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We Suggest

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Ashton-Warner, Sylvia

Spearpoint

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972. 224 pp.

It is always best to learn about a great innovator by reading what he actually said in the context of the time when it was written. This is better than reading what others say at second hand about the new ideas of the creative thinker.¹

Teacher, Sylvia Ashton-Warner's first book about classroom teaching, has become a favorite, and classic, among teachers throughout the world. Previous to the publication of that book in 1963, readers had come to know the evocative imagery of her writing through her *Spinster* and *Incense to Idols*. Since the time when educators had been introduced to her sensitive, intuitive understanding, and creative methods of teaching her young Maori pupils, many have followed her life story in two more recent books, *Myself* and *Three*. There, changes in her life, reflected concomitantly with changes in world society, are touchingly revealed.

Now, like a visitor to an unknown, unexplored planet, she alights upon "Spearpoint." It appears almost totally strange, inhabited by beautiful children who are somehow puzzling, and not a little frightening. The site of landing is a new kind of "open-concept" school where, supposedly, children are free—free to learn—free to choose whether they "wanna" or "dowanna" learn and study.

In teaching these children, within the given structure of this school, the main thesis of her organic teaching theory, "Release the native imagery of our child and use it for working material," does not seem to be workable. She has always regarded this living imagery as the third dimension of personality. She has equated it with feeling, "the force which compels us to think, to talk and try to do things . . . but we are only a copy of others, and God knows there are enough copies around."

Perhaps, she hypothesizes, the children's native imagery is being replaced "by outside imagery concocted by man." It is startling, if not appalling, to think that she might be right: that "the compassion, pity, mercy, tenderness and the contagion of warm feeling" are being supplanted by dead images straight out of the television screen, the

¹ John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum*, and *The School and Society*, p. v. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Eleventh Impression, 1972.

radio, and the “rabble-rousing beat” of a stereo. Suppose children no longer feel with love, or with hatred; suppose they no longer feel at all? Suppose they no longer have the comfort of a dream? “Dreams are a living picture in the mind of generating energy. They are at once direction finders and sources of power . . . There are no limits to the dreams a mind can conceive, but only the whole mind has the mechanism to dream . . . Yet no dreams combust from imagery which is sedated or dead; not the kind with the power to lure you.”

Throughout the author’s seven months at this school, the struggle between alien and natives continues. It may be that the natives are blind to subtle differences which the alien perceives between children of American society and those of other countries. Could it be that some traditionally inalienable rights and freedoms, upon which Americans so firmly and sometimes so rudely insist, do not, in fact, free them at all, because the necessary component, *responsibility*, is missing?

Before the writer’s final vision becomes reality, for it is written as a vision of the future, *hope* and *awareness* in the heart of man *must* direct his actions. They must keep man from espousing the religions on Cosmet, Ashton-Warner’s mythical planet of mutation. The religions are three. One is lying. One is the “Wannadowanna” assurance that life is “built entirely around what they want or don’t want,” with no deterrent consequences. One calls true believers to worship three gods sitting side by side: the dollar sign, the Adman, and a legendary spirit called Feeling. No one really knows what the last is . . . only that something is missing from their lives.

Indeed, we must become aware in order to choose the good—but no awareness will help us if we have lost the capacity to be moved by the distress of another human being, by the friendly gaze of another person, by the song of a bird, by the greenness of grass. If man becomes indifferent to life there is no longer any hope that he can choose the good. Then, indeed, his heart will have so hardened that his “life” will be ended. If this should happen to the entire human race or to its most powerful members, then the life of mankind may be extinguished at the very moment of its greatest promise.²

² Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man*, p. 150. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964.