

THE HARD ROAD TO SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN INTERVIEW WITH HERBERT KOHL

As I wound my way up California Highway 1 to Point Arena to visit with Herbert Kohl, I was repeatedly reminded of the dramatic context of my meeting with an educator I greatly admired for his personal and political courage. The Rodney King incident had just taken place and the radio nearly blared with reports from riot-torn Los Angeles. I couldn't help but think that our meeting would be heavily tainted by the latest example of the struggle for social and economic justice in this country.

I recalled the lyrics to a 1960s folk song that elucidated, for me, the hardships and hopes of this ongoing battle that Kohl and others had so courageously engaged in:

The trail is hot and dusty:

the road is kind of rough,

but the good road is a

waiting and boys its not

far off (Dylan, 1964).

As I arrived at the Point Arena compound of Judith and Herbert Kohl, I was immediately struck by its rustic beauty and comfortable atmosphere. Herbert welcomed me into his office, a cozy potpourri of books, reference material and personal toys.

Kohl is a vigorous, active man. He chooses his words attentively as if he is crafting them by hand. He seems to have the utmost respect for their power and their beauty. Kohl is at once up and about, almost agitated as he elaborates his points. He is, after all, the man who William Bennett called a romantic and a kook. Kohl cheerfully admits to the former and seems particularly amused by the latter.

Succinctly, Herbert Kohl is an educator and a human being who always operates in the context of political activism and the pursuit of social and economic justice. He views public schooling as an essential tool in this quest. We begin the interview with what we both agree is the big question:

Posner: Can we save public education in this country? What can we do to prevent the invasion of the private sector?

Kohl: My feeling is: the question is not can we save public education? but can we save democracy?. Its like Bush saying were going to privatize the bridges and the highways. We can go back to toll roads and that would be like going back one hundred or one hundred and fifty years to a time when our society was even more fractious than it is right now.

We have to save public education! The difficulty is that no one can predict right now. For example, how can we predict the outcome of the Rodney King trial when the evidence is staring you in the face? We cant do our work predicated on succeeding. Whether we can save public education or not depends on how hard we struggle, how widely we can reach people, how eloquent and truthful we can be about showing the reasons to save it and whether we can resist the rather nasty and well-funded opposition we have to face. In fact, I have reached the point in my life where I don't make a struggle because I can win or even conceive of or imagine a victory, but because it is consistent with the principles upon which I base my life as a person and my work as an educator.

So the answer is: we have to do everything we can to save public education. However, we have been our own worst enemies for years. Teachers unions have been notoriously reticent in criticizing the worst practices in the public schools. Salaries and money have been constantly exchanged for control over the nature of education. In fact, teachers organizations have suffered from the same problems that many unions have had such as not focusing on the fact that ones best bargaining position comes from doing good work. So it is my feeling that one of the biggest problems in public education is that teachers and teachers unions have been too quiet about each other, have never managed to say it is our responsibility to show that our work is good enough to be supported by the public. If we don't show this kind of responsibility for the quality of our work, we may very well lose our struggle to preserve public education.

The point is that there are those of us who believe that the goal of education is to privilege all of the children and to "deprivilege" all of the adults who try to prevent [this] from happening. And we have to make this struggle within our own schools and within our own institutions. It seems to me that that's where the internal battle has to be engaged. We have to take on the political and social forces of education. If we don't take them on, we are going to drown. I think the only way that democratic education will survive (and that means public schools) is by having teachers seize the occasion and opportunity to confront the conservative and somewhat ossified institutions that they have created.

I would say that right now there is only one way we can remake public schools; that is, we have to make them welcoming and beautiful places. We have to spend as much money on schooling as we do on the Stealth Bomber. What we have to do is to buy all the resources necessary and give everyone the maximum number of chances to learn in ways in which they choose to learn.

Posner: How about the state of the teaching profession in the public schools today? Do you see good things happening in spite of the systemic problems?

Kohl: I would like to say (very strongly, by the way) that I see more interesting things going on in the public schools now and more committed, fine caring people within the context of public education than ever in the course of my career. They are embattled but, wherever you go, there are wonderful teachers...who have been forced to take some kind of position, who are staying in the profession because they feel they can make a difference in their students lives...I also think there is a little more intelligence today about what you teach...I see more people beginning to think more of the substance and content of teaching. Right now you will find a lot of teachers who are interested in building the content of learning and also in incorporating the social and moral content of students lives into what they teach. This is very important right now because we have become such a polarized society...All kids are coming to the schools feeling under siege in some way...and we must respond to the content and substance of the situations of learning and how these things fit together.

Posner: How about the question of choice? There is some strong feeling among public school educators that the private sector is trying to co-opt the idea of choice in order to disguise their real agenda of an at-large voucher system. How do you feel about this important issue?

Kohl: This is a very important question. Not only have they co-opted the choice issue, but they have put people on the road to talk about public school choice in order to create the notion of choice and allow for them to come behind these people to enact total privatization... [these educators] are being used for a right-wing agenda and are being funded accordingly.

I do believe that the notion of diversity in the public school system is an absolute and unambiguous necessity. I also believe that teachers should really have the ability... to develop curriculum, to control pedagogical style, to formulate a school or a concept or a way of learning. I believe that parents should have

real shopping lists of schools within the public context where they can go someplace comfortable for them and their children.

I must add that I feel that none of these choice schools can be racially exclusive or restrictive on the basis of class. And all of them have to deal with the compromises of building an imperfect education in a world where opportunity and the distribution of wealth is unequal. Therefore the search for an ideal school for your child is foolish. [As a parent] you want the best possible situation in which your child can have the maximum opportunity to be a fully effective adult in his culture. That means that if you are poor you need your kid to be in a school where her or his culture is respected, where she or he is among enough of their peers not to be a totally marginalized person, at the same time that there is enough contact with the people who have power so that students know how to both maintain their integrity and become mobile...Kids need to be with kids who are equal to them but different from them. So we need schools that are very different but the differences [should deal] with pedagogical style, the content of what is learned or the specializations and opportunities we provide for kids. You may have a performance oriented context, a technologically oriented one or just general schools in which some are more conventional than others while others are more informal in their approach.

In the end however, we need these schools to pay attention to equity issues. This is essential. Not only that, but the teaching of equity should be central to every school. So what we need is not only multi-cultural and gender-fair education but also anti-racist and anti-sexist education.

Posner: What are some other essential elements that you would want to see in these public schools of choice?

Kohl: Joy and pleasure! I would say that there is a major defect in the way in which people talk about children in the schools these days. Everything is talked about in industrial terms, time on task...technological stuff. Children need to be children! So a common thread [among these schools] would be the ordinariness of dance, music, the visual arts, of theater and rhetoric. The common thread would be the expressive arts. Everyone would be engaged in art as something they simply do.

Another common theme would be a global perspective...cross-cultural communication...how you learn to speak to someone who is not like you without having to take an attitude. There should also be a deep understanding that diversity means enrichment and that race and gender should not function as limits on possibility. Simply put, the struggle against stupidity is the overriding concern of decent education.

Posner: If, as Paulo Freire contends, any educational system primarily reflects the interests and values of those who hold wealth and power in a given society, how can we hope to change the educational system before we change the political system?

Kohl: You cant give up because the system isnxt you. Freire is saying the system is overwhelmingly trying to reproduce the culture as it is. But that doesnxt mean it has to. And it doesnxt mean you shouldnxt try to do what you can, to the degree which you can, within that system to transform it. You have to function on the principle of hope, that you might make a difference...I would say that the first job [for a teacher who wants to become active in the change process] is to seek friendship, allies and nurturing from other educators who, under similar circumstances, are doing creative things.

Posner: How about our responsibility to confront the system?

Kohl: ...The question is: when, what, how and over what? If you want to confront [the system] over your own personal dissatisfaction; its not worth it. If you want to confront because you have built a program that the system is trying to kill and you and other people are defending it, its certainly worth something. If you

want to confront them about the possibility of creating a school of choice within a district that has no choice, it is worth building community to make the confrontation. So, its not a question of whether you confront or not; but of how, what and whatxs at stake. The problem is that confrontation should never be personal; it should be collective...if you are not part of a collective , then before the confrontation, your goal should be to make yourself part of one to whatever degree you can.

Our conversation went on and touched on other areas such as teacher education and the role of the teacher in todayxs world. Kohl infused each point with his sense of political consciousness, sense of humor and ,of course, his dedication to social justice and moral courage. As I left the Point Arena compound, my arms and mind filled with the various gifts that Herbert Kohl gave me, I finally recalled the next verse of the folk song that had been rambling around my head:

Trails of troubles, roads of battles

Paths of victories we shall walk. (Dylan, 1964)

Once again it reminded me that the struggle continues and that the road goes on and ,finally, that people like Herbert Kohl will never give up.