

# Why Johnny Can't Fail: The Ideological Basis of the Literacy Crisis

By Bruce L. Edwards

In this lecture I would like to offer a dissenting view on the character and source of the nation's putative literacy crisis and what might be done about it. To do so, I must spend some of my time touring the history of literacy and observing some of its effects in the societies in which it has developed. Along the way, I will seem initially to minimize the value of literacy, but if you will stay with me to the end of the talk, you will see that I have done so only to rehabilitate literacy for a perhaps greater service than it normally provides.

Discussing literacy has always been a problematic task, not least because the term is frequently used as an aggregate of related but discrete skills, aptitudes, experiences, and values. As we are at a transitional moment in world history, so too are we at a similar transitional point in the role of literacy in understanding history. Literacy, as a vehicle for transmitting traditional, Western values to our children and for exporting them to nations emerging from totalitarianism and headed toward greater personal liberty, appears itself to be in jeopardy in our times. And paradoxically so, since educators have always endowed literacy with many qualities, some mythical, some realistic, that deserve more rigorous scrutiny and critique than we have given them. This definitional ambiguity is at the heart of much of what some call the literacy "crisis."

We have trouble not only deciding what literacy "is," but also what it is "for." Were I to ask each of you to offer your own definition this afternoon, many of you would begin with some minimalist definition such as "the ability to read and write," and almost immediately begin to amend it with a series of qualifications ranging from school-based provisos ("at the sixth grade level") to more expansive social and cognitive concerns — such as literacy is having read the "classics" or possessing the ability to contextualize and interpret new information from sources previously unencountered. Until we come to a firm consensus about what comprises literacy, its purpose, and its foundations, we are destined to witness a declining facility with and prestige for literacy in our schools and in our nation at large.

**Literacy's Role and Function.** Perhaps with some temerity, I would like to try to demythologize literacy, and to suggest that less important than how many people in a modern, industrialized society are literate is question of the predominant role and function of literacy in that society. Or, to put it another way, whether or not every citizen of a nation is able to read and write is not as important as whether there exists freedom of thought, freedom of association, and compensatory channels of communication and interaction in the society as a whole. In effect, it is crucial to determine where literacy is "housed" in a society — and who is charged with its promotion and defense.

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There is a broad difference in my view between social and personal literacy, between literacy as a social good and a personal good. The advantages of personal literacy are obvious, and should be encouraged and advertised broadly. Still, there is a decided difference between recognizing, on the one hand, that in a society that is built upon literacy, the citizens must know that laws, guidelines, tradition, education, commerce will be negotiated on the basis and interpretation of documents, of text, and, on the other hand, demanding that everyone needs to and must acquire personal literacy to operate successfully in it. Even the marginally literate or so-called functionally illiterate are advantaged and able to partake of the blessings of literacy in a democratic society despite their personal deficit. As long as the less literate continue to have access to public forums for the expression and redress of their concerns, their individual liberties remain intact, regardless of limitations in their social mobility.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, literacy may be seen to be a paradoxical possession that promises order and stability – and illumination, but often delivers diversity and factionalism – and ignorance. The same presses that published *The Wealth of Nations* also published *Das Kapital*. Its precise impact must be gauged in terms of other social conventions in place that determine how the ideas packaged and preserved by literacy are received: primarily the vitality and cogency of public discussion and involvement of the citizenry. In other words, the calibre, passion, and informativeness of oral discourse and oral tradition that shapes the reception and interpretation of what is published are often as important as the products of literacy itself.

**Literacy As Panacea.** It is only after the Enlightenment that Western societies, influenced by shifting views of what “human nature” consisted of, began to champion universal literacy as a panacea for ending oppressive political regimes, and in those cases, the institutional vehicle for mass literacy was nearly always the church and the home, and not formal “public” schooling. The first schools in Sweden, England, Scotland, and colonial America were in effect the homes of parents concerned about Bible literacy, and were created by post-Reformation, activist Protestants specifically to promote Bible reading and moral character in their children and in the larger society.<sup>2</sup>

Since what counted as literacy has varied over the history of Western civilization, and its definition was often as much a function of social utility as of specific content or specific skills, its measurement is difficult over time.<sup>3</sup> For instance, literacy in classical times en-

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1 Surprising as it may seem, at the turn of the century, fewer than 4 percent of the adult male population of U.S. citizens finished high school. In 1890, only 6.7 percent of American 14 to 17-year-olds attended high school; in 1978, the percentage had grown to 94 percent. In 1890, of all 17-year-olds, only 3.5 percent graduated from high school; by 1970, the figure was 75.6 percent. In 1900 less than 5 percent of American 18 to 21-year-olds attended college; by the late 1960s, 50 percent of 18 to 19-year-olds did. Source: Thomas James and David Tyack, "Learning from Past Efforts to Reform the High School," *Phi Delta Kappan* 64 (February 1983), p. 401.

2 Cf. Lawrence Stone, "Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900," *Past and Present* (No. 42, 1969), pp. 69-95.

3 William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), ch. 1.

tailed the mastery of a complex taxonomy of rhetorical encoding and decoding skills by aristocrats and their sons; in the middle ages, it consisted in large measure of being merely able to sign one's name or, for scribes, the ability to transcribe Latin or Greek texts, with or without comprehension of those texts.<sup>4</sup> In most industrialized, Western societies literacy has evolved to take on not only functional duties, but also to include the more sophisticated cultural knowledge and inferential skills commonly assigned to it by present day educational reformers like E. D. Hirsch and Chester Finn.

### **Orality and Literacy**

Let us consider how this has occurred. No one begins life as a reader, primed to be alphabetical about the world. Literacy is an acquired technology, not an essential human quality. We often treat literacy so honorifically that we associate non-literacy with much that is problematical in the world: poverty, social unrest, disease, ignorance. Indeed, in some cases literacy is so closely identified with humanness that the nonliterate is sometimes seen as an ignoble savage or moral retrograde. One literacy educator, the late Frank C. Laubauch, co-designer of one of the most widely-used adult literacy curricula, introduces his training session for literacy volunteers with this:

You think it is a pity they cannot read but the real tragedy is they have no voice in public affairs: they have no vote, they are the silent victims, the forgotten people, driven like animals, mutely submitting in every age before and since the pyramids were built. It is human weakness not to become aware of suffering unless we hear a cry.<sup>5</sup>

But the nonliterate population in a predominately literate modern society are not like driven animals, despite this impassioned portrait, and it is demeaning of us to characterize them in this way. We have lived so long with the myth that education, specifically literacy education, would dispel all traces of human aggression and misery that it comes as a shock to realize how barbaric even fully literate nations can be.

Again, let us remind ourselves, writing ability is not, in fact, an innate human capability, but a human appliance created to respond to certain social needs. To use Owen Barfield's term, our chronological snobbery sometimes prevents us from recalling that there have been great civilizations predating our modern world that did not depend upon universal literacy for stability or quality of life. Oral communication, natural, spontaneous, close to the self, was and is the first medium of expression among humankind. And oral communication suffices for a society and for individuals until other relations, socio-economic structures, and personal ambitions call for a more versatile, sophisticated means of dealing with the world.

**Extending Memory.** Writing extends human memory, allowing us to classify objects and events and impose regularities on them, and making possible both historical record and

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4 For an overview of the range of definitions, cf. Eugene Kintgen, "Literacy Literacy," *Visible Language* (Vol. 22, Nos. 2-3), pp. 49-68.

5 *Wood County (Ohio) Literacy Council Newsletter*, March 1989, p. 2.

long distance communication. Because of the power of literacy to overtake functions once primarily oral, those who adopt it become refugees from the earlier, oral-based world and its thinking processes. It is virtually impossible for thoroughly literate persons to imagine a word as pure sound totally divorced from its mechanical representation in letters. As Fr. Walter J. Ong has observed, writing and print have become so deeply interiorized in the West that we are normally oblivious to how much our normal, everyday thinking and communication processes depend upon them.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge processed in oral fashion strikes the technologized person as quaint, unusual, charming. Eastern mystics as well as fundamentalist preachers regularly travel the U.S. enchanting hundreds and thousands by their wistful orality, commonplaces in their cultures and subcultures, but eccentricities in hyperliterate ones like ours. The movement in the West from a text-less to a text-full culture can thus be described as a movement from one “noetic,” or knowing, process toward another: once we acquire literacy and accept the authority of textuality we come to know and assess the world and ourselves in new, sometimes problematic ways.

But it would be a crass oversimplification to say that literacy somehow displaced orality or that textuality is itself a monolithic phenomenon, a unique brand of cognition devoid of resemblances to oral thought. It is closer to the truth to suggest that since the development of writing there has always been a symbiotic relationship between speech and text, and that each has influenced the other dramatically over the past three millennia, and continues to do so. Even today, oral and literate skills complement each other, and, in many instances, can compensate for deficiencies in each other as communication media. But that there are epistemological/cognitive consequences arising from the acquisition of literacy is indisputable — even in societies that have not reached universal literacy. As George Gilder has demonstrated in his critical history of the microcomputer industry, new media arise in history to augment and obviate the functions of the host medium, and that they are, in fact, parasitic on it, and ultimately do not so much displace the host medium as subsume it.<sup>7</sup> The power and prestige of both the written and printed word reached its zenith in the 19th Century, but soon shared the information burden then with the invention of new technologies that gradually began to overtake some of its functions.

## The School

When we initially encounter literacy in the elementary school setting, it is as “alphabetic literacy”: reading and writing do seem to be fairly mechanistic decoding and encoding skills. Passing through school, one is capable of becoming proficient in basic literacy in a remarkably short time, barring physiological problems. And even though one can always become more adept, more efficient, more capable at it, over time, in different settings, and among a host of communicative demands, these are extensions of skills initially mastered at any early age. Literacy is clearly a versatile and accessible instrument to all people. But at the same time, as I suggested earlier, literacy emerges soon as also more than a mere skill.

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6 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982), pp. 31-77.

7 George Gilder, *Microcosm: The Quantum Revolution in Economics and Technology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989). See especially chapters 22-23.

For those for whom literacy becomes an entrenched way of life, it serves as a lens on the world, a paradigmatic state of mind that filters and negotiates the world as if it were a text. The ability of words on a page to represent someone's fleeting thoughts also comes to stand for a tradition or a network of ideas and relationships appropriately called "Western." This "deeper" or what some have called "cultural" literacy encompasses the simple ability to read and write, but also signifies the West's invention of a system to objectify and, thus, test knowledge and counterclaims to that knowledge for its truth value. "Alphabetic literacy" is housed so-to-speak within this larger, deeper literacy that gives it its authority and utility.<sup>8</sup>

**Beginning At Home.** But in our times there are competing aural-visual experiences that undermine the privilege and prestige of literacy. Even in the midst of compulsory education, literacy is an individual choice. No one can compel someone to become literate, or to treasure the Western tradition of objective inquiry it bestows. And when alphabetic literacy loses its appeal — through other media which obviate its functions, like television, e.g., — or when this deeper literacy becomes the province of social planners or ideologues, then a more serious literacy crisis ensues. In a home, in a society, that does not value literacy or that indirectly cheapens it, it is difficult to engage young minds in seeing its value. If the only place a child encounters literacy is the school setting, there is little or no incentive for him to treat it as a social or personal good that he should investigate beyond a certain rote level. The genius of American literacy — as it has descended from a European, religious patrimony — is that it has traditionally begun in the home, as a father and mother endowed their children with a heritage of story-telling *and story-reading*.

Simply put, it is my view that the roots of the nation's real literacy crisis include, certainly, but run deeper than questions of classroom pedagogy and dropout ratios. These roots extend into the sociological fact of our faltering family structures, the notion and purpose of schooling itself, and the social functions of literacy in a democratic society. For it appears to be the case that at the end of the twentieth century we have reached a time in which literacy itself must be rehabilitated and defended against forces that would commandeer it for ideological gerrymandering.

Such a recognition compels us to engage in intellectual warfare that many of us — as parents, educators, policy-makers — may be loathe or ill-prepared to undertake because they inevitably involve defense of Western civilization and, in particular, something I call "Western literacy," allegiance to which brings charges of ethnocentrism, and worse. This new offensive is a strategy that in recent years we have come to associate with the likes of William Bennett and Allan Bloom, and our fears about debased higher education; but let me enter the discussion at a more concrete level by scaling down the topic to a more local vantage point by talking about Johnny.

### **Here's Johnny**

Since Rudolph Flesch published his book, *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955, we have heard a lot about Johnny, and over the past thirty-five years we have learned some disturbing things about him. Johnny has always been presented to us as Everychild, a poster boy for a

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987), chapters 1-2.

national epidemic. There are many things Johnny can't do. Not only can Johnny not read, he also can't write. Johnny can't spell, can't do arithmetic, can't tell you when the Civil War was fought, can't distinguish the words of Stalin from Churchill, and can't identify Central America, or his own state for that matter, on a map. There's one other thing Johnny can't do. Johnny can't fail.

No matter how poorly Johnny has performed in school, our benevolent, paternalistic educational system – the perfect analogue to our welfare system – has by and large found a way to promote Johnny to the next grade, found a way to keep his self-esteem intact, lest he be disgruntled, discouraged, or guilt-ridden. Johnny's deficiencies as a student can always be explained away by reference to personal circumstances: poor school lunches, budget cuts, biased testing procedures, a broken home, racial or gender discrimination. (Well, in Johnny's case, probably not *gender* discrimination.) And besides, his underdeveloped skills or languishing motivation can always be remediated or accommodated next year, on the next rung, by the next teacher, in the next school, perhaps by diverting him to some subject-matter or vocational interest more to his liking or aptitude – a scheme that may well postpone recognition of his failure indefinitely, possibly all the way up to and including graduate school.

For Johnny himself to fail – as an individual and not merely as a faceless, disadvantaged personification of some larger subclass – someone would have to be responsible. Some parent, some teacher, some principal, some school board, maybe even Johnny himself, would have to become accountable for that failure, would have to explain it to somebody; and performance standards, objective criteria would have to be evoked to catalogue the extent of the failure and the place to begin to remediate Johnny.

### **Putting the "Public" Back in Public Education**

For Johnny to fail in this sense, if I may put it this way, is to fail "publicly." That is, to determine one's progress or lack thereof by comparing oneself with a public measuring rod that it is demonstrable, accessible, corroborable by observers situated in different places in the larger society.<sup>9</sup> Failure, missing the mark, falling short, these are events, happenings that come to one and all; it is a preparation for adulthood, for becoming, in a word, a *public* man. The journey from infancy to adulthood is one of trial and error, of hypothesis building, affirming, and refuting – a journey that begins first and is most strongly influenced by the home, and which is greatly assisted by the acquisition of certain literate and numerate skills that schooling traditionally provides. The ability to be resilient, resourceful, capable of responding to failure and moving on with one's life: this a primary rite of passage.

Forgive me if I state the obvious. But this character-building function of wrestling with failure used to occur in the home and was mediated by sympathetic parents. But in our in-

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hannah Arendt: "The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself.... For although the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it.... Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear" (*The Human Condition*, 198; *On Revolution*, 71-72).

creasingly statist culture, parents have begun to abdicate that function to schools and other social agencies. We want to quarantine people from the consequences of failure from cradle to grave; we want their every choice to be repealable. Johnny's failure to become literate is a microcosm of our tender-hearted but muddle-headed attempts to redeem him from failure by surrendering him to it. In the process we have caused the demise of the public man.

Sometime after World War II, American education, led by its universities and their colleges of education, lost the will to promote and to undergird the essential value of Western civilization in its curricula, a civilization that was not merely *one possible interpretation* of the good and humane society, but one that made possible by its very nature the notions of the self, and the public realm; with it came the notions of self-correction, self-government, and the particular value of the liberty of individuals and families to live out their lives in harmony with conscience and with God.<sup>10</sup>

It is my contention that the West, through its invention and promotion of alphabetic literacy, practically created the familiar "public" world where minds may meet, and objectively wrestle with and resolve matters of mutual importance. This "public world," a world available, present, negotiable is assumed in the founding documents of the United States, a public world based upon a social literacy that includes as many men and women, boys and girls, who want to enter in through the door of personal literacy.

Over the past half-century, however, public education has moved away from a pedagogy of an objective consensus in which facts and values rest not on personal epistemology but on public corroboration to an increasingly autistic world of ethno-gender specific "truths." We are implicitly educating Johnny to be "himself," without any sense of what it might be to become a "self."<sup>11</sup> Michael Halloran, an accomplished historian of Rhetoric, effectively captures the present ambivalence of intellectuals toward literacy and its public functions and their despair over the possibility of coming to settled truth on any matter in this manifesto in 1975 that heralded the new age of a retreat from literacy as an enabling possession:

The assumptions about knowledge and the world that informed classical rhetoric are no longer tenable. External reality is paradoxical; our very effort to know something of the physical environment alters that which we seek to know that the object-as-known is not the same as the object we set out to know....It is no longer valid to assume that speaker and audience live in the same world and to study the techniques by which the speaker moves the audience to act or think in a particular way.<sup>12</sup>

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10 Cf. Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), for a particularly poignant and informed overview of this period in public education.

11 Cf. John Leo, "The Trouble with Self-esteem," *U. S. News and World Report*, April 2, 1990, p. 16; Charles Krauthammer, "Education: Doing Bad and Feeling Good," *Time*, February 5, 1990, p. 78.

12 Michael Halloran, "On the End of Rhetoric, Classical and Modern," *College English* (Vol. 36, 1975), pp. 624-25.

In effect, Halloran has declared the end of the public world and the public man. The obvious question to ask Professor Halloran is, of course, "But how do you know that?" But the role of literacy in a modern democracy is to help make public men of private persons, to lift men and women out of their provinciality and narrowness into a more expansive realm of persons, ideas, and ideals, an arena in which character is built, affirmed, and celebrated as a public good which promotes the health of the society at large. Seen historically in the American experience, the role of literacy is to equip its citizens to fight ideology.

Western literacy thus entails not only the skills of thinking, composing, and reading/understanding texts, but also our intuitive trust in the possibility of objective value and the reliability of language to express and convey truth. It is the death of the latter, more than declining literacy rates, that is cause for alarm. Such a defense of the core presuppositions that animate and comprise our Western literacy as I propose could be seen as merely a predictable, cyclical event — there are always barbarians at the door needing to be turned away. But the barbarians are not at the door; they are indeed inside the castle. Such a defense thus takes on greater urgency given the emergence of an "epistemological self-consciousness" in academia that directly confronts and challenges the assumptions of Western literacy. There has hardly been a time in the 20th Century in which the academy has been less hospitable to or appreciative of the foundations of Western culture.

In my own profession, English, I find fewer and fewer colleagues able or willing to undertake such a defense. Stigmatized by well-orchestrated opposition as ethnocentric (not to mention euro-, phallo-, Judeo-Christo-, hetero- *et al.* centric) or compromised by its own personal, relativistic paradigms, the profession at large seems paralyzed by this militant, coercive xenocentrism that masquerades as a tolerant pluralism. Deconstructionism, in various guises as an affirmative metaphysics, and secularization, as a revolt against creaturehood and transcendent order, have been twin adversaries of faith and liberty in the 20th Century.

Until recently, "public" schools were places, occasions, opportunities to affirm and ratify the character built elsewhere: a public forum where the values of democracy, patriotism, faith, community, respect for parents and oneself, etc., could take place. Ethnographer of literacy Shirley Brice Heath notes that in the 1800s, literacy in American schools was inextricably intertwined with "character, intellect, morality, and good taste...literacy skills co-occurred with moral patriotic character."<sup>13</sup> At present in some communities, our schools are little more than re-education camps, or the grand stage on which the key dramas of freedom and responsibility are being played out in the life and mind of Johnny.

### **Back to Basics**

One response to this situation are the various versions of the familiar "back to basics" movement, something I am generally sympathetic to. It is often pointed out by critics wishing to discredit "back to basics" movements that concern over educational decline has been a common theme in American education over the past 150 years. If citizens and educators have periodically railed against educational apostasy, so the skeptic's argument goes, no

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13 "Toward an Ethnohistory of Writing in American Education," in Marcia Farr Whiteman, ed., *Writing: The Nature, Development, and Teaching of Written Communication*, Vol. 1 (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1981), 35-36.



golden age or curriculum can ever have existed. Either we are perpetually in decline, he sneers, or in some veiled form of constant equilibrium. Back to basics reform efforts can then be dismissed as at best unwarranted nostalgia and at worst as ill-tempered elitism. A more obtuse form of this argument might be this: things cannot get worse, because they have never been better.<sup>14</sup>

But things can get worse. Worse than increasingly poorer test scores is the news that literacy itself has become commandeered and politicized. What is not often acknowledged is that beyond the test scores and curriculum debates lies the larger question of what demands a society places upon literacy, that is, where literacy fits into the life of that society and what is expected of individuals who profess literacy. Most back to basics reformers assume that if we can restore a more traditional curriculum, many social and educational ills will take care of themselves. I cannot be so optimistic.

Personally, I am skeptical that further empirical research will assist us much in reforming our educational institutions, and may, in fact, impede it. For ours is ultimately not a pedagogical problem but an ideological one. We don't need more information, but the courage to act on what we already know about literacy, and its contribution to the foundations of democracy. The chief social disadvantage of illiteracy is not that it disassociates individuals from the present, but that it distances them from the past and places them at the mercy of those who would spell America with a k. Symptomatic of this is the National Literacy Act.

### **The National Literacy Act**

On February 6th, 1990, the Senate, with spiritual support from the First Lady, formally declared a state of war on the nation's corporate illiteracy when it unanimously passed the National Literacy Act of 1989. In that legislation, whose chief architect was Senator Paul Simon of Illinois, the Senate averred that:

- (1) there are between 23 and 27 million adult Americans who are functionally illiterate, a number which is increasing due to disproportionately high drop out rates in the public schools among minorities;
- (2) the Adult Education Act is the only major program to reduce illiteracy in the United States and serves only 10 percent of eligible participants, while all public and private literacy programs serve only about 19 percent of those who need help;
- (3) illiteracy is a problem of intergenerational nature;
- (4) effective literacy training in our Nation's schools, particularly at the elementary level, is essential to preventing further growth in national illiteracy rates;

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14 For some recent versions of this argument see: Daniel P. and Lauren B. Resnick, "The Nature of Literacy: An Historical Exploration," *Harvard Educational Review*, 47 (1977), p. 385. Jonathan Kozol, *Illiterate America* (New York: Anchor Press, 1985), pp. 203-207; Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), pp. 5-9.

- (5) as many as 50 million workers may have to be trained or retrained between now and the year 2000; and
- (6) the supply of unskilled workers is increasing and the demand for unskilled labor is decreasing.

As Yogi Berra said, "it's *deja vu* all over again." For those of you who have lived through the federal Wars on Poverty, Discrimination, Teenage Pregnancy, and Drugs, we now have... the billion dollar War on Illiteracy.

It is my belief that the National Literacy Act offers little hope that our real literacy deficits will be addressed. For "eliminating illiteracy," the language used to describe the crusade in the legislation itself and by many in government, is not the same as "fostering literacy," and the unintentional equation of the two can only continue to have a debilitating effect on American education, and American society.

Certainly, one can grieve for the individuals who, earnestly desiring to learn to read and write, have suffered disenfranchisement and social alienation from their nonliterate status. And one can only applaud efforts by volunteer organizations – among them countless churches and church-related agencies – who wish to remediate this situation. The question becomes, as it always does, what is the best way to proceed in targeting and addressing the right audience for the benefit of the largest number of individuals and for American society at large?

**Exacerbating the Problems.** In my view, the remedy that the Senate has ordained is an amorphous, ill-defined piece of legislation that may in the long run exacerbate rather than address the real problems that the First Lady and Congress wish to solve. Consistently, in consonance with our massive welfare state, we have underwritten poverty, broken families, homelessness, and, now, in my view, illiteracy. The National Literacy Act, like the recently enacted Child Care bill, ingratiates the federal government still further into the states, communities, families, and lives of individuals.

Not the least of many problematic aspects of the bill is its own attempt at defining of literacy:

As used in this Act the term "literacy" means the knowledge and skills necessary to communicate, including the reading, writing, basic skills, computation, speaking, and listening skills normally associated with the ability to function at a level greater than the 8th grade level so that education, employment, citizenry and family life is enhanced.

This seemingly innocuous but actually portentous, redundant, ambiguous attempt at defining literacy is the portal through which the federal government will extend its grasp into the preschool years of the children and into the meaning of family life and parenting. Using even these fuzzy criteria, it is nearly impossible to determine the size of the "illiterate" adult population. In addition to the usual funding for research and dissemination, there is a massive outlay for new, distinctive entities called "family literacy" and "workforce literacy" that create new classes of social worker analogues: "literacy experts" and "literacy providers." Not only is training in alphabetic literacy offered, but also obscurely defined parenting education and referral services to assist in this inculcation of literate skills. Included as well as is generous funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to

produce something called "family literacy programming." Judging from the thematic concerns of much public broadcasting, fears that a one-dimensional political vision would soon dominate its offerings are not unfounded.

It is clear that, at its best, more than simply establishing a clearinghouse for information or a coordinating outpost for research funding and evaluation, the National Literacy Act creates another self-perpetuating bureaucracy that will funnel more money and more authority toward Washington away from the localities and organizations most involved in literacy education.

### Damage Control

There are many reasons to oppose the National Literacy Act, among them fiscal conservatism, state and local government sovereignty rights, and the fact that we already know how to teach alphabetic literacy to children and adults.<sup>15</sup> But the greater one is that it inevitably further galvanizes and extends the influence of the least productive and most virulently anti-Western ideas of our times. All literacy campaigns in the twentieth century, and ostensibly that is what the National Literacy Act is, have been conducted by revolutionary governments, and they are fueled and driven by ideology. It seems likely that those who have the most to gain from this bill are not America's nonliterate population or their children, but the education industry and its lobbyists.<sup>16</sup> The most obvious intellectual genesis of the National Literacy Act is the 1985 book, *Illiterate America*, written by Jonathan Kozol, who has become somewhat the Paul Ehrlich of educational reform.

In Kozol's hyperbolic and histrionic book, for which Senator Simon wrote a most generous cover blurb and who is praised within for having the courage to propose reforms Kozol approves of, traditional education is frequently mocked, while the national literacy campaigns of Cuba and Nicaragua are praised. Toward the end of his book, in demurring at "back to basics" reform, Kozol exclaims,

[The Back to Basics movement] is a subset of the dangerous nostalgia for the past, born of a basic fear to face the future, which summons up a warm and golden image of the days when conventional families drove in friendly humpbacked Fords to neighborhood stores and county fairs, and the poorest people (especially Black people) were invisible, uncounted — and did not take SATs.

Clearly, Kozol's America is a sinister place where elitists conspire to keep the populace under control by various, nefarious means, including supply-side economics, budget cuts for education, and calls for better discipline in the schools. The intelligentsia that Kozol represents sees literacy as a power-mongering technology bestowed or withheld by ruthless, white capitalists to manage and prevent the underclass from usurping their authority. Their platform reduces history and its meaning to the incessant interplay of the categories of race, class, and gender, and thus preempts the possibility — or desirability — of valuing or recog-

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15 Cf. Frank Smith, *Insult to Intelligence* (New York: Arbor House, 1986), especially chapter 3.

16 For a representative exposition sympathetic to "revolutionary literacy," cf. Richard Ohmann, "Literacy, Technology, and Monopoly Capital," *College English* (Vol. 47, 1985), pp. 675-89.

nizing a "shared heritage." The very idea of a cultural literacy untainted or unfettered by ideology is repugnant to many if not most of our radical cultural critics.

To believe that these influential educators and pundits will not have a major say in the implementation and regulation of the program envisioned by the National Literacy Act would be naive indeed. It could be that through Senator Simon's bill, Kozol and other anti-Western educationists have succeeded in creating our first de facto Ministry of Culture to operate its own closed shop of approved and disapproved texts, ideas, and ideals.

But even among this crowd, there are sane voices being raised. Of all people in of all places, Herbert Kohl, one of the original "open classroom" advocates, and a self-styled "progressive" reformer, offers surprisingly conservative comments about education and what works in a recent review article published in *The Nation*. His revisionist rhetoric, when stripped of its radicalese, sounds suspiciously like that of a back-to-basics advocate:

[I've been] struggling to help youngsters who are marginalized by the majority society acquire the skills to function within that society while maintaining their integrity and continuing to honor their roots. Practice must precede and override theory in the classroom, and it is sensible to work on the assumption that we don't know for sure how children learn....

I believe...that all children are capable of functioning in creative, self-motivated ways and are capable of thinking critically, expressing ideas and developing well-informed opinions. But if a child isn't self-motivated, can't sit still and won't read, progressive techniques might have to be abandoned for a while....Sitting a child down and focusing her or him on a book, using didactic teaching methods and a firm hand, can...sometimes be expressions of caring. taking children through difficult times and letting them know the skills they need in the future is a way of watching out for them. It may be necessary in certain circumstances to begin tight in order to loosen up. I don't believe there should be a fixed rule about what practice teachers have to follow in order to be open and progressive.<sup>17</sup>

As more and more doses of common sense such as this pervade public education, there is some hope that matters can be turned around.

## Conclusion

My own suggestions for meeting the challenges of illiterate adulthood and the future schooling of Johnny and his children are not original, but I believe they are sound.<sup>18</sup> First, we must restore the family to its proper role as the location for character-building, not only

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17 Herbert Kohl, "The Teacher as Learner," Rev. of Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), *The Nation*, April 16, 1990, pp. 531-34. This is as close to a mea culpa for the Pandora's box of educational ills they have unleashed as "progressive educators" ever get.

18 Cf. Jeanne Allen, "Illiteracy in America: What to Do about It," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 690, February 10, 1989.

for the sake of literacy, but for the sake of democratic stability in our nation. Second, we must place literacy – as alphabetic and cultural – at the center of an educational system that is truly designed to create public men and women. Thirdly, we must be prepared to advance the cause of choice in public and private school, a true “pluralism” that restores more franchise to parents and students themselves for their options in education. Finally, we must be willing to engage in ideological battle against debilitating notions of what constitutes literacy and the foundations of the transcendent values of the Western tradition – both in our schools and in our professions. This involves keeping parents at the local level informed about the quality and content of their children’s education, a willingness to compete for and serve on school boards, and the challenging of alumni and businesses to withhold their philanthropy from schools that undermine Western literacy and its values.

**Access to Wisdom.** We should wish nonliteracy upon no one. But literacy itself does not bestow character. Good parenting, based upon the Judeo-Christian tradition and filtered through Western institutions over many centuries, does. Still, a critical literacy – something that includes functional alphabetic literacy and a deeper, respectful cultural literacy – is a key partner in that character-building. There is no magic in literacy, but there is opportunity. There is within it access to what G. K. Chesterton called the democracy of the dead, the wisdom of the past, stored in texts, available to the present and future. And that, perhaps, is the open door we need to enter to restore human dignity to American culture in an increasingly crass and hedonistic era, one intoxicated by proliferating “rights” without a concomitant sense of duty.<sup>19</sup> I know of no better apologia for the value of literacy in rehabilitating our public character than that offered by C. S. Lewis in his last book, *An Experiment in Criticism*. So I will close with a generous recitation from it:

The primary impulse of each of us is to maintain and aggrandise himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness....The man who is contented to be only himself, and therefore less a self, is in prison. My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many, is not enough. I will see what others have invented....Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality....In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.<sup>20</sup>



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19 For a thoroughgoing treatment of this theme as it relates to contemporary America, cf. William A. Donohue, *The New Freedom* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990).

20 C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 138; 140-41.