

Transcription of the Q & A session after Gatto's talk, 'The Fourth Purpose' at the Home Education Conference, April 1999.

Gatto answering a question about his own school teaching practice in NY:

The question is, how old were the children, and how long did it take them to move from what they were familiar with to this new reality?

The answer to the first is very easy. From the beginning of my teaching career to the end, my children were always thirteen years old. I had deliberately selected that age because I was told that it was impossible to do anything with kids that old, and so at the beginning it struck me that I couldn't possibly get in trouble if no one could do anything with these kids. Some few were twelve, and some few were fourteen, but I would say they were always thirteen, and the horror of opening your door every September, (laughs) and suddenly there is a whole new group of thirteen year olds in front of you is something that we could take up another time (laughs).

The strategy that I used to move them from point A to point B was not exhortation, largely because it doesn't work and it arouses fears in all sorts of children depending on the background that they've had. So what I did in the first two or three or four days, the first week of every term, was simply to observe as closely as I could, every single kid as an individual. I never looked at the school records, never. In thirty years teaching I never opened the record box, and several times I discarded the record box so no one else could open it, but er ha, that's another felony ha ha ha. Er, you would notice immediately I suppose if some of you have large families of six or seven, you notice immediately distinct differences among the people, and some of those differences are that the kids are providing work for themselves. Those are the people I would approach first, and I would say "look, there's a shadow deal that goes on, if you can get it past your Mum, in this class where you can have a private curriculum all year long in my class and as often as I can manage it in other peoples classes as well" - which turned out to be pathetically easy. I never knew a teacher who really minded if the kids didn't show up. I suppose they exist, but I never ran into one of them. (Ripples of laughter through the hall)

So one by one children would vanish from my class, and in the States a class size is probably always pretty close to thirty, so when it gets down to twenty, other children say "Where did these people go?" (laughter). And then you say "There is this lay-off possibility that's available to all of you, but it's voluntary, and you've got to get it cleared with your Mum first. But if you can convince me that you have something that in lieu of what I'm going to offer is equally valuable, and you can convince your Mum, then I'll become your assistant. I'll write letters and make phone calls, and clear the deck for you." So now there's always a hard core half of the class who really gets angry. They say, and often it's the brightest kids, I mean the ones who are used to such a 'tell us what we have to do to get an A, and that's be done with it!'. And I say, you don't have to go anywhere, but if you stay here, I said, I was reared part-time by Jesuits, and you're getting a Jesuit intellectual curriculum, so you can expect that when you step out of the eighth grade that you won't have to crack a book until you step into graduate college, because that's how fast we're going.

So that's how I began immediately. I never once in one of the years, I probably did this for twenty years, ever reached a point where the entire class was emptied out. The final hard core are those people, and I know you are all familiar with them, who are terrified about doing anything - taking the initiative with anything. They're the kids who often in later school never raise their hand, never participate, and yet even with them, when the numbers are reduced to nine or eight, it's much much easier to work on a seminar basis with them. There's some real profit comes from that. So that's a long-winded answer to your question.

Second Question

Member of the audience:

I feel I should announce myself, and I thank you very much for presenting such an eloquent description of your experience and also of the reasons why we should be considering, if not already doing, home education. I came here to listen and to learn. I know very little about it. I have a four and a half year old daughter, and her mother is extremely keen on home education. However, my question comes out of my context, which is obviously very different to yours. My context is that I was state-educated, in this country. My context is that as a result of that education I got to medical school. Not only got to medical school, but got awarded a scholarship to medical school. I then went on to study oral surgery. I then went on to practice in general practice for seven years. I then, once again through the state, did a post graduate degree in ecology, through which I got another job, and changed career. I've had several careers. The one thing that my education has done for me, my state education, has given me the tools to learn and to change career at will, and I'm very, very grateful for that. And the one thing I don't know, and I'd love you to explain, is how can we take the risk with a new young life like my four and a half year old daughter. What evidence is there that we may entrust her education to people like me or her mother who have no experience of education. I'd like to know why we should trust ourselves to educate when I know that my teachers were so wonderful to me. My experience was so terrific, by and large, that I feel very very reticent to trust myself to that job.

Gatto:

Thank you, that's a wonderful question, and at the end of the week when I've finished answering.... (laughter). No, what I'm going to have to do is partially address that because of constraints of time, but I recognise that as utterly legitimate. The fact that some fraction of the population passes through orthodox schooling, and for ever after has an advantage in careers is how the system was set up. That does nothing to denigrate the good experiences people had, but I think it forces assumptions on us that aren't true. There are an enormous number of prominent people, even in the hostile climate of the twentieth century who in fact have not passed through a schooling experience. I could mention one of the great villains, or two of them: Darwin himself of course is not a schooled person. George Washington had two years. Benjamin Franklin, two years, was thrown out of both schools he was put in.

Washington of course I think had a distinguished political career, because he refused a kingship, or we would have a similar situation to the one you folks have passed through. Franklin was a distinguished scientist in his day, as well as a distinguished publisher. Certainly Britain would never have lost the American colonies if Benjamin Franklin - the son of a lower middle class candle maker, mind you, who had seventeen kids, thirteen of whom lived, so there couldn't have been too many luxuries to pass round - if Benjamin Franklin hadn't at the age of sixty I believe, taught himself French, - and you folks know the French better than I do, but I can tell you I will never speak another word of French in my life, having tried it in France, and gales of laughter, angry laughter by the way, not good natured. Franklin went to Paris, lived among the nobility, speaking French, and convinced them that America had a chance to overthrow the British military power which was the most formidable on the planet. Now, that he did that in French, once again should cause your eyebrows to raise, because I'm sure you've been told, as I've been told, that past the age of seven or eight or nine, you'll never speak a foreign language without an accent; it will never become part of you, although I've run into probably literally a hundred Korean Chinese kids who speak unaccented slangy English after four or five years, and yet it took the hundredth to convince me. There is a distinguished pool of people, in fact I will be talking about some of them tomorrow, unschooled who have the highest positions in literature, the arts, the sciences - er, if Pat Farenga's around? - Pat, who's that professor on the west coast who's sent three of his kids to Harvard, two of them who are now doctors?

Pat Farenga:
David Colfax.

Gatto:

David Colfax! The reason I can't remember David's name is he always makes fun of me when we're.... Er, David Colfax's book, 'Homeschooling for Excellence', did you bring some of those? - Is it?! - that's Pat's wife right down here sitting next to him (laughter) - I'm blind as a bat...

So, Colfax's four kids went to college, three of them to Harvard on scholarships, two of them to med school I believe, and they're now practicing doctors, and they were, although they had been University lecturers I think before, there's a huge cloud cast on them for some kind of affiliation with, you know street revolution, whatever, so they really weren't in a friendly learning environment. A book I would suggest Doctor, that you would read with great personal profit to yourself, is by a very, very famous American physicist, Robert Scott Root-Bernstein. He's a professor at either MIT or Harvard, and in a very, very thick volume that came out four or five years ago called 'Discovering', he undertakes to anatomise all the great scientific discoveries of the twentieth century, and his conclusion is that formal schooling is in every case, not almost every case, an impediment to the type of intellectual structure you require to go far and fast. He said it's very good to make scientific administrators, or folks who follow orders and call themselves scientists, but to do the actual seeing of things in new ways, he said it is a strong impediment to that. So here we have blue ribbon profession, physics, a blue ribbon American university, and besides the guy has some credentials in his field, he's a well known major physicist I'm told, and the book is crystal clear.

Another member of the audience:

I just wanted to comment on the question because I believe that if I as a well-educated person end up questioning myself as to whether I can trust myself, then that says something about my education.

Gatto:

You know it's really strange how our attention has been diverted from reality. There was a major intellectual study of world literature came out in the United States last year, or the year before, about the canon of western society, and according to the author Bloom, before Shakespeare and after Shakespeare, are two precisely different parts of world literature, that the individual had no status at all. No one would have thought of concentrating on the course of a life developing prior to Shakespeare, and after Shakespeare it could not be avoided, and I don't know how far he went in school, but according to Shakespearian lore, not nearly as far as he went in hoisting a pint and getting inspired by ladies!

Comment from an ex-teacher:

I'm really also answering the question stated by the doctor there, and in support of what you've been saying also. I am an ex-teacher. I taught in an inner city multi-racial school, and I gave up when it became more crowd control than actual teaching, and I'm one of those awful teachers that told you that your kids were never going to achieve anything, were as thick as two short planks, or whatever, so if you want to hurl abuse at me afterwards you can.

I'm not intrinsically against state education, or education in schools. My daughter went to one of the best independent schools, and has done very well there, but I have since been blessed with the birth of a son who is now 11 with special needs, and he has more behavioral problems than any of the pupils I dealt with in the past, and who I individually used to hate. So I have had to come to terms with it from both sides of the desk, and I now see the folly of my ways, and if I'm determined to give him a better education than I know he will receive in a state school, and that's from the side of a teacher and a parent, then I think anybody, you know, you've just got to give in to your gut instincts. If you think its better for your kid, then do it. (Applause.)

Gatto:

The really ironic thing is that if it's intellectual depth and breadth and speed that you want, even the finest schools, I went to Cornell and Columbia which in the United States they're considered

elite colleges, and when I said earlier that I never touched what happened to me in third grade with the Jesuits I mean that. It was always attenuated. Remember that Plato said in one of his dialogues, I think it was 'The Apology', that if you charge for teaching, two things will inevitably happen: one, that you will draw the thing out and divide it into smaller and smaller compartments because it's your livelihood, and the second, you'll make things that are relatively simple to learn seem difficult so that you get the necessary status you need in order to manage a group of people. So when he was charged, he was on trial for his life and he was charged with taking money for teaching children, and the only time in the dialogues that he is known to have lost his temper was with that charge. He said, that's ridiculous, because if you do that, these two things will happen: you'll make simple things seem hard to do and you'll stretch things out for ever.

There really is a distinguished body of biographical information that shows how the legitimately great reached their status, and its almost never simple-to-complex, or through these managerial sequences. That would be even if your son or your daughter could avoid the dramatic context of the classroom which is utterly deadly to a huge number of children. It shapes for ever their outlook on the opposite sex and on themselves, and I don't think there's any way to avoid that. You're locked in a room where the teacher thinks that she or he is the centre of attention, and you know that that little girl on the opposite side of the room, that if she makes fun of you, that you will never wake up again. You'll never come to school again. I mean I can put it in a kindly fairy tale way, but it's horrifying, and it really is meant to teach that there is no escape from your destiny. If you look at the Anglican Homily of Obedience, I think the year is 1561, it essentially says this in that wonderful English prose - that you're stuck; and don't try to get out, because God wants it that way.

Wife of doctor who asked the first question:

I want to thank you for your speech; it brought tears to my eyes, because I think it is so very rare that you get a complete presentation as to what lies behind the stages that prevents people from having freedom of choosing their own development.

Gatto:

Thank you.....

Doctor's wife:

What I find very important to point out is that in the difference between myself and Irving, (speaker's husband who spoke earlier) and a lot of that is at the background, is this compartmentalisation of experience so that I can see that there is good things and there are also difficult things or bad ones, and in a way of talking about it it is very easy to not see the connections between these bad ones, and I'll just mention one which I find very important because Irving is Jewish, he was given Hitler salutes at his school as he was growing up, and he has told me that it hurt him, and that is part of how schooling functions. It induces very young minds into modes of thought that lead to what we see in Serbia right now.

Gatto:

You're right. You're absolutely right.....

Doctor's wife:

These things are connected and deeply connected and I thought that was very good in your presentation. That you used your great intellect, and your great power of speech to connect many things which have gone on behind the stage in the last hundred years. Earlier on when I wanted to speak, that's what I wanted to ask. I wanted to ask when did the responsibility for the growth of the human being pass from the family to the state.

And why?!

Gatto:

It was an open question through the middle of the nineteenth century. It was an open question in some nations towards the end of the nineteenth century, but once the economy had been centralised in a relatively few hands, (and I don't want to demonise the people who did that even though I think it was an immense evil, because if life has meaning it's that we write our own stories, and when you're an employee or part of a giant pyramid you take orders for the most part). But once the economy had been centralised, and once an understanding finally of the role of finance, that money moving could find opportunities for itself, once this had crystallised, which took place symbolically - on this movie I'm working on now we symbolically crystallise this in 1882 when your philosopher Herbert Spencer, who really was the reason Darwin got heard about for the most part, came to the United States and spoke at a banquet at Delmonico's Hotel to the wealthiest people I should say on earth who attended, and what he said was that evolution had given us the blueprint that we needed to justify organising all the lives on earth. He was given an enormous treasure in gold by the grateful American industrialists - it was a surprise - he didn't expect that. But they were so grateful that he had shown them how their own lives were justified and what to do in the future.

From that point on, the breeding stock in the United States, (that's a cruel and ugly term, but I think it's the one that most accurately describes it), the breeding stock in the United States was drawn off and reserved in elite private boarding schools that had never existed in the United States before that time. There were perhaps half a dozen of them, but hundreds emerged. The institution of the country club emerged, and perhaps a dozen other ways to short circuit the privileges granted to ordinary people by the American founding documents. They were all put together, not as Marx thought, or at least as we think Marx thought, that some people could bathe in wealth and celebrate their greed, but because they had this ideological dream they could follow now to constantly improve the human species, so this had to be done, the rest of the people had to be organised: had to be organised into the ones that were going to be drawn as assistants into this great system. The Germans called doctors, lawyers, engineers and college professors, (I don't want to inflict my ugly German on you), but it was a 'professional proletariat'. They didn't see those professions as significantly different than farm labourers, they were simply another stage in organising the society.

So this happens at different speeds in different countries, but it all is done by 1915. And it's all coal powers. Germany and Britain and France were the first, but the United States had twice as much coal as those three put together.

You know, one amazing source for this information that comes right here out of London, and it's not readily available any longer, but let me blow the whistle on it right now is the eleventh edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Not any subsequent edition, but the eleventh edition was so proud of what was happening that frequently it just spills the beans: 'We're doing this and aren't we wonderful' (laughs). Well, God bless you all, thank you very much.