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What is Education for?: A Review Essay



by Del Vander Zee

To design with Earth in mind and foster ecological literacy would be the answer of David W. Orr. These phrases capture the titles of three critically important books authored by David W. Orr, in which he lays out his analysis of what is happening in modern culture and modern education: *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Island Press, 1994; 2004); *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World* (SUNY, 1992); and *The Nature of Design: Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention* (Oxford University

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Press, 2002).¹ This review will attempt to give highlights of Orr's critique by quoting liberally to get a sense of the depth and extent of his radical insights. By radical, I mean analysis that gets at the root of what is happening in culture and education. Orr does not make a superficial foray into how better to do assessment or how better to equip students for a changing technopolis; rather, he begins with a commitment to deal with what is needed to equip culture in such a way that sustainable living on planet Earth might become an option. Education has a formative role in this endeavor.

The occasion for this review is the tenth anniversary edition of Orr's *Earth in Mind—On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect* (Island Press, 2004). What was so eloquently stated in the 1994 edition was deemed important enough to republish, although I would have preferred a more evaluative commentary on what had transpired (for better or worse) in the ten ensuing years. To that extent, the tenth anniversary edition is a disappointment: it has only an updated introduction and one new closing essay. However, Orr has not been silent in his continuing observation of what is happening in education and culture. For some of these observations and critiques, we can turn to his 2002 book, *The Nature of Design—Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention* (Oxford University Press), which contains his views of the paradigms that undergird the apparent intention of industrial societies. In fact, many chapters in *Nature of Design* are elaborations of chapters and ideas in *Earth in Mind*. To appreciate Orr's views, one must understand the context of

his thinking. Orr is a professor of environmental studies; he is a deeply reflective scientist who frequently writes essays in *Conservation Biology*;² and he is the author of many thoroughly researched books. I would consider him a modern prophet, one crying in a wilderness of confusion about education, culture, and the future.

Orr writes with passion and sometimes harsh criticism. What is his underlying motivation? He seems to be driven by an intense concern for the biodiversity of Earth and the looming cultural problems that, when seen from an ecosystem perspective, are on a collision course with human societies. In other words, Western human societies (i.e. industrial societies) are not only heading in the wrong way but are being informed (educated) in the wrong way, and the developing world seems only too eager to follow. Part One of *Earth in Mind* presents the argument that we are faced with “the problem of education,” not problems “in” education:

The conventional wisdom is that education is good, and the more of it one has, the better. . . . The truth is that without significant precautions, education can equip people merely to be more effective vandals of the earth. If one listens carefully, it may even be possible to hear the Creation groan every year in May when another batch of smart, degree-holding, but ecologically illiterate, *Homo sapiens* who are eager to succeed are launched into the biosphere.” (EIM 5)

Further,

[t]he great conceit of the industrial world is the belief that we are exempt from the laws that govern the rest of creation. Nature in that view is something to be overcome and subordinated. Designing with nature, on the other hand, disciplines human intentions with the growing knowledge of how the world works as a physical system. (NOD 4)

These quotations provide a glimpse of how education, design, and ecological literacy come together. But Orr’s ideas of proper “design” are not only about how to pattern better green widgets but also about how “to make decent communities that fit their places with elegant frugality” (NOD 11). What he is calling for is a design for culture itself, a populace that has a world picture different

from the industrial conceit cited above; in short, he is calling for a fundamental shift in the dominant social paradigm: “In other words, ecological design is the careful meshing of human purposes with the larger patterns and flows of the natural world and the study of those patterns and flows to *inform* [my emphasis] human purposes” (EIM 104). To the extent that higher education (and all education for that matter) is about informing human purposes, it would seem that ecological literacy would be an absolute minimum outcome for any core or general education program.³ We live in an era when it is expected that most people study beyond secondary school and pursue one or more college degrees, in an era which can easily claim the highest acumen of intellectual knowledge in human history, in an era of instant access to and distribution of knowledge. Why, then, are the planet’s life-support systems still in a state of decline?

Two chapters/essays in *NOD* attempt to give explanation to this issue: In “Ideasclerosis” Orr identifies this malady as the inability to get at and apply what is apparently known. What seems to be unbending is a cultural faith in the speed and scale of anything that contributes to “pecuniary accumulation, convenience and power” (NOD 70). Consequently, “some of us live more conveniently, but the world is more toxic, dangerous, and far less lovely than it might be otherwise”(70). That this happens in modern industrial societies must mean that they “lacked reliable means of appraising the collateral effects of their actions, which is called ‘feedback’” (70). Systems lacking feedback “are by definition dumb” (citing Donella Meadows), and “[a]t large enough scale, they are also dangerous” (70). My (and his) question is this: How can this kind of disconnect continue to go on in academia? Orr ends this essay by a challenge to higher education:

It is not whether higher education will be reinvented, but rather who will do the reinventing and to what purpose. . . . If we, in higher education, cannot make these changes, the possibility that the great transition ahead will be informed by liberally educated people will also decline. That means, in short, that the ideas necessary for a humane, liberal, and ecologically solvent world will be lost in favor of a gross kind of global utilitarianism. (NOD 81-82)

Following “Ideasclerosis,” Orr identifies another cultural pathology in the essay “None So Blind: The Problem of Ecological Denial.” He cites six kinds or evidences of ecological denial: (1) culturally there is great effort “to deny that there are any physical limits to our use of the earth or to the legitimacy of human wants”; (2) unreasonable standards of proof are demanded to admit to the existence of

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environmental threats (e.g. “name one species that went extinct today”); (3) unwarranted inferences are drawn from disconnected pieces of information (e.g. “prices of some raw materials have declined” so they cannot be scarce!); (4) using “ridicule and *ad hominem* attacks” on scientists, clerics, and politicians who are calling for ecological sanity (e.g. applying the labels of doomsayers, romantics, apocalyptics, wackos), which relieve the ridiculers from doing responsible thinking about “complex and long-term issues”; (5) confusion over time scales (e.g. citing climate warming and soil erosion as irrelevant in view of glacial periods and continental drift!); and (6) unwillingness on the part of politicians to come to grips with the large and complex issues facing the environment. Orr gives his reasons for these phenomena of denial in modern society, but I would like to add that there seems to be significant denial in Christian higher education as well, or if not denial, a failure to see ecological literacy as fundamental (see endnote 3).

Not only does Orr suggest that we must ques-

tion the manner in which modern higher education seems to be preparing people for the future in its formal curricula, but he also calls us to analyze the places where we do our educating: “The curriculum embedded in any building instructs as fully and as powerfully as any course taught in it. . . . How it is cooled, heated, and lighted and at what true cost to the world is an utter mystery to its occupants. It offers no clue about the origins of the materials used to build it. It tells no story. With only minor modifications it could be converted to use as a factory or prison. . . . And, the lesson learned is mindlessness, which is to say, it teaches that disconnectedness is normal” (NOD 128). But, a positive note should be added here: there is a (small?) movement on many campuses to build to meet LEED standards.⁴ However, sometimes such goals are resisted because of fears of higher costs. The unaccounted high cost of continuing to foster ignorance and ecological illiteracy is apparently another aspect of denial!

The closing essay in Orr’s book on design is most interesting—“Loving Children: The Political Economy of Design.” This essay follows logically and necessarily, considering his prior books. Since children will inherit the future and the state of the planet we leave, should we not design and educate FOR them? Orr notes that all would claim to love their children and would want the best education for them; but, for what? To acquire more and more while not knowing how, or not even having the skills, to ask about the sources of all our “thneeds”?⁵ Shouldn’t education in love teach us all to know and be able to account for the collateral damage that accompanies access to the globe’s goods in a next-day delivery economy? Or, are we, in effect, systemically denying this as well?

This essay is worth the book, but it is much deeper than a sentimental, “let’s do it for the kids!?” “The important issues for our children are not narrowly scientific. The issues have little to do with symptoms and everything to do with systems” (NOD 211). The following problems are cited as systemic by Orr: (all are my paraphrasing from his given context): (1) a nutritional economy that fosters obesity, (2) a materials economy that fosters increased endocrine inhibitors and other toxins including heavy metals, (3) an entertainment econo-

my that tends to trash deep thinking and artistic appreciation, (4) a social system that has few methods to assess or choose alternatives to environmental risks in a globalized world, (5) a disconnected world in which children are increasingly removed from “wild” nature and the associated creative and imaginative playing, and (6) a popular cultural system that labels current conditions as only anomalies and not as systemic—all solvable with more technology and more diversionary things. In Orr’s words, “We have unwittingly created a global political economy that prizes economic growth and accumulation of things above well-being of children” (211). Some might criticize Orr for going from preaching to meddling here, but in my view he is simply doing the equivalent of driving out the money changers.

David W. Orr has been writing for many years about finding a new paradigm for living responsibly and sustainably—for the sake of preserving biodiversity and for maintaining and even enhancing the quality of human life and dignity both for now and especially for the future. As I see it, there is only one alternative to finding a new social paradigm; that is to put unbounded faith and fortune in technology. (This is essentially where we are headed.) But let us hope that in the next few decades, humankind will be able to muster the courage and divert sufficient resources to do better than what has been sustained by a study of the biotic and physical processes of creation over the past millennia. There is nothing now or in human history that would suggest that this change is possible. What is needed is frank confession of our arrogance and fundamental ignorance. Of course, this confession won’t come from science or from technology or from education, nor will it come from simply hoping for a new social paradigm (design)! But if we educate within a framework of seeing humankind as *imago dei*, as is revealed for Christians in Holy Scriptures, then and only then will there be a basis for being humble and walking before our God. If there is a new design, it must be a design “with” nature, or creation, not against nature. We can be thankful that modest improvements have been made within evangelical groups over the past few years relative to attitudes toward creation stewardship.⁶ Maybe, just maybe, the Spirit is blowing anew!

Endnotes

1. Books cited in this essay are as follows: David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*, 10th Anniversary Edition (Island Press, 2004); David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*, 1st Edition (Island Press, 1994); David W. Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World* (SUNY, 1992); David W. Orr, *The Nature of Design: Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
2. *Conservation Biology* is the journal of the Society of Conservation Biology, which features a column, “Conservation in Context,” often penned by D. Orr.
3. See my chapter “Ecological Literacy in Christian Higher Education: Status and Prospects,” in *Celebrating the Vision: The Reformed Perspective of Dordt College*, ed. John Kok (Dordt College Press, 2004). In this essay I evaluate the pulse of ecological literacy in Christian higher education at the turn of the century.
4. The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System™ is the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction, and operation of high-performance green buildings. LEED provides building owners and operators with the tools they need to have an immediate and measureable impact on their buildings’ performance. (<http://www.usgbc.org/Default.aspx>) The new Environmental Science Building on Oberlin College’s campus stands as a singular example of a sustainably designed building, designed by D.W. Orr; information and details can be found at the following website: <http://www.buildinggreen.com/hpb/overview.cfm?projectid=18>.
5. The word “thneeds” is a whimsy coined by author Dr. Seuss in his book *The Lorax*; it means a combination of wanted “things” becoming “needs.”
6. Witness the work and testimonies of these examples: Dr. Calvin B. De Witt and his founding of Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, Rev. Richard Cizik and his contribution to the greening of the National Association of Evangelicals, and Sir John T. Houghton and his work on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. All are referenced and described in this essay: <http://www.grist.org/news/mandish/2006/10/17/dewitt/>

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