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If you read this to the end, you'll discover that I'm inviting you to join a real conspiracy, call it an open conspiracy, with real consequences on millions of real lives. I know that sounds megalomaniacal, but be patient. If we pull this off, a great many will bless us, although the school industry few will curse us. This is about a project to destroy the standardized testing industry, one in which you, personally, will be an independent unit commander. This adventure is called "The Bartleby Project, for reasons you'll learn in just a little while. And keep in mind as you read, this has nothing to do with test reform. It's about test *destruction*.

We've all taken these tests. After graduation few of us think back on this ugly phenomenon unless we have little ones of our own being tested, and have to live through the agony of watching them stumble. We lose touch with the rituals of testing because, upon entering adult life, we inevitably discover that the information these glorified jigsaw puzzles generates is unreliable, and very misleading -- absolutely nobody ever asks after the data. We see that those who test well are more often circus dogs than leaders of the future.

Nothing inside the little red schoolhouse does more personal and social damage than the numbers and rank order these tests hang around the necks of the young. Although the scores correlate with absolutely nothing of real value, the harm they cause is real enough: such assessments are a crowning glory of the social engineers who seized final control of institutional schooling during the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt. They constitute a matchless weapon of social control, wreaking havoc on winners and losers alike. Standardized testing is the tail wagging the entire monster of forced institutional schooling.

The frequent ceremonies of useless testing -- preparation, administration, recovery - convert forced schooling into a travesty of what education should be; they drain hundreds of millions of days yearly from what might otherwise be productive pursuits; they divert tens of billions of cash resources into private pockets. The next effect of standardized testing is to

reduce our national wealth in future generations, by suffocating imagination and intellect, while enhancing wealth for a few in the present. This occurs as a byproduct of "scientifically" ranking the tested so they can be, supposedly, classified efficiently as human resources. I hope the chapters of this book have done some damage to these assumptions, enough to recruit you as a leader in The Bartleby Project. If you show the way, others will follow.

We've reached a point in North America where it isn't enough to claim moral loftiness by merely denouncing them or muttering about them in books and essays which only true believers read. Standardized testing, which has always been about standardization and never about quality standards, must no longer be debated, but brutally and finally destroyed if schooling is ever again to take up a mission of intellect and character enhancement. And so, as I told you earlier, you'll be invited to lead - not join, but lead - a plan to cut the testing empire off at the knees; a plan to rip its heart out swiftly and cheaply. An incidental byproduct of the Bartleby Project will be to turn the men and women who create and supervise these murderous exercises into pariahs, but that isn't the point.

No organization will be required to oversee This simple plan - or, rather, thousands of organizations will be; all local, all uncoordinated. Otherwise, we will be certain to be co-opted, marginalized, corrupted - as all reform organizations become in time: and one as powerful as the Bartleby concept would be quickly subjected to sabotage were it centralized. To make this work - and soon you'll know what it looks like specifically - requires exactly the kind of courage it took to sledgehammer the first chunks out of the Berlin Wall, a currency in ready abundance among teenagers - the rightful leaders. I'll briefly mount a case why such a project is needed and then introduce you to its spiritual godfather, Bartleby the Scrivener.

On May 8, 2008, the *New York Sun* reported that despite legal mandates which require physical education be offered every school day, only one kid out of every twenty-five received even the legal minimum of 24 minutes a day. The New York City comptroller was quoted by the *Sun*, saying that physical training was a major concern of parents. But then, parents have had no significant voice in school for over a century. The story gets even darker than you realize.

Quietly, over the past decade, a national epidemic of obesity and diabetes

has appeared in children as young as five. The connections between food, lack of exercise, and these twin plagues have been recognized for a long time. Diabetes is the principal cause of blindness and amputations in the US, and obesity is the leading cause of heart disease and self-loathing. That the non-fat are revolted by the fat, and discriminate heavily against them should not be a mystery, even to the stupid. Fat kids are punished cruelly in classrooms and on the playground.

In the face of these sobering facts, that thousands of schools still serve familiar fast food - and also non-proprietary fatty foods like liverwurst and bologna as nutrition - should have already caused you to realize that school is literally a risk to the mental and physical health of the young. Coupled with the curious legal tradition which makes serious lawsuits against school-generated human damage impossible, I hope you will try to convince yourself that behind the daily noise and squalor, a game is afoot in this institution which has little to do with popular myth. Standardizing minds is a big part of that game.

In the news story cited, a representative of New York City's Board of Education declares, "We're beginning to realize student health is a real core subject area." Think about that. The city has had a hundred year near-monopoly over children's daily lives and it's only *beginning* to realize that health is important? Where is evidence of that realization? Don't all schools still demand physical confinement in chairs as a necessary concomitant of learning?

When lack of exercise has clearly been figured as a main road to diabetes and obesity, and both conditions are well-understood to lead to blindness, amputations, heart disease, and self-hatred, how can law only provide 24 minutes of exercise a day, and be so poorly enforced that only one in twenty-five gets even that? Doesn't that tell you something essential about the managers of schooling? At the very least, that 96 percent of all schools in New York City break the law with impunity in a matter threatening the health of students. What makes it even more ominous is that school officials are known for and wide for lacking independent judgment and courage in the face of bureaucratic superiors; but something in this particular matter must give them confidence that they won't be held personally liable.

You must face the fact that an outlaw ethic runs throughout institutional

schooling. It's well-hidden inside ugly buildings, masked by dull people, mindless drills, and the boring nature of almost everything associated with schools, but make no mistake - under orders from somewhere, this institution is perfectly capable of lying about life-and-death matters, so how much more readily about standardized testing?

If the bizarre agenda of official schooling allows its representatives to tell the press that after a hundred years they're beginning to learn what Plato and Aristotle wrote eloquently about thousands of years ago, and that privileged sanctuaries like Eton, Harrow, Groton, and St. Pauls have practiced since their inception, that physical health depends upon movement, you should be reluctant to assign credibility to any school declaration. Under the right pressure from somewhere, schools can easily be brought to act against the best interests of students or faculty.

This is what has happened with standardized testing, post WWII. Some teachers know, and most all teachers feel it in their bones, that the testing rituals cause damage. But human nature being what it is, only a few dare resist, and these are always eventually discovered and punished.

I began my own schooling in 1940 in the gritty industrial section of Pittsburgh ironically named "Swiss-vale," continued it for the most part in the equally gritty industrial exurb, Monongahela, during WWII and its aftermath, and concluded my time, served forcibly, in the green hills of western Pennsylvania, very near where Colonel Washington's late-night killing of French officer Jumonville precipitated the French and Indian War (Washington didn't do the killing himself, but he took the heat).

As compensation for confinement, schools in those days were generally places of visible morality, powerfully egalitarian, and often strongly intellectual under the rough manners of the classroom. Faculties were always local, which meant among other things that each school employee had a local reputation as a neighbor and citizen; they existed as people as well as abstract functions. Curriculum prepared far away, and standardized testing, was hardly in evidence even at the end of the school sequence for me, in the 1950s. Each classroom at my high school, Uniontown High, was personalized to a degree which would be considered dangerously eccentric today, and hardly tolerable.

And yet, boys and girls schooled that way had just finished ruining the

tightly schooled dictatorships of the planet. We boasted often to ourselves, teenagers of the 1940s and 1950s, that unlike those unfortunate enough to live outside the US, we carried no identification papers, feared no secret police. Compared to the exotic liberty of those days of my boyhood, American society of sixty years later smacks a bit too much of a police state for comfort. To imagine old ladies being patted down for explosives at airports, or the IRS invasion of one's home, or the constant test rankings and dossiers of behavior managed through schooling; to imagine machinery purchased for home use spying on intimate choices and reporting those choices to stranger, would have been inconceivable in 1950.

A river of prosperity was lifting all boats in the US as I finished my own public schooling in 1953. My father was a cookie sales man for Nabisco, a man with no inheritance or trust fund, yet could cover my tuition at Cornell, own a new car, send my sister to college, pay for clarinet lessons for me and painting lessons for my sister, and put something aside for retirement. Schooling was considered important in those days, but never as very important. Too many unschooled people like my father and mother carried important responsibilities too well for pedagogical propaganda to end the reign of America's egalitarian ethic.

The downward spiral in school quality began in the 1950s with changes which went unnoticed. Schools were "rationalized" after the German fashion' increment by increment they were standardized from coast to coast. By 1963, standardized tests were a fixture, although very few extended them any credibility; they were thought of as a curious break from classroom routine, a break imposed for what reason nobody knew, or cared. Even in the 1950s, curriculum was being dumbed down, though not to the levels reached in later years. Teachers were increasingly carpet-baggers, from somewhere outside the community in which they taught. Once it had actually been a legal requirement to live within the political boundaries of the school district, just as it was for police, fire fighters, and other civil servants, but gradually families came to be seen as potential enemies of the "professional" staff; better to live far enough away they could be kept at arm's length.

Morality in schools was replaced with cold-blooded pragmatism. As Graham Greene has his police chief say, in *Our Man in Havana*, "We only torture people who expect to be torture." Ghetto kids were flunked and

nearly flunked because that was their expectation; middle-class/upper-middle-class kids were given Cs, Bs and even As, because they and their parents wouldn't tolerate anything else.

School order came to depend upon maintaining good relations with the toughest bullies, covertly affirming their right to prey upon whiners and cry-babies (though never cry-babies from politically potent families). The intellectual dimension was removed from almost all classrooms as a matter of unwritten policy, and since test scores are independent of intellect, those teachers who tried to hold onto mental development as a goal, rather than rote memorization, actually penalized their students and themselves where test scores were the standard of accomplishment.

Horace Mann's ideal of common schooling was put to death after WWII; students were sharply divided from one another in rigid class divisions justified by standardized testing. Separation into winners and losers became the ruling dynamic.

By 1973, schools were big business. In small towns and cities across the land schoolteaching was now a lucrative occupation - with short hours, long vacations, paid medical care, and safe pensions; administrators earned the equivalent of local doctors, lawyers, and judges.

Eccentricity in classrooms was steeply on the wane, persecuted wherever it survived. Tracking was the order of the day, students being steered into narrower and narrower classifications supposedly based on standardized test scores. Plentiful exceptions existed, however, in the highest classifications of "gifted and talented," to accommodate the children of parents who might otherwise have disrupted the smooth operation of the bureaucracy.

But even in these top classifications, the curriculum was profoundly diminished from standards of the past. What was asked of prosperous children in the 1970s would have been standard for children of coal miners and steel workers in the 1940s and 1950s. Many theories abound for why this was so, but only one rings true to me: From WWII onwards it is extremely easy to trace the spread of a general belief in the upper realms of management and academy that most of the population was incurably feeble-minded, permanently stuck at a mental level of twelve or under. Since efforts to change this were doomed to be futile, why undergo the expense

of trying? Or to put a humane cast on the argument, which I once heard a junior high school principal expound at a public school board meeting: Why worry kids and parents with the stress of trying to do something they are biologically unable to achieve?

This was precisely the outlook Abraham Lincoln had ridiculed in 1859 (see Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*); precisely the outlook of Edward Thorndike, inventor of "educational psychology" at Columbia Teachers College; precisely the outlook of H. H. Goddard, chairman of the psychology department at Princeton; precisely the outlook of great private corporate foundations like Rockefeller and Carnegie; precisely the outlook of Charles Darwin and his first cousin, Francis Galton. You can find this point of view active in Plato, in John Calvin, in Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza, in Johann Fichte, and in so many other places it would take a long book to do justice to them.

As long as ordinary Americans like Ben Franklin's dad were in charge of educating their young, America escaped domination from the deadly assumptions of permanent inferiority - whether spiritual, intellectual, or biological - which provide the foundation for rigid social classes, by justifying them. As long as the crazy quilt of libertarian impulses found in the American bazaar prevailed, a period which takes us to the Civil War, America was a place of miracles for ordinary people through self-education. To a fractional degree it still is, thanks to tradition owing nothing to post-WWII government action; but only for those lucky enough to have families which dismiss the assumptions of forced schooling - and hence avoid damage by the weapons of mass instruction.

As the German Method, intended to convert independent Bartleby spirits into human resources, choked off easy escape routes, it wasn't only children who were hurt, but our national prospects. Our founding documents endowed common Americans with rights no government action could alienate, liberty foremost among them. The very label "school" makes a mockery of these rights. We are a worse nation for this radical betrayal visited upon us by generations of political managers masquerading as leaders. And we are a materially poorer nation, as well.

School's structure and algorithms constitute an engine like the little mill that ground salt in the famous fable - long ago it slipped away from anyone's conscious control. It is immune to reform. That's why it must be destroyed.

But how?

We will start at the weakest link in the German school chain, the standardized tests which are despised by everyone, school personnel included. The recent past has given us two astonishing accomplishments of citizen action - no, make that three - which should lift your spirits as you prepare to ruin the testing empire - instances of impregnable social fortresses blown to pieces by disorganized, unbudgeted decisions of ordinary people. Call these examples "Bartleby Moments." Think of the ending of the Vietnam War, when young people filled the streets; think of the tearing down of the Berlin Wall; think of the swift dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The Bartleby Project

By the end of WWII, schooling had replaced education in the US, and shortly afterwards, standardized testing became the steel band holding the entire enterprise together. Test scores rather than accomplishment became the mark of excellence as early as 1960, and step by step the public was brought, through various forms of coercion including journalism, to believe that marks on a piece of paper were a fair and accurate proxy for human quality. As Alexander Solzhenitzyn, the Nobel Prize winning Russian author, said, in a Pravda article on September 18, 1988, entitled "How to Revitalize Russia:"

No road for the people [to recover from Communism] will ever be open unless the government completely gives up control over us or any aspect of our lives. It has led the country into an abyss and it does not know the way out.

Break the grip of official testing on students, parents and teachers, and we will have taken the logical first step in revitalizing education. But nobody should believe this step can be taken politically - too much money and power is involved to allow the necessary legislative action; the dynamics of our society tend toward the *creation* of public opinion, not any *response* to it. There is only one major exception to that rule: Taking to the streets. In the past half-century the US has witnessed successful citizen action many times: In the overthrow of the Jim Crow laws and attitudes; in the violent conclusion to the military action in Vietnam; in the dismissal of a sitting American president from office. In each of these instances the people led,

and the government reluctantly followed. So it will be with standardized testing. The key to its elimination is buried inside a maddening short story published in 1853 by Herman Melville: "Bartleby the Scrivener."

I first encountered "Bartleby" as a senior at Uniontown High School, where I was unable to understand what it might possibly signify. As a freshman at Cornell I read it again, surrounded by friendly associates doing the same. None of us could figure out what the story meant to communicate, not even the class instructor.

Bartleby is a human photocopy machine in the days before electro-mechanical duplication, a low-paid, low-status position in law offices and businesses. One day, without warning or explanation, Bartleby begins to exercise free will - he decides which orders he will obey and which he will not. If not, he replies, "I would prefer not to." To an order to participate in a team-proofreading of a copy he's just made, he announces without dramatics, "I would prefer not to." To an order to pop around the corner to pick up mail at the post office, the same: "I would prefer not to." He offers no emotion, no enlargement on any refusal; he prefers not to explain himself. Otherwise, he works hard at copying.

That is, until one day he prefers not to do that, either. Ever again. Bartleby is done with copying. But not done with the office which employed him to copy! You see, without the boss' knowledge, he lives in the office, sleeping in it after others go home. He has no income sufficient for lodging. When asked to leave that office, and given what amounts to a generous severance pay for that age, he prefers not to leave - and not to take the severance. Eventually, Bartleby is taken to jail, where he prefers not to eat. In time, he sickens from starvation, and is buried in a pauper's grave. The simple exercise of free will, without any hysterics, denunciations, or bombast, throws consternation into social machinery - free will contradicts the management principle. Refusing to allow yourself to be regarded as a "human resource" is more revolutionary than any revolution on record. After years of struggling with Bartleby, he finally taught me how to break the chains of German Method schooling. It took a half-century for me to understand the awesome instrument each of us has through free will to defeat Germanic schooling, and to destroy the adhesive which holds it together - standardized testing.

Signposts pointing our attention toward the Bartleby power within us are

more common than we realize in the global imagination, as Joseph Campbell's splendid works on myth richly demonstrate (as do both Testaments of the Bible), but we needn't reach back very far to discover Thoreau's cornerstone essay on civil disobedience as a living spring in the American imagination, or Gandhi's spectacular defeat of the British Empire through "passive resistance" as bold evidence that as Graham Greene should have taught us by now, "they" would prefer to torture those who expect to be tortured.

Mass abstract testing, anonymously scored, is the torture centrifuge whirling away precious resources of time and money from productive use and routing it into the hands of testing magicians. It happens only because the tormented allow it. Here is the divide-and-conquer mechanism *par excellence*, the wizard-wand which establishes a bogus rank order among the schooled, inflicts prodigies of stress upon the unwary, causes suicides, family breakups, and grossly perverts the learning process - while producing no information of any genuine worth. Testing can't predict who will become the best surgeon, college professor, or taxicab driver; it predicts nothing which would impel any sane human being to enquire after these scores. Standardized testing is very good evidence our national leadership is bankrupt and has been so for a very long time. The two-party system has been unable to give us reliable leadership, its system of campaign finance almost guarantees we get managers, not leaders; I think Ralph Nader has correctly identified it as a single party with two heads - itself bankrupt.

I don't know what to do about that, but I do know how to bring the testing empire to an end, to rip out its heart and make its inventors, proponents, and practitioners into pariahs whose political allies will abandon them. Let a group of young men and women, one fully aware that these tests add no value to individual lives or the social life of the majority, use the power of the internet to recruit other young people to refuse, quietly, to take these tests. No demonstrations, no mud-slinging, no adversarial politics - to simply write across the face of the tests placed in front of them, "I would prefer not to take this test." Let no hierarchy of anti-test management form; many should advise the project, but nobody should wrap themselves in the mantle of leadership. The best execution would not be uniform, but would take dozens of different shapes around the country. Like the congregational Church, there should be no attempt to organize national meetings, although national chatrooms, blogs, and mission-enhancing advisors of all political

and philosophical stripes will be welcome. To the extent this project stays unorganized, it cannot help but succeed; to the extent "expert" leadership pre-empts it, it can be counted on to corrupt itself. Think Linux, not Microsoft. Everyone who signs on should get an equal credit, latecomers as well as pioneers. Unto this last should be the watchword.

I prefer not to. Let the statement be heard, at first erratically and then in an irresistible tide, in classrooms across the country. If only one in ten prefer not to, the press will scent an evergreen story and pick up the trail; the group preferring not to will grow like the snow ball anticipating the avalanche.

What of the ferocious campaign of intimidation which will be waged against the refuseniks? Retribution will be threatened, scapegoats will be targeted for public humiliation. Trust me, think Alice in Wonderland; the opposition will be a house of cards, the retribution an illusion. Will the refusers be denied admission to colleges? Don't be naive. College is a business before it's anything else; already a business starving for customers.

The Bartleby Project begins by inviting 60,000,000 American students, one by one, to peacefully refuse to take standardized tests or to participate in any preparation for these tests; it asks *them* to act because adults chained to institutions and corporations are unable to; because these tests pervert education, are disgracefully inaccurate, impose brutal stresses without reason, and actively encourage a class system which is poisoning the future of the nation.

The Bartleby Project should allow no compromise. That will be the second line of defense for management, a standard trick taught in political science seminars. Don't fall for it. Reject compromise. No need to explain why. No need to shout. May the spirit of the scrivener put steel in your backbone. Just say:

I would prefer not to take your test.

An old man's prayers will be with you.