



Education for Its Own Sake

Elizabeth May

ABSTRACT

In this commentary the author examines the exciting role that education has played—and still plays—in her life. She discusses the joy of attending law school where legal cases and rulings piqued her thirst for knowledge. Later, she reiterates Jane Jacobs' cautionary warning about education being replaced by "certification" and students being degraded to mere "consumers" of an educational product. She concludes by stressing the importance of protecting and valuing education for its own sake.

When I think of any and every advantage and opportunity through life, those I prize the most have been my educational experiences. I loved school from Grade One. I love learning and believe that that process never stops. Although family financial reverses meant I was never able to complete an undergraduate degree, I was fortunate to access a law school program for older students. Having missed university through most of my twenties, I approached law school as someone who had been lost in a desert offered an oasis of cool water.

Law school was a joy—although few of my fellow students felt that way. I read case law as though each piece of litigation was a pulp novel, full of drama and suspense. And some actually were. Somerset Maugham's brother, a High Court judge, wrote wonderful judgments, as did Lord Denning. My favourite of his began, "It was bluebell time in Kent ..." (1970). I developed my own legal theories: if Lord Denning was the judge, no cricket club could be successfully sued.

Even the first week of law school exams did not dampen my happiness. In fact, friends even asked me if I would please have the decency to stop smiling. There is something magical about sitting at a desk and having someone else decode new and wonderful mysteries. I have on a number of occasions (at Dalhousie and Queens) had the great good fortune to teach courses myself. And now, in my fifties, I love taking courses part-time in theology. I am still not sure what I want to do when I grow up.

The threats to education were best crystallized by Jane Jacobs (2005) in *Dark Age Ahead*. She wrote that true education, particularly through university, was in danger of being replaced by “certification.”

There is a repressive force that wants to see all education justified by the earning power guaranteed by a degree. This is what Jane Jacobs saw as corroding a fundamental pillar of our civilization. You pay your money to get your ticket. Students are degraded to mere “consumers” of an educational product. Education should never be so transactionalized. Education should be about expanding the mind, building the capacity for critical analysis, and allowing students to experience a world beyond their reach. Real education has nothing to do with future income and everything to do with fulfilling potential. Studying philosophy, poetry or dance may not sound like a “realistic” endeavour, but what sort of civilization would we have if we lacked poets, dancers and philosophers. And for those seeking those “practical” degrees, must not they also have at least some contact and understanding of the rest of the tapestry of the world in which we live?

Education for its own sake must be valued and protected. The increasing dumbing down of media, the acceptance of mediocrity in our political leaders, and ugliness in our public spaces, needs to be challenged. Educate. Teach. Learn. Change. Breathe. Dance.

Education in its truest form should lead to a metamorphosis.

References

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Elizabeth May is an environmentalist, writer, activist, lawyer, and leader of the Green Party of Canada. She is a graduate of Dalhousie Law School and was admitted to the Bar in both Nova Scotia and Ontario. She held the position of Associate General Council for the Public Interest Advocacy Centre prior to becoming Senior Policy Advisor to the federal minister of the Environment from 1986 until 1988. Elizabeth became Executive Director of the Sierra Club of Canada in 1989, a position she held until March 2006, when she stepped down to run for leadership of the Green Party of Canada.

She has served on the boards of numerous organizations, including the International Institute for Sustainable Development and as Vice-Chair of the National Round Table on Environment and Economy and is currently a Commissioner of the Earth Charter International Council. Elizabeth became an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2005, and was elected as leader of the Green Party of Canada in 2006.

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