

Time Served

A Poem

One of the things that I noticed shortly after moving to Ireland was that there seemed to be a high incidence of suicide. The incidence appeared to be more marked amongst young people. I began to suspect that one of the factors was what appeared to be something of an obsession with educational qualifications.

The Irish system is much the same as the British one. I doubt if the Devil himself could spit between the two. When I became redundant from the Institute of Technology where I worked, I began to offer private tutoring in Mathematics, Physics, and other technical subjects. Pupils who came to me for assistance could be classified broadly in two groups.

There were those for whom the system worked. They were making good headway in school and simply wanted to move up from say grade C to grade A. Their only interest was how to work the system to their advantage. They were not interested in the subject matter or the solution of problems *Ab-Initio*. Everything had to be in the form: *I see this - So I do this - Then I get an "A"*. I really could not be bothered with these types.

They are not interested in knowledge, only in producing the correct Pavlovian response. Many of them will rise to high office. Few of them will amount to much in terms of human decency. Depending on your perspective it is either an indictment of the educational public relations machine, or a tribute to it, that these students actually seek to behave in a Pavlovian manner. It is possible that the approach is effective on account of the inherent laziness of examiners. Year to year, the bulk of the questions change only in format and detail. If one learns the response pattern to a few of the past papers, the way is clear to a good result. Forget about the syllabus. Its only purpose is to create the illusion of learning.

The other category of student consisted of those who were struggling. Some of them could barely read English. Few could operate calculators properly. None of them could actually read the Mathematics or Physics problems, much less understand the symbols. The system had failed them from the earliest age. Many of them were very frightened of failure and perhaps more so of the teachers. Most of all they feared being moved into a lower class because they would be separated from their friends.

Many of these problems have their roots in the education system itself. From staffroom experience I am well aware how vindictive teachers can be. Teachers of low competence disguise their failings in a number of ways. Perhaps the most widely used approach is to saturate the pupils with homework. Many parents have been conned into thinking that homework is a good thing. The best teachers require very little homework of their pupils because class time is used effectively. Another favoured technique is to culture an air of superiority which makes pupils fearful of asking questions lest they show their ignorance. One particularly nasty - and common - technique I have witnessed is to isolate the weakest pupil and persuade the rest of the class to despise their classmate. Pupils learn that as long as they outperform the duffers and avoid associating with them, they should be able to pass through the system unnoticed. Sadly, the education system exists primarily for the purpose of warehousing. First and foremost it serves the interests of those employed within it. Perhaps that is not surprising, since education systems frequently have their roots in religious organisations of one type or another.

A large part of the problem faced by pupils for whom the system does not work is emotional. I can teach them the subject matter readily, because their concern is with survival and they think that if they can do maths or whatever, then their lives will improve. Anecdotal accounts suggest that results I was able to obtain with some students may have upset the local educational applecart, prompting the introduction of additional teaching support in mathematics.

Apart from subject matter, I am also careful to teach my students that school is just an obstacle between now and the rest of their lives. "*Lifelong learning*" is the warehousing which was introduced for grown-ups. There will be plenty of time for learning when these young people feel they are ready.

Under normal circumstances, life is indeed long. One way or another, life ensures that we all become time served, with or without any education system. That is the most important lesson I can give. When they first come to me, some pupils feel worthless as human beings. A feeling of worthlessness is one of the signposts on the road to suicide. Pupils often show great improvements as they are assisted in the development of their self respect. In years to come self respect might prove more valuable to them than any certificate.

Hence "*Time Served*"

Jim Cahill
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TIME SERVED

If you do not fit the system
It may not be you to blame
Individuals we all are
No two of us the same

There is little they can give you
That you cannot give yourself
By dint of your own efforts
And the books from off the shelf

You can take the knowledge to you
With your person make it one
Turn your hand to every challenge
What 'ere it be beneath the Sun

Always work to your best standard
Show the smug a thing or two
With their honours and their titles
They're not superior to you

Bits of paper feed their egos
As the plaques upon the wall
They're no measure of those people
They don't measure them at all

Use your skills for you are gifted
Consider others not yourself
It's for that you'll be remembered
Not the slyly squirelled wealth

And Genetics is defective
Talent cannot be bequeathed
You can never take it with you
When your final breath has ceased

Jim Cahill
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cutter@swarfology.com
www.swarfology.com