

Finding Hope in an Anxious Time: Education in the Age of the Great Acceleration

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The middle of the 20th century marks the beginning of what has been referred to as the “Great Acceleration.” Peter Ho uses this phrase in his brief yet insightful article, “Coping with Complexity,” to describe our current period of unprecedented rapid change on a global scale. He observes that this process has resulted in greatly accelerating the global rate of change on all fronts—political, economic, and social—and is having a huge impact on the earth’s ecosystems.¹⁸⁷

It was during the early days of this period that I grew up. Looking back, the beginning of the Great Acceleration was a time of social, cultural, and political stability, progress and optimism, seasoned with a moderate case of adolescent angst and peripheral concerns about the Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Even though there was a great deal of public concern about the Soviets and Cuba, and the retired Navy Admiral who lived next door ran films instructing us on how to build a bomb shelter, I never had the sense that the worst would happen.

After President Kennedy’s election and the country’s infatuation with “The New Frontier,” things seemed increasingly hopeful, and

although change was in the air (and on the radio), the world seemed upbeat. Then, on November 22 of 1963, something fundamental changed about how I and other Americans viewed the world.

John F. Kennedy’s assassination rocked the aura of optimism and national unity, the sense that even with our differences, we all shared a social, political, and cultural identity—a common worldview. Things suddenly became more uncertain; there was a feeling that if this could happen, other things we took for granted could start unraveling.

There was a palatable sense that not only were we living at a turning point of history, we were actors in the process. This was often exhilarating, and I expect many of us who came of age back then share a poignant sense of loss deeper than the nostalgia for the music of our youth—a loss of potential unfulfilled.

Within a handful of years, deep divisions in our society surfaced, multiplied, and grew. Assumed values, norms and rules of behavior were suddenly changing. The issues that emerged, including the anti-war movement, the rapidly growing impatience for achieving civil rights, as well as women’s rights and broader economic reforms, growing awareness of environmental pollution, the growth of ecological consciousness, and declining trust in our political institutions, all burst into the nation’s consciousness. Although each has evolved, they remain with us today.

My coming-of-age years, along with those of many of my contemporaries, were also a time for seeking an expanded perspective that

¹⁸⁷ Peter Ho, “Coping with Complexity,” 1. Retrieved October 2012 from <http://mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/coping-with-complexity>.

would give meaning to what we were experiencing, what we saw, who we were, and what we could become, encompassing both the personal and the universal. There was a palatable sense that not only were we living at a turning point of history, we were actors in the process. This was often exhilarating, and I expect many of us who came of age back then share a poignant sense of loss deeper than the nostalgia for the music of our youth—a loss of potential unfulfilled. It seems natural that my own search to find meaning in current times has intensified with the emerging sense, yet again, of being at another of history's crossroads.

On a daily basis we see evidence of how technology is shaping our present and future in ways that increasingly determine not only how we do things, but what choices we have about what we can do. In fact, with the loosening of our agreement about a collective sense of reality that began with the 1960's call to "question reality," it is the technological world itself that seems now to be the designer of both our public and private spaces—our external realities.

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Yet, just a click of the mouse away, we are barraged with news about those "wicked problems:" growing numbers of problems that present intractable and overly complex challenges, seemingly impossible to get our collective minds around, and, worst of all, beyond our capacity to solve.¹⁸⁸ These include increasing economic insecurity and the polarization of wealth and income levels, pan-global terrorism, a mounting eco-crisis, unsustainable development, continuing threats of nuclear annihila-

tion, run-away climate change, food and water insecurity, and the uprooting (literally and figuratively) of communities, populations, and cultures. And this is only a partial list.

In this world, there seems no limit on what reasonable people might find deeply troubling.

In the face of this, we don't seem to be able to find a center from which we could collectively address what is happening to our world. We lack a center from which we could begin to meaningfully stem the bleeding. We are caught up in conflicts about differing notions of fundamental beliefs while drifting in a sea of moral relativism. We seemed to have lost purpose, no longer having the need or interest to ask: why? Without asking, there is no answer. So we move through a world that looks helpless and apathetic, yet is also increasingly frustrated and anxious.

Children's Inner Questions

It sounds almost trite to say that children are the hope for the future, too much like the "we are the world" Pepsi commercials of the past. Yet, what if we take these words out of their commercial context so that we can see them for what they are, and stop to consider what this could mean for us today?

Who in good conscience would disagree that there are reasons for us as educators, parents, citizens, public officials, and humans, to do everything and anything within our power and limits of knowledge and creativity, to provide the most effective education possible: an education that is simultaneously engaging, empowering, honoring, humbling, and creative?

It is not accurate to assume children are unaware of the challenges we face, as individuals, families, communities, and as a species. Think back to your own childhood. Even now, years or decades past, those early memories are the most vivid. Children and youth have their own ways of knowing what is going on. In

¹⁸⁸ Peter Ho, "Coping with Complexity," 2.

1922, Rudolph Steiner argued that a good teacher helps her or his students formulate, or give words to, their internal unspoken questions, consistent with their stage of development. The teacher guides them with sensitivity in the discovery of insights that help them grow, developing more fully towards who they are and will become.¹⁸⁹

Children and adolescents tend to think in and through their emotions, so we should resist assuming they don't feel the pressures of potential futures just because they may not talk about them. Children benefit when adults who care about them make it safe to enter into these questions, and if the adults in their lives don't facilitate the process, it not only negatively affects their learning, but it erodes their trust in the adults who are in caregiving roles. I experienced this phenomenon in my largely unsuccessful quest to talk to adults about feelings I was struggling with in my adolescents. I found an adult world that seemed disinclined to engage in discussions of inner tension related to external experience. Given the heroic tasks we are leaving to our children, this might be the type of engagement we would want to foster.

Today, schools don't work particularly well for the sizeable majority of our students. There is plenty of evidence that tells us this. In a national survey of high school students carried out earlier this year by the Center for Emotional Learning at Yale University, students were asked how they felt when in school.

The top three answers were tired, bored, and stressed.

There are many voices who are calling for deeper understandings about what kids really need to learn, and why. Without greater socio-emotional supports and non-cognitive learning experiences that promote a feeling of belonging

in school, children will continue struggling to master the academic core—a priority of most, if not all, schools. Paul Tough's work explores the effects chronic stress conditions have on children, whether related to their health or emotional well-being. We can ask what needs to be done to address this for these children to have the chance of succeeding in school and life.¹⁹⁰

On the other side of the economic divide, it is increasingly being recognized that children living even in privileged families and communities also grow up with considerable risks. These students need more holistic educational practices that emphasize the healthy development of character traits such as decency and kindness as an antidote for community norms that are telling them that success hinges on gaining a competitive edge on their peers and the world at large.¹⁹¹

Whether rich or poor, children have inner questions that our educational environments are not cultivating.

The Need to See and Learn Together

Why is it that in the face of the evidence of our educational inadequacies, many of our educators, policy makers, and schools cling to discredited notions of what the highest priorities should be? Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher and metaphysician, points to a closely related problem in a series of lectures he delivered late in his life, published as *What is Called Thinking?*¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Rudolf Steiner, "Education for Adolescents," Stuttgart Lecture, June 21, 1922. Translated and published in the *Journal for Anthroposophy*, Spring 1979, 3. Retrieved September 22, 2007 from the Rudolf Steiner Archives: <http://www.rsarchive.org/>.

¹⁹⁰ Paul Tough, *Helping Children Succeed: What Works and Why* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

¹⁹¹ Suniya S. Luthar, "The Problem with Rich Kids," *Psychology Today*. Retrieved November 15, 2015 from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/201311/the-problem-rich-kids>.

¹⁹² Heidegger, Martin, "What Calls for Thinking?" In *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1977), 371–372.

In these lectures, he went deeply into the idea that the most thought-provoking thing in this most thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking. His words from a half a century ago, in the early years of the Great Acceleration, foreshadow our current challenges: that we, as human societies, made up of a collective set of individuals, act as if we are incapable of seeing and learning together—from history, from what is now going on in the world around us, and from the increasing likelihood of horrible calamities.

Wicked problems—tired, bored, and stressed students. How can this be?

We seem to avoid or be unable to bring into clearer focus the existential threats that engulf our world. An obvious example is climate change. If we cannot even come to a consensus understanding that this is a life-threatening problem, what chances have we of solving it? What role do we have in helping our children deal with the world we leave them?

In a 2016 article on the “Spiral of Silence,” the *New York Times* reported that around 70% of American adults are very or moderately concerned about climate change. And yet the article reported that more than half of these people rarely or never talk about it to friends or family. Similarly, less than half hear media discussions of climate change even once a month. The article suggests that there is a “spiral of silence” surrounding climate change “in which even people who care about the issue, shy away from discussing it because they so infrequently hear other people talking about it—reinforcing the spiral.”¹⁹³

George Marshall, a campaigner for action on climate change, proposed that the first step to addressing this avoidance is to “recognize,

even embrace, the essence of how humans work, including the faults.”¹⁹⁴ Then the conversations and collaborations can begin, assuming we agree to pursue truth rather than reverting to conflict.

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In this approach, we set aside our tendency to see value as relative, where what you value about the world is primarily a matter of taste. Of course, perspective is not irrelevant, but should not be an impediment to moving beyond differences of perspective. Talking about climate change in these ways helps “boost capacities to innovate, empathize, to devise resilient responses to risks and more—to bend, stretch, reach, teach...”¹⁹⁵ It treats the subject of climate change as something critically important, deserving urgency; something that matters greatly, rather than something to be avoided.

Between a flat world of cultural relativism that defends the right to virtually any perspective, and the rigidity of moral fundamentalism, the above is an example of how we might elevate our discourse, recognizing that we do have choices—we are in fact making choices, even in our refusals—that are creating the world of the future. For as Rene Girard has said, “if we suddenly see reality, we do not experience the absolute despair of an unthinking modernity but rediscover a world where things have meaning.” Given our challenges, this is an encouraging observation. Hope is possible only if and when we dare to think about the danger at hand.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Andrew C. Revkin, “As Warnings Build, Is There A ‘Spiral of Silence’ on Climate Change?” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.dotearthblogs.nytimes.com/2016/09/30/as-warnings-build-is-there-a-spiral-of-silence-on-climate-change/>.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Rene Girard, “On War and the Apocalypse,” *First Things: The Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 4. Retrieved November 4, 2016 from

Education and Seeing Together

What should we consider as the most compelling questions of our time?

From the above, it seems that addressing our habit of avoiding questions is a promising place to start. How do we overcome our resistance to talk about undeniably critical topics, whether personal or social?

What are the questions that will help us better see reality? What new, more accurate and more helpful insights and understandings are waiting discovery—waiting, as Rene Girard says, to suddenly see an illuminated reality, and lead us away from the distractions and avoidances that obscure it?

Putting these insights together, Rene Girard says, first, we must look together.

But how can we do that if we are entrenched in our avoidance?

Second, then, is ending the spiral of silence. George Marshal suggests that we must get better at understanding ourselves, understanding why we are unable to look, which will provide clues to how we can overcome this impasse. We must hold each other accountable for looking.

We must see together.

The relevance of this for education is to ask: How do we teach our children well? What is essential for them to know that is lacking or missing in our world right now, and speaks clearly to a better, or any, future?

Our educational system expends great amounts of resources and attention on preparing students academically, the principle goal being entry to college. Mastering the academic core, with the rise in the importance of science, engineering, and technology, along with assessments and accountability, are the priorities in educational policy.

Yet there is an old folk saying that reminds us that truths are like paint, they only have value in their application. Academic skills are only relevant in the context of our shared human world we live in. Therefore academic knowledge is only useful if and when it can be successfully communicated and effectively applied to society's needs.

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The good news is that we have a vast amount of wisdom within our grasp as to what education should be doing. We also have the connectivity to network, share and converse, creating new avenues for discourse. And we already have many schools and communities where the puzzle pieces are coming together.

Indications are that a new generation of children and youth have a growing awareness of who they are—both as individuals and in relation to the rest of the world. We adults could provide them with opportunities to use this awareness to guide their decisions. This small shift can lead to a greater sense of personal power and accountability, of agency, and of purpose. With purpose comes the invitation, the opportunity, to grow hopeful about the future.

Many leaders in the field of education are telling us that there are insights, approaches, constructs, and pedagogies that can provide what students need to grow in knowledge and character.

Yet children and youth need to feel that what they are learning has value and purpose. They need to feel that what they are learning is personally relevant. They blossom when they are engaged. Students need to believe that they can change through intentional effort, learn by being persistent, and succeed with the help of

adults who will remind them that not knowing is an essential starting point for learning—not a indicator of lack of intelligence.

Because we were all once children, we can anticipate the internal unspoken questions. Addressing these questions is a core part of identity formation. They include questions such as: What and who is in the world? What do I like? What interests me? What am I good at? What in the world might I want to try or do? How can I contribute to solving the problems I see? What should I be learning now and in the future to help me grow into adulthood and have a satisfying life? How should I prepare for the certainty of change that will require me to be agile and adaptable as I go through life?

A good teacher or parent makes it safe for children to enter into these questions. Using Heidegger's formulation, these existential questions are truly compelling because they lead a student towards a more profound understanding of themselves as exceptional and unique, allowing them to understand they are a part of the unfolding human community. By expanding our understanding of what our schools need to be teaching, we are also learning, once again, that what is inside is as important as what is outside. It is time to take up the ancient command to "know thyself". We can hope that this will lead us on the path of discovering who we humans are meant to be.

Conclusion

In order to see the reality of the world, we must look together. To be able to look, we must better understand ourselves, including understanding why we are unable to look at what is happening to us and the world, and what is keeping us from looking. And we must seek to help each other to look, so that together we may see. In so doing we must keep focused, and avoid slipping into diversionary conflicts that distract us from our purpose, which is to

address the existential questions that are facing our species.

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Yet, as the saying goes, one thing leads to another. Further compelling questions remain to be explored. Perhaps we do not care to look because we no longer believe in reality. If virtual environments are pushing us deeper into a moral relativity, one that could lead to nihilism, where will we find hope for a shared future? Can we together learn to see the wonder that is the gift of life?

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