



The Creation of Conscious Culture through Educational Innovation

by Michael Strong

“The one essential thing is that we strive to have light in ourselves. Our strivings will be recognized by others, and when people have light in themselves, it will shine out from them. Then we get to know each other as we walk together in the darkness, without needing to pass our hands over each other’s faces, or to intrude into each other’s hearts.”

Albert Schweitzer, from Rabbi Greenberg’s “The Art of Living”

A Practical Approach to an Idealistic New Social Vision

There is a large market for books and workshops on how to live a better life. The *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series and Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* series are but two well-known examples. They have each become small industries in their own right; during a period in the late 90s a list of the top-selling 100 books of the year contained several volumes from each series; more than half the books overall were either inspirational or self-help. M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled* has been on *The New York Times* bestseller list for longer than any other paperback. Apparently people crave guidance.

Many people, perhaps most people, would like to become more successful at “the art of living.” Although individuals may receive inspiration from quotations, inspirational speeches, religious sermons, works of art, or nature, very few individuals are able to learn the art of living from any of them. They must be provided with experiences in which an inspiring approach to life is constantly supported and re-enforced. This is why many churches place emphasis on “fellowship.” It is very difficult for us to create better lives for ourselves in isolation. We usually need peer communities to support our practice of the good, of wellness, of excellence, however we perceive such goals.

Beyond the genetic component, human beings become who they become based on the daily, moment-to-moment, manner in which they live. They learn, or fail to learn, the art of living from those around them. Although there are universities that study education and human development, schools that follow government rules, and churches and secular organizations that promote spiritual ideals, there are no institutions that allow for the ongoing practical development and implementation of better ways of living. Schools at present are mostly institutions in which young people learn the worse ways of living. We need to allow for the growth of a new species of institution in which better ways of living may be developed and transmitted to our young.

Reformers have long recognized that “education” is the solution to our problems. What has not been generally recognized is the equivocal nature of the term “education.” Exhortative billboards and worksheets on self-esteem do not change habits and appetites, norms and attitudes. Inspiring, healthy adults who build real mentoring relationships with the young people they supervise, and who work together as a team to impart the practices of a coherent culture can make a significant difference. In the absence of government schools and government teacher training (i.e. training through state-accredited schools of education mandated by state licensure laws), our society would have evolved institutions devoted to the practical development, implementation, and continual improvement of better ways of living. “Teacher training” would have developed along a path quite different from what it is today, much more closely aligned with the optimization of human potential. “Schools” would be unimaginably different from what they are today, much more closely aligned with the fulfillment of those human needs that would allow for the optimization of human potential.

My original goal as an educator was to increase intellectual performance; I had cohorts of students who gained twice and three times the national average annual gains on the SAT, and developed a charter school at which, in only two years, we had the highest percentage of students taking AP courses of any public high school in New Mexico. But even to create superb intellectual gains, I realized that the ultimate answer lay in changing peer culture to be supportive of learning rather than hostile to learning. This is especially critical if one wants to improve intellectual performance among cultural groups that are not already performing well academically. In order for a school to make a consistent, comprehensive push towards changing a peer culture, the school director needs the freedom to focus directly on those variables that determine patterns of peer interactions.

When I directed a charter school my employer, the government, judged my work strictly by whether or not I hired credentialed teachers, whether or not my students scored well on certain standardized exams (exams which were not aligned with authentic learning), whether or not I followed the state procurement code (they actually specified the number of purchase orders allowed in each file folder); and other such trivia. The lawmakers who established these laws were not bad people. The state

employees who enforce these laws are not bad people. The thousands of school administrators for whom compliance with the law is the primary focus are not bad people. And yet the strictures with which the law forces us to comply are at best very partial and misguided. A busy administrator soon finds most, if not all, of his or her energy consumed by compliance with dictates that utterly fail to reflect human needs and reality. It is not possible to raise young people well by means of general rules passed in the form of laws or bureaucratic decisions by far away legislatures and state boards of education. It is not possible to make the many thousands of adjustments, for particular individuals, particular circumstances, and in a world of pervasive change, while adhering to many strata of inconsistent laws and regulations.

By means of such well-intentioned compliance with well-intentioned enforcement of well-intentioned laws, over many decades of “public” education, we have reached a horribly inhuman situation in

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which young human life is systematically distorted and starved for meaning and inspiration. These distortions and starvations, in K-12 education, contribute to much of the dysfunction of our society. Compulsory mass public education, in the last 100 years or so, replaced individual human discernment of what the young human spirit needs with a bureaucratic system that has been utterly blind to the needs of the human spirit. We have pre-empted and then betrayed our deepest instincts,

and we need to re-discover how to raise our young so that they may be happy and well in the chaotic world of never-ending change in which we find ourselves.

Creativity and the freedom to use it have given more people better, healthier, and more fulfilled lives than we realize. The tragedy of modern times is that the most powerful system for developing and disseminating ever more sophisticated products and services, the free market, has not yet been applied to educating our young.

Many believe that free markets are hostile to human potential and fundamentally undermine its development. What they don't realize is that their assessment is correct only because we have not allowed a market in education to form. Connotations of the term "free market" imply commercialism and consumerism because our current schools are utterly incapable of training appetites. Young people are completely vulnerable to marketing; a course in "media awareness" does not change the fact that young people today crave the kinds of stimulation that existing markets provide for them. The only way to change the vulnerability of young people to marketing is to cultivate their more valuable preferences, and to surround them by a peer culture that supports such preferences.

Perhaps few parents or students will initially choose schools that develop the human spirit. But if you believe, as do I, that there are marvellous aspects of life that are being lost to contemporary young people because of the avalanche of creative destruction that has been let loose upon our culture, then perhaps I can persuade you that educators will be able to market the foundations for deep wellness to both parents and young people. The latent demand for education that satisfies the human spirit is enormous. In such a world, "sales" and "marketing" will have profoundly different connotations than they do now. Instead of being inundated solely with marketing which appeals to our most shallow impulses, we will increasingly find ourselves in a world in which competing visions of well-being are put forward in tantalizing fashion.

The stage at which we now find ourselves is one in which the most important lesson the young need to learn, at every age, is how to live. We need experts on life, integrity, wellness, humor, kindness, love, accepting grace, finding courage, and on being human. We need model human beings who can create new, better ways of living together. We need artists of life who can blend together the astonishingly different cultural patterns, old and new, to create teen cultures devoted to new forms of human adventure, beyond violence, manipulative and casual sex, bigotry, social cruelty, drugs, whining, self-righteousness, laziness, vanity, and self-indulgence.

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We are now at a stage where what is needed is not merely a matter of teaching algebra or grammar or historical facts. It is increasingly the case that the duller parts of academic disciplines may be taught by means of computers. Increasingly human educators will specialize in uniquely human abilities, those skills, habits, attitudes, and norms that technology cannot transmit.

We need schools based on love. We need schools at which people passionately love what they are doing, love what they are teaching, love what they are learning, where teachers love their colleagues, students love their teachers, teachers love their students, parents love the school, where everyone is joined by a passionate vision of excellence and human flourishing. Such schools cannot be mandated or created by force. They must be freely chosen by all parties involved.

If people knew that they could do what they love, and share what they love with others, even at a modest salary, they would be crawling out of the woodwork to practice their artistry. We have entered the age of meaning. Now that most of us has had our basic needs for food, lodging, and security met, we long more than anything else to make a meaningful contribution to society. Exercising our creative powers by means of sharing our individual uniqueness and brilliance with the young is far more satisfying than shopping or parties or gambling or doing most of the other wasteful things that so many people spend so much time doing.

In a world of educational freedom, parents, students, and educators will choose those educational communities that they love, communities that are based on love. As a consequence of allowing love into the world of K-12 education, on a grand scale, we will gradually begin to introduce love into the adult world on an even grander scale.

The Challenges We Face

Although a percentage of the high school population is working hard in order to get into competitive colleges (perhaps 20-30%), the vast majority of high school students are devoting only a small fraction of their intellectual and moral energies towards learning. For most middle and high school students, school is a social activity, a kind of game in which the goal is to obtain adequate grades while doing as little real learning as possible. The number of hours and dollars wasted, the human energy wasted, is colossal. No sector of our society has such potential for improvement.

Most professional adults, who themselves worked reasonably hard in school and were reasonably polite (they were almost invariably among the 30% who actually worked in school), are shocked when they first teach contemporary students. The level of apathy and indifference to learning—the disrespect for authority—is astounding. Anyone who doubts this should substitute teach a few courses (outside the honors track) in a local government high school for a week.

Adolescence in America is largely a disaster. Bill McKibben, the environmentalist writer and advocate of natural living, is as harsh as any fundamentalist parent: “If one had set out to create a culture purposefully damaging to children, you couldn’t do much better than America at the end of the 20th century.” Patricia Hersch, in a book titled *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence*, states: “All parents feel an ominous sense—like distant rumbles of thunder moving closer and closer—that even their child could be caught in the deluge of adolescent dysfunction sweeping the nation.” According to a *USA Today* poll, although 75% of American parents say they have taken steps to shield their children from outside influences deemed undesirable, 73% concede that limiting children’s exposure to popular culture is “nearly impossible.” “Professional wrestling” is the most popular television show among adolescent males. Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia* makes the case that contemporary teen culture amounts to an assault on teen girls: “America today is a girl-destroying place.” Students across America acknowledge that the viciousness of high school cliques and hierarchies could lead to another Columbine massacre anywhere.

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The obvious power of teen culture to shape human lives has only recently been re-recognized. We were much wiser in the 19th century. Emerson summed it up: “I pay the schoolmaster, but it is the schoolboys that educate my son.” More recently, Judith Rich Harris, in *The Nurture Assumption*, has shown that the majority of psychological research suggests that peers have a greater influence over young people than do parents: “In the long run it isn’t the home environment that makes the difference. It is the environment shared by children. It is the culture created by these children.”

The pervasive power of peer influence is most problematic with respect to negative behaviors:

“Research has shown that the best predictor of whether a teenager will smoke is whether her friends smoke. This is a better predictor than whether her parents smoke. Teenagers who smoke are also more likely to engage in other kinds of “problem behavior”: to drink, to use illegal drugs, to become sexually active at an early age, to cut classes or drop out of school, to break laws. They belong to peer groups in which such behaviors are considered normal.”

As a consequence, “Telling teenagers about the health risks of smoking...is useless.” The only way to affect teen behavior is to change the nature of peer culture. An educational approach that intervened in peer culture, instead of futilely talking at kids, is the only approach that is worth being described as “an investment.”

John Taylor Gatto, twice named New York State Teacher of the Year, describes conventional K-12 education as thirteen years’ training in passivity and dependence, meaninglessness and incoherence. Existing K-12 education largely consists of experiential indoctrination in the lesson that learning is boring, humiliating, and meaningless, and that therefore the only rewards in life come from intense stimulations. Appetites for community, spirituality, art, and nature are systematically stunted in our young people in the first 18 years of their lives. As adult consumers, they then go on to create the society in which we live.

Around the world, human beings living together in a common culture is being replaced by individual daily experiences of flashy, stimulating, electronic sounds and images. Electronic stimulation is becoming increasingly potent and seductive. Technology will continue to develop ever more compelling television and video, computer and video games, musical stimulation, and virtual reality. The gaming world is now a bigger industry, by revenue, than the motion picture industry, and it caters to a narrower demographic than does the motion picture industry—mostly young males. One of the best-selling computer games in recent years, *Grand Theft Auto*, includes an option whereby teenage

boys can hire a prostitute, avail themselves of her services, and then murder her. Killing human beings is a common gaming option. We should be concerned about the ever-increasing realism of such gaming experiences and the hours of saturation and the consequent tastes and appetites formed among young boys.

Transformative Cultures as a Solution to Public Health and Environmental Problems

The costs of a world in which short-term stimulations are more satisfying than long-term virtues is already immense, arguably on the order of \$1 trillion per year in the U.S. alone. The leading causes of death in the United States are heart disease, cancer, stroke, respiratory disease, and accidents. The rate of incidence of each of these is heavily influenced by lifestyle factors. If we could develop and transmit an improved “cultural technology”, it would reduce death, disease, and their associated costs at a much greater rate than is possible by means of improved medical technology. A culturally-reinforced habituation education will be more powerful than a public health campaign to eat less fat and sugar. The National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention claims that 75% percentage of our \$1.4 trillion in health care costs goes towards the treatment of chronic diseases, all of which are largely preventable by means of lifestyle factors. This figure does not even include costs associated with accidents, which are also influenced by lifestyle factors. One estimate of automobile accidents alone for 1990 was \$362 billion.

In addition to chronic diseases and accidents, addictive behaviors are among our most intractable social problems. The American Council on Science and Health puts the costs of social addictions to alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs at \$241 billion. People with healthy relationships and healthy habits, who are surrounded by others who live healthier lives, and who are engaged in meaningful work in a meaningful community are less likely to take up addictions. A public health campaign on billboards is a weak substitute for a culture which supports well-being. Expensive addiction treatment centers

after the addiction has taken hold are a terrible substitute for a healthy culture. People who learn the art of living while young will harm society, and themselves, less.

Our existing medical system is not effective at transmitting techniques for reducing stress, changing diet, and improving physical fitness. Indeed, there are financial and institutional incentives that will continue to result in an emphasis on a “drugs and surgery” approach for many decades rather than a transition to a more holistic wellness approach. Schools, where children’s habits and attitudes may be developed for 13 years in a row, is the ideal environment in which to cultivate wellness. Yet existing schools are, for the most part, even worse than our existing medical system when it comes to cultivating wellness. Often well-raised young people learn bad habits at school.

At present there are differential insurance rates for smokers vs. non-smokers. I envision a world of competing brands of educational programs with competing approaches to learning and wellness (like the tiny, amateurish Montessori and Waldorf movements but with billions of investment capital and diverse types of extraordinary human talent committed to their development and implementation). If certain brands of schooling reliably graduated individuals with healthier habits, graduates of such programs might be eligible for lower insurance rates. With financial incentives combining with parental interest in their children’s well-being, all guided by cutting-edge zealots for healthier ways of living, gradually one can imagine a society with significantly fewer health problems and much lower health costs. Preventative medicine could become a reality.

Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) provide a case study of the “public health” benefits resulting from involvement in a particular culture. The Mormons have created a distinctive culture with remarkable health and welfare benefits. Utah, where 70% of the population are Mormon, has the lowest, or near the lowest, rates of smoking, lung cancer, heart disease, alcohol consumption, abortions, out-of-wedlock births, work-days missed due to illness, and the lowest child poverty rate in the country. Utah ranks highest in the nation in number of AP tests taken, number of AP tests passed,

scientists produced per capita, percentage of households with personal computers, and proportion of income given to charity.

But we don't have to convert to Mormonism in order to obtain these benefits. In a diverse educational market, secular humanists, new age spiritual educators, and traditional religious educators will all develop better ways of cultivating habits of wellness due to innovations in enculturation technology.

At present we spend approximately \$430 billion on a K-12 educational system that is not only ineffective with respect to academic content, but is also ineffective with respect to inculcating good habits. What if, deployed by means of educational vouchers, that \$430 billion saved our society between \$500 billion to \$1 trillion in health care, lost productivity, and accidental damage costs? These figures don't include the human costs associated with rape, child and spousal abuse, unwanted pregnancies, and other features of contemporary human life that might be reduced by healthy enculturating educations.

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Many environmentalists are against "economic growth" because they perceive economic growth to be necessarily a matter of increased use of natural resources. But under the right circumstances human beings have a greater appetite for achieving their human potential than they do for endless material aggrandizement. "Economic growth" could just as well mean additional demand for art,

music, spirituality, and community rather than for gambling, pornography, intoxicants, and status goods. We can create schools that dramatically shift preferences towards those things that we perceive as good, but we will need a lot more freedom in order to do so.

There are unlimited realms of human development with respect to body, mind, and spirit. We could spend lifetimes exploring various practices and disciplines without ever watching television or going to the mall. If we develop these traits in our young people, human growth and economic growth will occur together in an environmentally sound and renewable way. If schools provided meaningful, enculturating educations that provided young people with profound well-being, many of the concerns of environmentalists would be ameliorated more than they realize. This approach is more effective than preachy “environmental” education. As long as young people have the appetites that they do, enforced by the status hierarchies of existing peer culture, then all the environmentalist preaching in the world will remain impotent.

None of the current outcomes in our system are necessary outcomes. Teens from all social classes can be polite, motivated, and well-educated. Teenage males can treat teenage females respectfully. Teens do not have to be racist, cruel, or addle their minds with drugs and alcohol for recreation. Teens do not have to graduate from high school illiterate and lacking basic workplace skills. All teen pathologies are entirely preventable and unnecessary. A steadily increasing percentage of teens, and subsequently adults, could have the opportunity to be healthy, well, whole human beings.

There are precedents for deliberately changing the culture of student populations. Philippe Aries' *Centuries of Childhood* reports how the Medieval Jesuits deliberately marginalized hooliganism and how Mormons have deliberately created a more successful and healthy religious sub-culture, other groups can create more successful sub-cultures of their own. Over time, they would learn much from each other, and hybrids would develop. The human race would learn a terrific amount about how to create well-being deliberately.

Skeptics may find the analogy between traditional or religious cultures, such as Jewish or Mormon cultures, and “classroom cultures” implausible. Given the current state of affairs, the analogy is implausible. My point, however, is that habits, attitudes, appetites and norms are important to education; that because of this a free market that allowed for the deliberate development of habits, attitudes, appetites, and norms would flourish due to parents’ ongoing interest in improving their children’s well being; and that in a free market, an innovation dynamic would develop that would eventually have highly beneficial results. Eventually the results would be far more positive than we can currently imagine, just as the results of today’s technology would astound our ancestors.

In 1930, almost all of the technology we use today would have seemed implausible. Since then many thousands of bright, creative, focused, practical individuals have created technological wonders—and this result is due to the fact that most of the activity took place in a free market. Silicon Valley was created from math, sand, and freedom. The Soviet Union had the best mathematicians, plenty of sand, but no freedom. And by the mid-1980s a decent U.S. university had more computing power than did the entire Soviet Union. This may be regarded as a parable with profound implications for our educational system.

A Market in Cultural Innovation to Help the Poor

The poor are particularly harmed by the lack of a market in education in a world characterized by cultural erosion. The upper classes can afford to either protect their children from cultural erosion by means of private school or a public school in upscale neighborhoods. If this fails, they can more readily remedy the problems after the fact by means of therapies, detox centers, vacations, lessons, plastic surgery, retreats, spas, and a thousand other options available to those who can pay. The poor, however, are often simply the victims of cultural erosion, and a poor parent has little recourse when her child’s well-being has been undermined.

Our existing educational system is designed to support education as training and/or curriculum coverage. It is not designed to support education as enculturation. Insofar as professional success in the 21st century depends on the development of critical thinking skills and intellectuality, the traits of innovation and entrepreneurial initiative, and mastery of upper-middle class social norms, enculturation is the crucial species of education for social mobility. Young people from households or cultures in which these cultural traits are not already developed will be systematically excluded from the professional classes as long as we continue our existing public school system.

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The greatest benefits of educational innovation will be a system for distributing cultural wealth and well-being as effectively as the market has distributed technological wealth so far. Televisions and radios, refrigerators and washing machines, cell phones and pagers, have all become cheap and ubiquitous even among the poor. Why haven't we created a society in which thrift, industriousness, intellectual curiosity, academic focus, self-discipline, respect, and courtesy are equally cheap and ubiquitous? K-12 education ought to be the leading vector for transmitting good habits from one generation to the next, and for adapting new norms and habits to the times. Instead of creating institutions for the transmission of the best cultural habits, our schools have suffered from cultural wars which have deracinated any set of common norms from "public" schools. This has resulted in

K-12 education that teaches young people not to abide by any set of norms whatsoever, except those spontaneously developed by pop culture and peers.

Insofar as the goal of education is the transmission of culture, direct contact with humans who know how to live is crucial. Although innovations in educational technology may help teach the academic component of education, innovations in the human element of education are the only means by which we will be able to make a fundamental difference in the lives of the poor. I say this as someone with solid roots in the working class, someone who has seen some members of my family flourish due to positive habits and attitudes and other members of my family experience misery due to negative habits and attitudes. Based on the dozens of members of my own extended family whose lives I've observed, as well as the hundreds of children of various social classes whom I've educated, day-to-day intellectual and emotional habits are the real key to social mobility. And, as an educator who specializes in the development of new intellectual and emotional habits by means of the creation of new classroom cultures, I know that all young people can develop the habits needed for success.

The system of K-12 education that has been established in this country was a reasonably effective system for educating upper-middle class students one hundred years ago. If a student had been raised with the cultural norms of the upper-middle class, then training in biology, chemistry, grammar, history, etc. might have been an efficient use of time in order to prepare him for entrance into college at the time. Since then, generations of students have wasted time that might have more productively been spent in other activities. Instead of learning biology or grammar in a context in which initiative and intellectual independence was destroyed, they could have been learning initiative and intellectual independence first and foremost, or frugality and industriousness, or emotional awareness and teamwork, or some other combination of more valuable personal traits.

Anyone who saves and invests \$2 per day from the age of 15 years old to the age of 70 in an index fund will, at long-term average rates of equity return (9%), become a multi-millionaire. Is it utopian

to imagine that, if there were schools that provided deep habituation in frugality and industriousness, in our economy today every impoverished student could create a multi-million dollar fortune. Unlike welfare or other stop-gap measures, such transference of the technology of success to the poor could eliminate poverty permanently. Moreover, only a generation ago such norms of frugality and industriousness were common. They still are among many people from the developing world.

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Because human beings are so varied, with different cultural backgrounds and different personal characteristics, we need vastly more variety in education to optimize future success for the underprivileged. Given the freedom, we will eventually develop forms of education that are remarkably different from what we see at present. Some need training in manners, some in “how to win friends and influence people,” some in frugality and investment, some need education as emotional therapy, some need to find themselves, etc. In a market, these and other forms of education will be integrated seamlessly into formidably effective, holistic human development programs that will allow for far more social mobility than exists now.

Success in our society is not simply a matter of academic achievement. A complex constellation of characteristics are required for success, most of which are not cultivated by existing schools. Although there are some students who fail because they do not learn academics, there are other students who do learn academics and still do not succeed in life. Our present approach does not begin to provide every child with what he or she really needs to succeed in life. Insofar as it claims to do so, the system is telling a lie.

The Idea of Cultural Innovation

Cultural innovation is constantly taking place. Every new song, book, video, movie, game, communication device, software package, home design, bathtub, tattoo, zoo, museum, car, vacation, map, corporation, spiritual practice, parenting practice, marital therapy, food, diet, exercise, sporting equipment, and so forth has some impact on culture. The notion that we should not seek to innovate culturally is absurd. It is happening all around us at an ever-increasing pace. The question is “Do we allow cultural innovation to take place in every realm of life except education, or do also allow a world in which educators may consciously, deliberately learn how to provide better ways of life?”

A century and more ago people talked about “formative education” or “the education of character” which was understood to be the deliberate effort to provide young people with the internal stability required to live well. The model that I have described is as true to traditional “formative” education, which only survives at some military and religious schools, as it is to “transformative” education. Although my goals as an educator are different from the goals of these schools, the cultural traditions of which these schools are an integrated component are rightly attentive to such currently neglected aspects of education such as heroes, ideals, music, manners, and attitudes.

Most contemporary education neglects these details. The extraordinary human phenomena resulting from the development of Spartan discipline or Buddhist awareness would never have occurred as a consequence of a contemporary American education. Although traditional education and traditional culture was flawed, the holistic cultural approaches used in traditional cultures should not have been left behind by modernity. The same kinds of approaches that have been used in traditional cultures for centuries can be adapted and innovated for greater human well-being going forward into the future.

Gradually, distinctive new cultures will develop reputations as a market develops in which parents need more information to understand which school model is best for each of their children. Just as *Car and Driver* and *PC User* magazines provide detailed, opinionated analysis of their respective

products, so too will education magazines arise that will provide detailed analysis of distinctive educational cultures. New standards of quality will arise. Instead of test score performance (in the case of public schools) or elitist reputation (in the case of private schools) sufficing for measures of quality, gradually there will develop cadres of perceptive education critics, similar to critics found in the worlds of automobiles, computers, food, art, travel, etc.: experts in the realm of taste and judgment with respect to education. They will perceptively discern those schools that develop a wonderful emotional intelligence, those schools that develop mental originality, those schools in which lifelong healthy habits are reliably developed, those schools in which males characteristically treat females with remarkable grace and consideration, and a thousand other distinctive virtues.

All cultures prior to modern European culture were virtue cultures in this sense. Humans were raised understanding that they had a role and standing in society and that their entire life was a reflection of how well they fulfilled that role. Each culture had a vision of excellence. The very texture of day-to-day life provided a consistent, coherent template that taught young people how they were to behave. From time to time, a member of the society was sanctioned or expelled in a manner that made it perfectly clear what types of behaviors were not condoned by the community. Young people were brought up in a set of cultural circumstances that allowed them to practice the requisite virtues of that society, allowing them to naturally become respectable adults in such a society.

Western civilization has been seeking liberation from these sorts of “intolerant” virtue cultures for some 500 years. The social rebellions known as the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment in their resistances to traditional authorities unwittingly provided the foundation for the more radical liberations of the 20th century. In the 1920s and the 1960s it appeared as if radical individual freedom was the final goal. What none of the liberators seems to have realized is the truth of Goethe’s insight that “Whatever liberates our spirit without a corresponding increase in self-control is pernicious”. I continue to be committed to the liberation of the spirit; and I have

gradually come to realize that as I liberate spirits, I have an absolute obligation to simultaneously provide training in self-control. Otherwise I am responsible for disasters.

Traditional cultures did not seek to liberate the spirit. By and large, they sought to constrain the spirit within very well-defined cultural boundaries. As a consequence, they were often bigoted, shaming, and sometimes cruel: Zorba the Greek contrasts Zorba's own liberated spirit with the cruel stoning of a young widow. Few people who are truly knowledgeable about traditional cultures would want to return to their brutal stasis, conformity, constraints, and judgment.

And yet many people long for community, tradition, ritual, structure, and meaning in their lives. We (including most emphatically Socratic intellectuals such as myself) have ripped traditional societies and norms to shreds. We had to do it. There were gross injustices and bigotries. We must now re-build more humane, tolerant, decent replacements for those earlier meaning systems.

A Vision for the Future

There are four reasons why the most urgent issue in the United States today is to transform our existing K-12 educational institutions by means of universal school choice, through vouchers or tax credits, with minimal constraints concerning curriculum, staffing, or structure of schooling:

1. Because of the relentless pressures of global competition, those in our society who are not currently receiving a great education will find life in the 21st job market harsh and unforgiving.
2. Because of the collapse of common norms of culture, including those norms that prevent addiction, constrain sexuality, support industriousness and thrift, and provide a foundation for long-term meaning and purpose, many in our population already find life harsh and unforgiving.
3. Because people at all levels of our society crave greater meaning, purpose, and community in their lives, and yet they find themselves immersed in a society which lacks structures for providing

new models of meaning, purpose, and community in which gambling, pornography, addictive substances, sensational entertainments, consumer culture, and other types of short-term satisfactions are cheap and ubiquitous.

4. By administering K-12 education through government, a clunky, impersonal agent, we have created a society in which it is easier for entrepreneurs to innovate and market short-term stimulations such as gambling and pornography than it is for entrepreneurs to innovate and market sources of long-term well-being such as wisdom and compassion.

Government control of education—through public schools or through excessive regulation of charter or private schools—amounts to granting control over the young human soul to all those who produce short term stimulations. Either real human beings, with distinctive intentions and ways of life, are allowed to create cultures with integrity—by means of minimally regulated school choice—or bureaucratic rules prevent the formation of appetites in the young, and marketers of all sorts thereby prey on the unformed souls of the young. Educational freedom, rather than government control, is the sine qua non for the creation of happiness and well-being for all.

Consider the following twenty propositions on education and wellness:

1. Culture, habits, and attitudes are the most important prerequisites to education.
2. Historically traditional cultures have varied widely; that variability is currently being lost through the force of those technology-based monocultures that are sweeping the world.
3. Over the course of 13 years of formal education, the average high school graduate is exposed to 14,000 hours of K-12 schooling. It is possible to have a considerable impact on the habits, attitudes, ideals, aesthetics, aspirations, and culture of the students over that time if that were to become the primary focus of educational institutions.

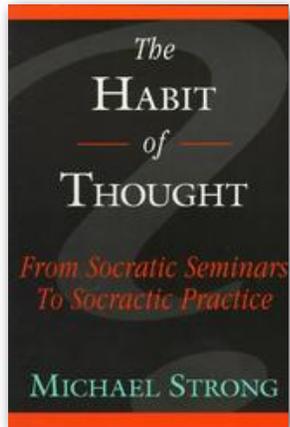
4. Habituation in new cultural norms may be successfully cultivated in the young only when they are educated by adults who consistently support the new forms of habituation and personally exemplify the new virtues. In order to do this, the adults themselves must exhibit a consistent form of habituation. New cultures can not be created by innovations in textbooks or software.
5. Except for those few educational approaches that have distinctive teacher training programs (Montessori, Waldorf, and some religious school systems), existing teacher training does not even begin to ensure consistent habituation. The most consistent habituation faced by K-12 students in government schools today is habituation in passivity and dependence.
6. Cumulatively, deliberately inculcated habits and attitudes may provide a foundation for new cultures. The Jesuits deliberately created a more disciplined and intellectual European culture out of the chaos of medieval education. Montessori and Waldorf education are nascent examples of new cultures being formed today.
7. The existing government-controlled education system acts as a monopolistic standard with a market share greater than that held by Microsoft's Windows standard. Unlike the Microsoft standard, the government schooling standard is enforced legislatively and financed coercively.
8. Only when this dominant standard collapses will great educational innovations be launched.
9. Freedom has been necessary for innovation in the world of ideas, the world of technology, and the world of entrepreneurship. If Galileo had been more effectively censored, Newton and modern physics might not exist. If government had regulated the invention of electrical devices in the 19th century, Thomas Edison's "invention of invention" would never have come into being. If tech entrepreneurs had needed government licenses to do their work, Silicon Valley, the micro-computer and the internet would be a pale ghost of their present selves if they existed at all. Likewise, educational freedom will be necessary for educational innovation.

10. Only visionary organizations, designed and built by a commitment to a distinct vision, can consistently create distinct cultures that are powerful enough to compete with the teen culture defined by the media. A distinctive, long-term vision can only be implemented institutionally in a self-regulated institution. Visionary leaders must be able to hire, fire, and promote faculty based strictly on their own perception of quality.
11. Markets will supply those goods desired by consumers.
12. Parents want their children to be healthy, well, productive, and happy.
13. Therefore in a free educational market there will be a demand for schools that can supply a healthier culture.
14. Innovative educators employed by private, visionary organizations will gradually develop increasingly healthier and more positive versions of teen culture.
15. Peer culture is a more powerful influence on teens than are parents. Currently teen culture is the biggest obstacle to parental ability to raise their children well. Conversely, a positive teen culture could compensate for many of the weaknesses of poor parenting.
16. Culture produces “neighborhood effects,” or externalities; once we have created more sources of positive teen culture it will spread to those who don’t originally pay for it or even choose it.
17. We develop critical habits as teens; a healthier teen culture leads to a healthier adult culture.
18. “Healthier” is broad; the foregoing analysis applies to any positive cultural characteristic.
19. Cumulatively, the long-term effects of an innovative, competitive market for adolescent well-being may produce cultural consequences as profound as, or more profound than, the long-term effects of technological innovation.

20. Cumulatively then, just as technological innovation has had a dramatic impact on the economic standard of well-being, so too cultural innovation will have a dramatic positive impact on our social, emotional, and moral standard of well-being.

The greatest invention of the 19th century was the invention of the invention (inventor?). While there had been inventions before the 19th century, only then did tinkerers and experimentalists begin to become conscious and deliberate about the act of invention. A magnificent turning point was Thomas Edison's creation of a laboratory specifically for the sake of creating inventions.

The haphazard cultural inventions that have taken place hitherto, in eastern and western cultures, are analogous to the occasional inventions that characterized western society prior to the 19th century. By means of radical school choice combined with a conscious recognition of the power and importance of creating new school cultures, the greatest invention of the 21st century may be the invention of new cultural models that continually allow human beings to adapt ever more effectively to a world of ongoing creative destruction while allowing for ever deeper levels of happiness and well-being for people of all races, cultures, classes, and abilities. 📖



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Strong is a pioneer in education and independent learning. He is the author of [*The Habit of Thought: From Socratic Seminars to Socratic Practice*](#), and the founder of innovative Socratic, Montessori, and Paideia schools and programs in Alaska, Florida, California, Texas, and New Mexico. Moreno Valley High School, the charter school Michael for which Michael was founding principal, was ranked the 36th best public high school in the U.S. on the *Washington Post's* 2006 Challenge Index. Michael is co-founder and currently serves as Chief Executive Officer and Chief Visionary Officer of [FLOW](#), a non-profit dedicated to "Liberating the Entrepreneurial Spirit for Good."

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