clear that this method would not serve. As I stood back and looked at my computer screen it was all highlighted yellow. This is a testament to the richness in every thought in this book.

This is a book that needs to be read and then reread over and over to ponder and truly contemplate the remarkable implications of what is being said. For example, how wonderful and how different would the world be if only

this thought were taken seriously: "When students are free they study what is remarkable, interesting, and important for them." For me, in part, this line opens up the possibilities of non-oppressive spaces for young people where they are all free to explore what they value and are passionate about. The result is that young people can truly unfold their inner genius—all this richness from just the first few lines of the text.

One substantive issue that gets explored and really resonates with me is how do we open our minds? With respect to schooling the question becomes how we move from a schooling system that believes in an artificially contrived system that plans opportunities for discovery learning, to an educational system that truly implements open inquiry. I see this as a move beyond a progressive model to one that approaches a more learner centered model where students get to decide what, when, how and when they want to learn—a democratic system where students are truly empowered.

One way to think about this difference between a progressive Deweyan model and one that moves beyond that is to focus on what John Holt wrote,

John Dewey [talked] about "learning by doing." The way for students to learn (for example) how pottery is made is not to read about it in a book but to make pots. Well, OK, no doubt about its being better. But making pots just to learn how it is done still doesn't seem to me anywhere near as good as making pots (and learning from it) because *someone needs pots*. The incentive to learn how to do good work, and to do it, is surely much greater when you know that the work has to be done, that it is going to be of real use to someone.¹

This difference between Holt and Dewey makes it clear to me that Holt's authentic and genuine need to make pots results in greater control, freedom and benefit to the community at large which is, in part, what Pritscher is getting us to think about. As well, as Pritscher correctly points out, "There is a different quality to the inquiry concerning a topic or question if the inquiry is assigned by the teacher rather than a question or discrepancy chosen by the learner."

This book gets us to rethink a lot of things including schooling. We need a revolution in schooling such that schools go from being merely places where individuals get trained to places where schools become centers of education. We need to take seriously the notion of the plasticity of the mind,

realizing that there is no critical period for learning; in fact, the best time to learn anything is not when some external agent decides it is best for someone to learn it, but when the individual hungers for that knowledge. Take, for example, reading. Schools believe that children need to learn to read early and the earlier the better. My research around reading finds that there are other ways. Free schools and unschoolers or natural learners do not teach reading, so children do not learn to read at standard times. The result, they all learn to read when they are ready and they enjoy reading because reading is something they have decided to do and not something that has been imposed on them by force.

We need a revolution in schooling whereby schools go from being merely places where individuals get trained to places where schools become centers of education.

On this point, John Taylor Gatto writes about students at the Sudbury Valley free school, "In thirty years of operation, Sudbury Valley has never had a single kid who didn't learn to read...So Sudbury doesn't even teach reading yet all its kids learn to read and even like reading. What could be going on there that we don't understand?"²

There are as many ways to learn to read as there are people learning to read and as soon as a standard formula or definition of how to learn to read gets imposed then those who struggle within that definition are disadvantaged and, even worse, labeled as having deficits that belong to them when in reality the deficits belong to the definition. As well, reading is not limited to a canon, but all reading is reading. Furthermore, there is already technology that favors speech and listening to writing and reading, and perhaps in the near future historians may be talking about tools that people called pens that they used to write on paper and then they were replaced by computer screens and keyboards and who knows what else. They will tell their young that books on devices that read them to us and computers that write what we speak are relatively new in our history.

What I have related is not fiction but current reality in its infancy; namely, there are devices that reads aloud to us whatever is on its screen and writes whatever is spoken to it. In a personal experiment I have converted my laptop to do just this and was amazed at the results and simplicity of it all. My point is that what we take as so fundamental and unchallenging in our own time may be replaced in another

resulting in a whole different set of skills and groups of people being valued and by extension devalued. To combat this we need to heed Pritscher's words and ensure that kindness, compassion and love reign, which would result in everyone being valued and cared for.

In conclusion, Pritscher writes, "If one notices one is primarily 'trained,' that awareness can be an enormous step in one's becoming educated." This book helps us move beyond a training system and into a system where we can become educated.

NOTES

1. John Holt, *Growing Without Schooling: A Record of a Grassroots Movement (Vol. 1) August 1977-December 1979 GWS #1-12*. Cambridge, MA: Holt Associates Inc., 1999, p. 121.

2. John T. Gatto, *The Underground History of American Education: An Intimate Investigation into the Prison of Modern Schooling* (Rev. ed.). New York: Oxford Village Press, 2003, p. 58.

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