

Through Our Hands

In Schools and Other Institutions

Through Our Hands (Lives of Value and Purpose, What Each of Us Can Do in Public Education) is a collection of one hundred and twenty-eight questions I could think of that might have something to do with how this turns out. Those of you in other institutions like businesses, government and non-profits can simply substitute the right words.

The purpose of school is to assist young people in creating meaningful, productive, joyous, contributory lives and developing the tools necessary to produce that result – lives free of abuse, violence and destruction – lives that are of use, of value, of purpose and accomplishment. No amount of technical or factual data alone can produce that result. Only young people, who grow up knowing that some ***one*** cares about them, that their lives matter and that they are in charge, capable of making good choices, can achieve this. Once this grounding is in place, knowledge of facts and data can be put to use.

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When you go to school each day, do you think about what that day can contribute to the rest of your life?

When you go to school, do you think about what you can contribute to the day? To others?

Near you, within your reach or in your heart and mind are all the tools necessary to produce the transformation of your school. What follows are mostly questions. They are questions about lives of value and purpose. They are intended to be tough. Internal discipline is required to master any circumstance. If you want to be an inspired teacher or administrator, there are questions here that can assist in producing that result. If you want to be a young person with vision, a goal, who produces results, there are questions here for that. If you want someone's good ideas, read another book. My notion is that you, not I, have the answers. If you, as a teacher, want to remain cynical, stay away from what you are about to read – it may be lethal. You will have to confront whether or not it is appropriate for you to be a teacher right now. If you want to be a student with stories about how it didn't turn out for you – don't touch this book – it will be difficult to blame someone else for how your life turns out if you answer the questions here. If you think things

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are hopeless – almost – read the questions. If there is within you a desire to have your job mean something, read the questions. If you want to be a parent able to reach your children, read the questions. If you want to be eighty and still alive, creative, producing results, read the questions. Each question is presented with love, with a vision of solution, with a sense of your power, with your magnificence in mind. Having worked with thousands of teachers, students, parents, administrators and board members over the past forty years and discovered in them an enormous reserve of strength, power and love (often untapped) – there is no question in my mind that the same is true for you.

Who is responsible for the morass in public education?

Who is responsible for the quality of life?

Who is responsible for “lives of quiet desperation?”

Who is responsible for the drug problem?

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Who is responsible for teen pregnancy?

Who is responsible for child abuse?

Who is responsible for mediocrity?

Who is responsible for the damage done to people?

How did things get this way? What can be done to solve the problems? From almost every corner we hear what is not being done, what is wrong and who is suffering most because of it. What usually follows is an attempt to assign responsibility, blame and fault. A very small list of the “causes” would include: uninspired teachers, the Federal Government, inadequately prepared teachers, parents who don’t care and in essence hold school as a baby sitting service, unresponsive administrators, low pay, poor facilities, busing, disrespectful students, school boards without vision and low standards, poor community attitudes, neglect of children, unions, the notion of teachers having to be all things to all people, bad press and backward national priorities.

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Please feel free to fill in the ones I have omitted. The list is endless.

Following the list of “causes” there is usually a list of exceptions: school systems that work brilliantly, truly inspired teachers “I have known,” communities that care, government programs that work, young people producing outstanding results, involved parents, wonderful facilities, creative solutions, clear and visionary administrators. **IT IS THE EXISTENCE OF THESE EXCEPTIONS THAT ALLOWS US TO KNOW THAT A PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM THAT WORKS IS POSSIBLE AND ATTAINABLE.** The committed teacher, the soaring student, the caring parent and the nurturing, result producing administrators all know this; they demonstrate it on a daily basis. The issue is shifting these exceptions so that they become the rule. Aside from the tragedy of the death of Samantha Smith, a little girl from Maine who changed the world with a letter to the Russian Premier, is the tragedy that **EVERY CHILD** does not know that his or her life makes the same enormous difference.

As long as a search for a scapegoat for Littleton or other school violence continues, there will be no solution. It is time

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for each of us to realize that what is necessary is individual action, beginning with the person sitting in your chair. There is too much to be done to spend time looking for someone to blame for how it got to be this way. There are teachers who can choose to be inspired, students who can be reached and discover their desire to achieve, parents who can choose to be involved, administrators who can choose to be excited and communities that can decide to be committed to reaching every person. If choose and decide seem to be the key words here, it is no accident. The only solution is a personal solution. “They” will not do it.

Who is in charge?

How can we control the quality of our educational system and its effect on our children when so many others seem to be responsible for it?

Students do not need brilliant teachers in order to produce results – of course it is desirable and not necessary. What they do need to know is that how their education (life) turns out is up to them – no one else. In kindergarten we are fairly

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successful in telling students where their coats are to be hung, where the bathrooms are, what numbers and letters are for and the one thing we tend to leave out is that how that first day (and ultimately each of the next 179 days and twelve years) turns out is up to them – not parents, not teachers, not administrators, not board members, not the community, not their crappy neighborhood – these are circumstances, they need not control the outcome. Sound outrageous – read about Anne Sullivan’s early life and look at what she was able to accomplish. Read Stand and Deliver or One Child. If any one of these factors had the power to control the outcome, then it would be hopeless for every child with parents who didn’t care, teachers who were turned off, administrators who were inept, board members who were out of touch, a community that valued football more than school – or, God forbid, a child with all of these circumstances.

Each person has a choice about the quality and nature of the results they want to produce in their lives. The only way a person can truly come to know this is through experience with other people who know it absolutely. A teacher, parent or any adult who thinks she/he is not powerful cannot deliver this experience. However, once you know that you control the quality of your own life, teaching or parenting, then you can let young people know that the same is true for them.

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Where does the will, the inspiration, the motivation come from?

Who controls its flow?

Anything over which we have no control, controls us. A simple and almost universal example demonstrates the point. Rain, in and of itself, does not produce a particular reaction from people. Yet, when it rains, many people react as if the rain controlled their mood and ability to be excited and enthusiastic. Ask a group of elementary school teachers what rainy Friday afternoons are like.

In countries where rain is infrequent, it is worshipped for it produces new life and growth. It is not the rain that produces our reaction; it is the attitude we bring to the rain that determines the result. Anyone who has ever gone for a walk with a loved one in a warm, gentle rain is not likely to condemn it automatically. Most of our reactions are based on the attitudes we bring to any situation. It is that process rather than the circumstances in our lives that controls our response to various events.

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There are children who have dealt with the death of their parents. There are others who are buried by it. There are children who have mastered a “handicap” and there are those who are destroyed by it. How do we account for Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan, Albert Einstein, Ray Charles, Franklin Roosevelt, Christopher Reeves or Stevie Wonder?

Who determines a handicap?

What is a hardship?

When are circumstances overwhelming?

The answer in every case lies with the individual: you and I determine these things by making choices that work or they don't. Only an individual can decide when things are overwhelming. In order to actualize this ability, we must have experience with human beings who know their own strength. Strength in this case is not about force or physical power; it is about an internal locus of control. It is always gentle and acknowledges the capabilities of others. It is about

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the ability to create poetry in a concentration camp – enter a “white” university as its only black – spend years writing a book because your only limb is a left foot – hold non-violence so dearly as to be willing to give life but never take it in order to improve the quality of life on this planet. It is about commitment and dedication to goals worthy of support. It all begins with the individual.

Who or what is the solution?

You.

You are the person who can contribute to the value and purpose in the lives of people.

I appreciate your willingness to explore these ideas and the questions that follow. Thank you for your willingness to take on the challenge, knowing that you are the solution.

It isn't the other person.

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You are the solution.

Can anyone else provide the solution for you?

We get tired sometimes.

Energy comes from within.

Renew yourself.

Some questions for you and me.

This is about school and this is not just about school.

What happens when we are not disciplined about our actions?

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When people feel good about themselves, do they damage others?

Have you ever noticed that people who take pride in their work stand out?

Do you want to be one of those people?

Do you think that might affect workability?

Have you ever had the privilege of going to a gas station that was really a service station (where service really meant something)?

Do you think that is an accident?

What will it take for us to value each skill and profession?

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Is it your intention to solve the problem or try to solve the problem?

How can a child know “warmth” until she/he has experienced it?

Is spending more time with uninspired people going to produce inspired results?

Who knows what your best is?

Name one thing of great significance in the history of the world that was not begun by one individual or small group of people?

Do you wish to choose to be bored? If you want to be, you will be.

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Are you willing to master the circumstances in your life?

Let's assume you have an uninspired teacher, now what?

Are you willing to form a group of students to “self teach” yourselves this year?

Who is responsible for how your day turns out?

Do you know that you are valuable, no matter what grades you achieve?

Do you know that you do not have to tolerate abuse? Get out. Get assistance.

How much time would there be if we stopped complaining about everything that didn't work?

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If the only place you had to look for a sense of purpose and energy each day was your mirror, would you look?

What do you really want in life?

What would happen if we brought satisfaction to our jobs?

What produces satisfaction?

What would have happened if Helen Keller had received sympathy?

Who has the guts to say, “I love you,” first and mean it?

Can you stop someone from being cynical?

Do cynics have to stay that way?

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What happens if nobody agrees with you?

If you had no hands would that stop you from writing?

If you had no legs, would it stop you from getting where you wanted to go?

What value is there in establishing goals based on what other people think is important?

If you don't operate in a way that you can respect, can you expect others to respect you?

What qualities do you want to have in your relationships with other people?

Who will determine the quality of your relationships?

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How are these qualities achieved?

What are the ingredients of friendship?

What makes you think that what you think is more important than what someone else thinks?

If you had no hands, would that stop you from applauding?

If you had no eyes, would that stop you from knowing what is going on in the world?

At eighty, do you want to be excited about things or simply tell stories about how your life didn't turn out?

What would happen if we began to trust ourselves and each other?

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Do you enjoy being around people who are excited about life?

Do you enjoy being around people who aren't interested in anything?

What do you get when you bring hostility into any situation?

If you are thinking about something else while someone is speaking, can you really hear what is being said?

Do you want your life to be controlled by external factors?

What were Helen Keller's odds?

Do you think Christopher Reeves was a success following his accident and up until his death?

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What happens when everyone knows they count?

Can anyone make you do something?

With all the support in the world, who still needs to take action in order to make things happen?

What does how you performed yesterday or last year have to do with what you will achieve today?

Do you acknowledge the good you see in people or notice only when things are not right from your point of view?

If you want the student/teacher ratio in your school to be 15/1 – how is that going to happen?

Can you make anyone learn?

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What have you learned or mastered that you really didn't want to know?

Once it is determined that you are minimally competent, will that mean that you are an inspired teacher?

Is an inspired teacher (parent, student, administrator) ever lazy?

What would happen if failure were viewed as an opportunity?

Does knowing more facts make someone a better person?

What would happen if we brought 100% energy to school (or anything else for that matter)?

When was the last time your children (parents, students) heard what you were saying?

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Have you ever told them how important it is to you?

What is the most important thing you want to say to your students (children, parents)?

If you could say only one thing, what would it be?

When was the last time you said it?

If money produces happiness, how is it that people who make \$250,000.00 a year commit suicide?

John Belushi had fame, fortune, success, and creativity. What did he not have?

What would happen if we acknowledged that we have more to learn from every person we meet than we will ever know?

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When a school conference involves only a teacher and a parent, what does that say about the student's responsibility in relation to how her/his education turns out?

What would you not be willing to risk in order for your students (parents, children) to get that their lives matter?

If you are a person doing damage to your family, is that what you really want to be doing?

If you don't do what you do with a sense of pride, how can you expect your children (students) to do so?

Are you willing to commit an hour a day to your children?

Do you think the person who shoots a store clerk has something personal against that individual?

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What do you want for your children?

Who can produce that result for them?

After you have tried 219 ways to reach a young person, what are your options?

How much time are you willing to invest in making sure your children know that you love them, that they are valuable and can make good choices?

Have you ever tried to maintain discipline after people figure out that you don't mean what you say or are not consistent?

Is it any fun to walk into a classroom unprepared?

What would happen if textbooks reflected an understanding of individual and personal responsibility?

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If standards and grades don't mean anything, what are we saying to young people when we use them?

If you are not excited about walking into your classroom, what makes you think anyone else will be?

If you don't have clear, simple, specific, measurable goals and objectives for yourself and your school, how can you possibly tell other people what you are up to?

How much have you told your students (children) about who you really are?

When was the last time you failed?

When was the last time you told the young people around you that you failed?

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Why don't we tell students that Abraham Lincoln went bankrupt twice before he was elected to office?

If you don't control your life, what makes you think you can assist young people close to you in knowing that they can control theirs?

Since you know what makes a master teacher a master teacher, are you willing to do what is necessary to be one?

What would happen if you told students that how it turned out was up to them?

If you are not current in your particular discipline, what do you need to do?

What happens to the young people we miss?

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What is the quality of their lives?

Are they contributors or detractors?

How many others do they impact?

What would happen if you studied your spelling like Serena Williams plays tennis?

If you lived in a crappy neighborhood would that mean you always wanted to live in one?

Do you know that you are valuable?

You are!

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What is powerful enough to bring about an end to mediocrity?

Are you willing to be that person in your school?

What might happen in your community if everyone, starting with you, contributed two hours a week to assist in the process of having schools be magic and alive in dealing with the creation of lives of value and purpose?

Who said it couldn't be fun?

My experience of you is part of my experience of the miracle within which we live.

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