

# Managing the Spiritual Neighborhood

## How to Restore the Conscience of America's Communities

### A Grass Roots Approach



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## Chapter 6

### Two Problems with Public Education

If you were to describe Garden Zone Management in a short sentence, you might say that its purpose is to cultivate a deeper sort of courtesy at the grass roots of society. We've talked in the abstract about how courtesy is more important in our quality of life scheme because it involves action that is closer to awareness. We also saw a number of examples that illustrated how courtesy, and the lack of it, is displayed at the grosser levels of behavior. My perspective in presenting those examples was that of a neighborhood resident, and most of the incidents I described involved neighborhood kids. Clearly when you address quality of life issues, you must keep young people in mind. A good portion of your effort will be directed towards bringing kids along, for they represent society's future. There is of course a program already in operation that aims to educate children. The public school system is in theory the place where young people learn the basic facts of life; the core knowledge required for each person to ... what? Hold a job? Get into college? Become a good citizen? I can't say that I'm sure what exactly the school system hopes to accomplish with its students. I guess the goal is to get each kid a high school diploma, which I believe means that he or she has mastered arithmetic at least, can read and write to some degree, and knows a smattering of facts from a few other fields: geography, social studies, biology, music. The time that you spend in school certainly does affect your eventual development, yet one might argue that it's not until later that the larger picture starts to come into focus; when the fragmented information you retain from your classroom training begins to fall into place relative to a deeper knowledge about the nature of life. In any event, we would all acknowledge that the education of children is important. It is without question an activity in which every community should have an interest. The government certainly seems to be interested in it. There are laws that require a child to attend school until a certain age, and the state and local municipalities spend a big chunk of our tax dollars on running the public schools. As Garden Zone Managers we too would be concerned about what is going on at the local schools. Although a classroom is not exactly part of the garden zone – it's more like an extension of the interior environment – the children who attend nevertheless have a large role to play in the quality of life in the garden zone itself. The future Garden Zone Managers, our community leaders, might very well come out of those schools.

I say all of this as preface to the following observation: The people of this community, my community, do not assign much importance to the education of children. The community's interest is not nearly as serious as you might believe

given the amount of rhetoric you hear from government officials and school administrators on this topic. To use the terminology of the last chapter (see Section 5.6), if you measure the strength of a common interest activity by the degree of community involvement, then in Camp Springs and the nearby parts of Prince George's County, you would have to conclude that children's education is *not* a strong common interest.

You can't tell this from the outside. It's only by spending time in class, with students that the truth becomes apparent. I recently had an opportunity to work as a substitute teacher in the Prince George's public schools, and it was that experience that gave me the full picture. Take all of the coarseness and discourtesy we saw in the neighborhood, increase it by ten-fold, concentrate it in a thirty-by-thirty-foot classroom, and then stand at the front of that room as band after band of twenty to thirty teenagers at a time comes flocking through. Kids who mock you, taunt you and throw things at you when your back is turned; who drop trash in classrooms, toss books out windows and smoke pot in the restrooms; who lie, cheat, steal, pull pranks, and generally show no respect at all for the people who are trying to educate them. This is what the teachers in our schools face every school day, from September to June. Your senses are assaulted by what goes on in a typical high school. Your patience is stretched to the limit. If you want to put your powers of detachment to the acid test, a classroom is the place to do it. Just the profanity alone, so thoughtlessly recited by these children, is enough to make you throw up your hands in despair. Despair at such crass behavior in such young kids. Despair at the utterly NON-educational atmosphere in these supposed halls of learning. Despair at the sorry state of our American culture. For these children directly reflect that culture ... the pop culture ... the TV culture ... the Hollywood/Las Vegas/Madison Avenue culture. You cannot tell me that the community cares about the education of children when they allow this raucous environment to persist in the institutions where their children must gain the knowledge that prepares them for life.

It's not my intention to undertake a full-blown analysis of the public education system, but there are several points I'd like to make based on what I observed during the time I spent subbing at Friendly High School, just up Allentown Road from Camp Springs. Apart from the gross incivility, the thing that stands out most at school is the absence of reality. Everything takes place in a vacuum. The classwork, the activities ... everything is disconnected, unrelated, to the world outside. Granted, you would expect that practical application would take a back seat when you're learning theory, but what I'm referring to goes deeper. Very few of these kids are seriously focused on what they are doing. They are not emotionally or mentally able to give full attention to their studies. Rather, the whole experience is a game to them. Part of the problem is that there is nothing at stake. The world doesn't come to an end if they don't do their alge-

bra. They still go home to a hot meal and a comfortable bed regardless of whether their biology work is done. For most students school time is an extension of play time. And since the attitudes of kids mimic the attitudes of the adults around them, this shows that we as a community, and as a society, don't take school seriously either. Actually, what it really shows is that there is no reality in *our* lives, we adults. We too are playing life as if it were a game, and the children pick right up on this.

To see just how much like a game school is, you need only examine the attendance figures. On any given day fifteen percent of the student body do not come to school at all. Another five percent skip class on a regular basis – they're tardy, they don't come back from lunch, they wander the halls. How long do you think these kids would last on a job, in a business? But what's really amazing is that the school administrators keep trying to make them come. They write tardy slips, fill out discipline forms, call their parents, hand out suspensions. Clearly by chasing these kids around the hallways we merely serve to enable their game playing. The principals and teachers stand side-by-side with the students as comedians in this farce. This brings up the second point: You cannot force someone to learn. Just as force doesn't work for teaching courtesy, it's equally useless when it comes to academics. We need to change our perspective about education. We shouldn't be running after people, dragging them to class. School should be purely voluntary. Those who are alert enough to see the value of it will be *attracted* to school. The kids, their families, their communities will understand that it's a *privilege* to attend school. Only then will students show respect for their teachers, and for the institution. As for the kids who do no work, who disrupt the class, who insult the teachers, that's a separate problem. Whatever we do with those kids – and we do need to do something with them – but whatever activity we involve them in, it must take place outside the school, or at the very least, separate from the classes where the conscientious students are working. It's absurd to keep letting disruptive kids back into class. It's simply not fair to the others.

No doubt it seems that I'm stating the obvious here. It is certainly obvious to most of the teachers you talk to. But the school administration apparently doesn't see it this way. Students of widely varying abilities go to the same schools, attend the same classes and mingle in the same corridors. However, it's not so much the different levels of ability that cause problems, it's the level of maturity. In other words, it's not intelligence but character development that distinguishes the good students from the bad. As we've already discussed, school-age kids don't display a lot of character anyway. Few of them are capable of true responsibility, concern, sensitivity, and so forth. But when you do happen to find a few mature, clear-thinking students, the contrast between them and the rest of the class is so dramatic that you have to wonder what could have

possessed us to collect such utterly different creatures together in one room. The good kids show us just how far behind the bad kids actually are when it comes to character development. By ignoring the blatant differences in character we show the entire student body what little regard we have for courtesy – we the community adults, we the supposed leaders and teachers. It's exactly analogous to the situation in the neighborhoods. The argument is the same as it was regarding the quality of life. We need to turn our priorities completely around; we need to put courtesy at the top of the list, and children need to clearly understand that this is how it must be.

As for what to do with the kids who are not yet ready to be serious students, the bottom line is this: There needs to be more involvement on the part the community, especially the community elders. Here then, is another huge spiritual hole to fill. It's a whole other area on which the garden zone leadership must put its attention. Most everyone agrees that we have to increase the ratio of teachers to students. I submit that the way to do this is not by sending more teachers to the schools, rather, one must expand the school into the community; make the community an extension of the school. But you must first *establish* a community before any of this is possible; a real community, that is, a Natural Community. As we have seen, that whole process is itself an educational undertaking. If we could transform the community into a school, the teachers and administrators would no longer be strangers, visitors from another city, anonymous figures who serve as the target of pranks. Rather, they would be people with whom you live, and on whom your health and well-being depends, you meaning the pupil. Conversely, the lives and livelihood of the community members will depend on the students. It is in this fashion that we can inject some reality into the education of children. If a kid shows signs of becoming a screw-off, a prankster, or in the worst case, a criminal, then the community will sense it immediately and take appropriate action to correct the problem. How will they correct it? Again, we come back to the issue of spiritual development, and all that we have discussed thus far. You would like to say that the right approach for handling the worst kids is to get tough on them, but that raises the question of how one gets tough without using force. The solution I think, is to pull in the reins. You must narrow the range of motion. Give a kid something very specific to do, and make that his platform for experiencing the real world. If the practice of courtesy is like acting in a stage play, you would want to give a kid a specific part in the play, a bit part, and have him or her practice it over and over until it goes smoothly. But it should be more than just a mechanical repetition. Rather, we must ritualize a kid's activity. Ideally the kid's ritual should be included in a larger array of community rituals. You start him off with a small role, and if you detect the potential for greater development, you can introduce other parts, other rituals, deeper knowledge. Little by little you give the kid more freedom. Does

this mean that you must be selective about which kids get to learn which subjects? Yes it does. But it also means that every kid gets an 'A' in every subject he takes. He has to get an 'A'. There is no other choice. Are we implying that you might have to decide early on which path a kid will take through life? The answer is yes to that too. You may indeed decide to make one kid a plumber, another a priest, and a third a civil engineer before they get out of high school. Perhaps before they have even finished junior high. I must admit, however, that it's not at all clear how one would go about determining which child was best suited for which path.

It seems that we have once again opened up a rather complex topic with our line of reasoning. The question of how we decide who will play what role in society touches on some deep aspects of our culture. For the moment I'd be happy if we could determine who would play the role of the grass roots leader, the Garden Zone Manager. If we could single out a few promising young minds who are inclined toward serving the community, and introduce them to some of the ideas we've been discussing, then we would be taking a positive step in that direction. In the meantime someone had better start paying closer attention to what is going on in the classrooms, and find a way to improve the connection between the schools and the surrounding neighborhoods. Apart from becoming a substitute, as I did, or a full-time teacher, there aren't all that many ways to get involved in school affairs. I suppose you could connect with school kids by tutoring. In Prince George's County they have an after-school program called "Oasis" for that purpose. The PTA also comes to mind. What else? Field trips maybe? I guess the real question is not how to educate kids while they are physically in school, but how to educate them before they even get there. The preventive approach requires that we figure out where the bad behavior of students originates and address the problem there. This points us directly back to the homes, the families and the communities. In this respect it is indeed we who are the teachers. And how do we teach them? Well, at present we teach kids by pumping hour after hour of television tripe into their brains. We produce the gansta' rap, the techno-rave and the shock-rock albums that they listen to on the walkmen that we build for them. We sell them the alcohol, the cigarettes and the drugs that they consume while they're enjoying the music. And we raise them in a society where there is no longer any vestige of dignified, discrete conduct in personal relations. Kids automatically pick up the lowest values of culture when no one provides them with a glimpse of the finer values; or, more precisely, when no one shows them *how* to glimpse the finer values. In America it seems that we don't even know what finer value means when it comes to culture.

We have done a lot of theoretical meandering thus far, and we could no doubt continue at length in this vein, issuing broad criticisms as we go, but in order to narrow the focus somewhat I would like to discuss two specific prob-

lems related to school children and public education that I encountered while working at Friendly. They are: (a) the poor connection between schools and the environment, and (b) the problem of children who harass other children. I chose these not because they are the most serious issues to be addressed. On the contrary, schools are grappling with even tougher problems – drug use, poor grades and a shortage of teachers, among others – but you have to start somewhere, and these two problems are clearly universal. I dare say that there isn't a public school in the country where you won't run into both of them. Moreover, these issues tie in well with what we've been discussing, and their ultimate solution may depend on the success of a program like Garden Zone Management.

### *6.1 Passion For The Yellow-Billed Cuckoo*

For several years I've been keeping a casual eye on the bird life in Westchester, particularly the species that visit the backyard feeder. When I first arrived it was common to see the yellow-billed cuckoo (*coccyzus americanus*) in the neighborhood. Its plumage is not all that striking, but it has a distinctive voice, a series of emphatic clucks, that I would hear coming from the heavy foliage of the trees during the warm months. I'm not sure when, but at some point I noticed that I was no longer hearing that familiar call. It became apparent that these birds had stopped nesting in our neighborhood. It's not often that changes in the ecology, the loss of species and what-have-you, are brought to one's immediate consciousness, at least not to us non-scientists. In the case of the yellow-billed cuckoo, the species hasn't actually been lost – it is still common, just not right here in Westchester. Nevertheless, I *felt* the absence when these birds stopped calling on my street. The loss had more to do with me than it did with the bird. Not hearing that call anymore brought home how vulnerable wildlife is to the encroachment of human habitation.

I talked about this loss to students in a biology class that I happened to cover. The regular instructor hadn't left any classwork, so I was ad-libbing. I thought that I would try to create a connection for these kids between what they were learning in school and something tangible that was taking place in the local environment. But the kids' reaction caught me off guard. I had expected that there be at least *some* interest. This was a biology class after all. Yet not only was there no interest, these students were down-right scornful.

"Cuckoo? Who's cuckoo?" It was a big joke to them. They obviously had not the slightest notion, the least inkling, of where I was coming from. Oh, they understood that I was talking about a bird, certainly. But a loss of species? Huh?

"Don't you ever watch birds? Hasn't your teacher taken you on field trips? Taken you bird watching?"

Derisive laughter. "Bird watching ... haw, haw, haw. Dude watches birds, y'aw!"

A personal loss? A neighborhood loss? Not for them. For these kids it didn't register. Yet I know for certain that biology students at Friendly were taught about the very problem that I was describing, the destruction of habitat and the threat to species. So here's the challenge: How do we get these kids to feel the loss of the yellow-billed cuckoo? How do we get them to a state where such an event elicits sympathy and not derision? Where instead of laughter, it brings about sadness and the sober realization that what we humans do has a permanent effect on the natural world?

Let's put it another way. How do we get kids *excited* about the yellow-billed cuckoo? Excited the same way they get excited about, say, pro-basketball. I had an earth science class one time where the topic of the day among the boys in the class was whether or not a certain ball player, a guard I think it was, could "go to his left." Boy, did these kids get vocal about the skills of that guard. They were literally shouting at each other. One kid would defend his favorite player, or team, and another would argue vehemently on behalf of someone else, then a third kid, and a fourth would chime in about some other player, some other team, some other contest, and who was going whip whose butt. They spent a good half-hour in this mode, occasionally taking time to glance through a couple of cheap, glossy magazines that were passed around. I finally interrupted and asked if any of them actually played ball themselves, on a team. I think maybe one said that he was in a playground league, but the others were only spectators.

It's ridiculous, isn't it? It's absurd that children show this much passion about an activity in which they don't even participate, a sport that they watch on TV, played by people they will never meet.

None of these kids did any classwork that day. Earth science was the farthest thing from their minds. I listened to them for a moment and tried to imagine that same group having a similarly passionate discussion about birds, or about anything at all related to the natural world. It struck me how incredibly far off course we have strayed in modern society, and how gargantuan is the task of setting things straight again. Yet the solution isn't really that complicated. When you talk about the passion of a child's mind, the object of the passion makes no difference to its intensity, at least not on the level where these kids are acting. We could just as easily bring them up to worship, say, famous chefs if we wanted to. So why not worship the yellow-billed cuckoo? Why not get passionate about the state of the garden zone? It so happens that Friendly High is located in a semi-rural area. There are woods right along side the school, and pastures across the street. You can step right off the parking lot into farmland and

forest. Yet you wonder how many people at the school appreciate the value of that idyllic location. Do you think any of the teachers or administrators ever consider the position of their school in the environment? If they do, they sure aren't conveying the idea to the pupils. The public schools are hooked into the environmental movement just as deeply as the rest of society. They preach the same sermon that everyone else does – save the whales, and all that. However, it is only biology and earth science students who hear this sermon, and the only time they hear it is while they are taking those particular courses.<sup>1</sup> If the environment were as important as people make it out to be, shouldn't all students be getting the message? Consider for example, courses such as government, cooking and parenting? Couldn't they also incorporate an environmental angle in them? In fact, I submit that those courses are incomplete without such an angle. And how about music and art? Not many people recognize the environmental component of the arts, because not many people recognize that the environment is continuous, from the wilderness, through the garden zone, and into our private compartments. Clearly painters, designers and sculptors by their works give shape to the interior environment. The same is true for composers, except that music affects the auditory rather than the visual aspect of environment. When a kid puts a walkman on his head, he has radically altered his world. With that music playing in his ears he might be in the same room with you physically, but mentally he is sitting on the moon. In any case, sermonizing on these points is not enough. Just as with the sermons we hear in church, it takes more than talk to bring out the deeper levels of a person's character, and it is only when those deeper levels are reached that a true appreciation for the environment can develop.

This, then is a task worth tackling. How does one go about touching a kid's emotions, his passions? Attention all of you would-be Garden Zone Managers; you the wisest, the most committed in the community. Apply your intellects to this puzzle.

## *6.2 The Problem With Bullies*

Here's another tough problem for you: What do we do about the bullies of the school? The boys, and sometimes girls, who pick on other kids? This is not a new problem, clearly, but that doesn't diminish its importance. There are children who spend their adolescence and young adulthood living in fear. Fear of

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<sup>1</sup> There is some question about whether the picture of the environment presented to students is a purely earth-centric one. I detected a distinct corporate influence in the environmental instruction at Friendly. For example, in one biology class that I had, the students watched a video produced by chemical giant Monsanto. It showed how they used the herbicide 'Roundup' to manage habitat in certain local ecosystems. The film was clearly a propaganda effort on the part of the manufacturer.

being taunted and harassed; fear of getting roughed-up by school yard thugs. For, once you have been abused by a bully, you don't soon forget the experience. You're always having to look out for your tormentor ... in the hallways, on the school bus, in the neighborhood. And it isn't necessarily the worst of the bad guys who does this kind of thing. Even kids who are otherwise fairly well behaved will push another kid around if they perceive that he is timid, less aggressive, or less able than they are.

I had a boy in one of my classes at Friendly who was victimized by these tough-guy wannabes. From my vantage point he didn't stand out much except that he kept to himself and did his work, but apparently those characteristics alone were enough to set him apart in the minds of his schoolmates. Some of the other boys in the class belonged to a rowdier crew. They were football-jock types who were always trying to out-class one another. They had to demonstrate that they possessed the minimum amount of coolness to be counted among the school's macho set. It was all quite childish of course. It's not exactly clear why boys feel compelled to participate in this adolescent jousting. I wonder if the reason that they must prove themselves to one another is because the adults around them don't require them to prove anything. In other words, if the more mature men – or women, as it were – in the community demanded more from these boys, if the adults showed their own leadership and mental toughness by having a stronger hand with the kids, then the kids would be trying to prove themselves to the adults rather than to each other. They wouldn't have to invent their own criteria for coolness, rather, the standard would be set by the community.

At Friendly when a substitute takes a class, more often than not the students treat it like a free period, which means they don't do any work. Even if an assignment was left for them, you're lucky if you can get them to actually stay in the room, let alone open up a book. Mostly they pass the hour talking, socializing and horsing around. It's not unusual for kids to throw things at each other – crumpled paper, plastic bottles, candy, pencils – anything at all that is disposable and readily within reach. Usually these missiles are tossed in fun, as a tease, towards someone you pal around with. However, in this one history class I had, it appeared that the quiet kid – Gerard, I'll call him – was targeted not out of friendly playfulness, but for some other reason. I happened to look up just as a flying projectile hit him in the head. It appeared to be a paper clip, and judging by its velocity it must have been launched with a rubber band. When I saw what took place, I immediately demanded to know who was shooting paper clips. I didn't catch who shot it, but I could tell that it came from the side of the room where the macho boys were sitting. Gerard looked over in that direction, but said nothing. Needless to say, no one wanted to take credit for the hit. There was a momentary pause in the horseplay as a few kids looked up, and then the general uproar continued. I later learned that this was not the only prank that

Gerard had endured. I happened to overhear him report a property theft to the vice-principal. It seems that someone had stolen his glasses. No one steals another person's prescription eye-glasses for their monetary value. Clearly people were going out of their way to torment this boy.

Gerard was not the only kid who was getting harassed at the school. I was present when a kid in another class, a girl this time, also had to suffer taunts and threats from a classmate. Alicia was a very sweet girl whom I briefly got to know in a parenting class that I covered. She was warm and talkative, with a sort of quizzical, questioning look in her eyes. She seemed to sense that there was something more mysterious about life than what we see on the surface, like a child who just arrived on earth a few minutes ago and is wondering what kind of strange and beautiful place is this where she has landed.

There were no desks in this particular class; rather, a couple of long tables were arranged where everyone sat together. The kids were supposed to be writing a paragraph about what they would do as parents; what things they would teach to their own kids. I was sitting off to one side working on my laptop when Alicia came over to ask about the assignment. I was struck by her friendliness. It was unusual. Students don't usually get very chummy with substitutes. On the contrary, they're more likely to challenge and insult them, especially someone new like me. After we talked for a bit, I turned my attention back to the work I was doing, and a minute or two later I noticed that another girl had come up and was standing over Alicia, taunting her in some fashion. For a moment I was confused. What I was hearing didn't make sense. It appeared that this other girl was actually trying to start a fight, and it didn't matter to her that I, the teacher, was sitting right there. The girl went right ahead with her taunts as if I were invisible. I don't even remember what she said; only that it was menacing and threatening, and that it sounded like a continuation of something that had begun in the past. Alicia for her part just sat there without reaction, looking up at the girl. I finally got up and intervened, and the girl went back to her seat. Later on as the students were leaving I said something to her about it, asking what her problem was with Alicia, why she kept trying to fight her. It seemed that this other girl had some sort of grudge against her. Yet it was inconceivable that Alicia could have done anything to bring this on. She was far too sweet, far too good-natured. No one in their right mind would ever want to hurt this child. All I could figure was that the other girl was meaner, more aggressive, but at the same time somehow jealous of Alicia, jealous of her sweetness perhaps.

What is most disturbing about these episodes is that no one does anything to stop it. Just as with the petty crime we see in the neighborhoods, it's not a big enough deal to us. Yet I guarantee you that for the kids who are getting pushed around, their lives have become pure hell. At the most basic level harassing another person amounts to discourtesy. It's an especially nasty sort of discourtesy,

a sort that demands that responsible people intervene on behalf of the victims. But intervention is reactionary. In Alicia's situation my intervening during class that day might have given her a brief respite, but it certainly would not keep that other girl from threatening her again at the next opportunity. What we really need are measures that are preventive. As we've seen, true prevention requires that we engage these kids in a program that exposes them to pure awareness; that brings out an experience of the inner aspect of existence, so that refinement of action can occur. But that takes time. In cases of harassment you must do something immediately, and the only action that makes sense is to separate the rude kids, the harassers, from those who show more development. We need to pin-point the bullies, the wise-guys and most especially the kids who are violent, and keep them away from the children who act more maturely. Alternatively, we can identify the well-behaved students, and provide them with a place where they can study in peace. By doing this we will not only solve the problems of individuals like Gerard and Alicia, but also demonstrate the great importance we have placed on courtesy. There is thus at least some measure of prevention, of education, in separating kids. It is not totally reactionary.

One cannot emphasize enough the seriousness of this problem, and the immediacy of the situation. These students are being harassed *now*. Action needs to be taken *now*. If you want to hire more staff, build new facilities, institute new programs, that's great, but in the meantime these kids need relief. And Gerard and Alicia aren't the only ones. Over and over you see children taunting each another, making threats, and verbally abusing other kids. Much of the abuse is incredibly vulgar, and the manner in which it is delivered ... the tone, the facial expression ... is quite hateful, as if the person spewing this trash truly intended to inflict bodily harm on his classmate. Yet the kids aren't at all ashamed about it. They act like this is the normal way to talk. It's disturbing to say the least.

Now certainly a good percentage of kids make their way through public school without ever being hassled or threatened. But for us that's not good enough. When you live by the philosophy of prevention, nothing less than one hundred percent will do. Realistically, if I were the parent of one of these children, at the very first sign of abuse from another student I would simply withdraw my child from the school. And right now, given the current state of the Prince George's school system, that's the advice I would have to give to people in my own community. Yes, it's unfair that your child should have to suffer because a school supported by your tax dollars is failing, but there is no other practical solution at the moment. If your kid is getting harassed, you must simply get him out of there. In the specific cases of Gerard and Alicia, someone ought to approach the parents – quietly, of course – to inform them about what's going on, and offer them this advice. But who would do this? The school administrators aren't going to do it. They're not about to chase kids away from

their own schools. A teacher perhaps? Possibly, if you found one who cared enough about the problem, and who had time to deal with it. What about the Garden Zone Manager? Assuming that the communities where the kids lived had such a person, wouldn't this be something that the manager might be concerned with? It makes sense that he or she would be aware of situations like this, and would keep parents apprised of what was going on. You would need to approach the family in a friendly, concerned way, and the Garden Zone Manager should be perfect for this, because that's what his expertise is, approaching people. Ideally he would already know the parents through his neighborhood connections. He could tell them, "Look, your child might not have said anything about this, but there are some bullies who are harassing him. You should probably consider finding another school."

Logically, this approach should also work from the other angle. The Garden Zone Manager in the neighborhood where the *bully* lives ought to be able to talk to *his* parents about how *their* child is acting. The manager would handle the situation just as he would handle any other neighborhood problem – with courtesy reduction (see Section 5.7). Everything we said in the last chapter about how to approach people, how to avoid force, and so forth, applies in exactly the same way. It's possible that by simply speaking up like this he may completely solve the problem. Moreover, the mere presence of an alert, concerned community leader could very well dissuade the bully from intimidating people. The leader might not even mention the intimidation to the bully. He might simply inquire about his health ... ask how his folks are doing ... catch his eye once or twice. Anything that deflects the bully's attention away from the potential victim. He is in effect offering himself as a substitute target.

Notice how the argument has progressed. We went from physically separating the bully, to speaking to his parents, to simply hanging out in his vicinity. It's a clear illustration of the principle of refinement of action; of how the effect becomes more powerful as we move away from gross action, and move towards finer levels. And why couldn't we go even further, and postulate that if enough people merely *thought* about the bully in the right way, that they could influence his activity? The thoughts could be positive or negative (preferably positive). The main thing is that we are putting our attention on the problem; we are creating an area of community common interest through the activity of thinking. I submit that just this very small step can have a significant effect.

A lot of possibilities come to mind when you consider the ways that a Garden Zone Manager could help out with the bully problem, and with the schools in general. They all center on the idea of involving the community in the business of schooling children. If a student is acting up, it shouldn't be left up to the principal to expel him, rather, the community should pull the kid out. There is a different philosophy at work, and a different kind of action. Rather than pushing

the child away, you are drawing him to you, so that you can do something else with him. This of course implies that there are people in the community, leaders, who are charged with taking such an action, and furthermore that these people are sufficiently sensitive to this issue; that they understand how important it is to have a courteous educational environment. It's rare to find people with such sensitivity. What's more rare are folks who have the *guts* to come forward in this fashion. Look, this isn't Kabul, or Bogotá. Compared to the truly dangerous places in the world, we live in paradise. Yet even school teachers, whom one might expect to stand out as community leaders, even many of them fail the backbone test. Too often you hear teachers state that they prefer *not* to live where their students live, because there's a chance that some disgruntled kid might take revenge for a bad report. It's that insidious undercurrent of fear surfacing again. Just like the cops who won't get involved in the neighborhood, the teachers are also hiding behind the curtain of anonymity. They too run away from the problems of crime and delinquency, instead of facing up to them. The lesson they convey with their actions is far more powerful than any words they speak in class. That's why we need a different kind of teacher; one who is involved in a real way in the lives of his or her students. The only way this can happen is for teachers to become part of the community that they teach.

### 6.3 *Handling A Child's Emotions*

While we're on the subject of schools and school children, I'd like to return for a moment to the question of how one goes about shaping a child's emotions. I suggested above that in order to cure the lack of environmental interest in kids, we must start hyping nature; we must excite the child's passion for birds and reduce his exposure to spectator sports. However, we must not pass too casually over this idea of directing a person's passion. There are several non-trivial questions raised here. In the first place, do we even understand what passion is? Can you stand apart from your emotions and view them from afar, or is the experience too intimate, too tightly integrated to one's being? What exactly happens when you excite passion? What is the mechanism? Does it take place involuntarily, by mere suggestion as it were? For that matter, why should one want to get passionate at all? About anything? Whether the passion is directed towards point-guards or cuckoos, doesn't the excitement of emotion run contrary to the practice of detachment that we discussed earlier? Also, some would argue that by telling people what to get passionate about, we are impinging on their rights, taking away their freedom of choice. Wouldn't it be better to allow kids to express their individuality? Moreover, if we tell children that watching birds is better than watching basketball, it once again sounds like we are making a moral

judgment, and are once again violating our self-imposed rule which requires that we stay clear of moral questions.

Some of these points have already been covered. As far as morality is concerned, it may sound like we've made a moral choice when we put love of nature above love of sports, but again, I maintain that a truly compassionate view of nature only comes when one has actually escaped the domain of morality, and reached a plane where the perspective is broader. It is then that one discovers the intimate connection between man and nature, and in particular the connection between you, personally and nature. This connection is manifested not intellectually, but experientially. Most folks don't really understand this. As with the astronomers who view the cosmos as separate from, and external to the observer, naturalists also tend to talk about life on earth as if it existed independently from man. It's hard to argue against this point with logic, but I submit that as a person grows in human spirit, the spirit in nature becomes more apparent, and one recognizes that these two are not separate at all, but in fact one field.

Concerning individualism, it is not a well-defined term. "To express one's individuality" ... what are we talking about here? Something material? Something non-material? It's even more fuzzy than the concepts that we've been grappling with. I myself can think of ways that you might make sense of this idea but people are generally so confused about it, that it has no useful value. As we noted earlier, humans are supremely individual, but the expression of that quality – those qualities, I should say, for there is an infinite continuum of them – that expression goes far beyond the superficial things that people usually associate with it. I would submit that we are actually inundated with kids' individuality. From the time the doors open in the morning to the sounding of the final bell, every one of the 1500 students at Friendly High School is gushing with individuality at every moment. What we need is to structure and channel this chaotic flood so that the finer aspects of an individual's make-up might be noticed. I'm thinking specifically of things like school uniforms, of separate classes for girls and boys, and also of strict routines and rituals, stricter even than those that are already in place.

The freedom issue is an easy one. The concepts of "freedom" and of "rights" that people keep shouting about have everything to do with force, and nothing to do with anything else. The point that no one seems to get is that all of these freedom objections become irrelevant when your community, and your society, function *without the use of force*. In the case of creating passion for nature you aren't forcing anyone to do anything. You are only suggesting a wiser path. I must say this, though: Generally speaking, kids should not be allowed to make their own decisions. You don't ask a kid anything. You don't solicit his opinion. Nor do you set him loose to do whatever stupid thing that comes into his head. No. When dealing with children, you *tell them* what to do. There should be no

gray area. You simply give the instructions, and they carry them out, period. No complaining, no arguments, no back-talk. I maintain that holding a close rein on kids in this manner does not equate to using force. It does, however, require that the adult trainer/leader devote a substantial amount of his or her attention to the student. He has to give attention in order to get attention. Getting a kid's attention may require that the master lend the pupil a gentle swat now and then. Nothing that would cause injury; just a friendly poke, a timely shove. This also does not qualify as force. Rather, it's a correctional device, a training aid. I think most people don't understand how one might get physical with a kid without getting violent. They either argue that one must never touch a child, or they go the other way, and say that kids must be punished in order to learn – the "spare the rod" argument.

The former position is the one taken by the Prince George's school system. Teachers are instructed not to lay a hand on a kid, not even to pat them on the back. "Don't touch above the elbow," is the rule they recite.<sup>2</sup> What school administrators fear is that physical contact can be too easily interpreted as abusive, or as having sexual overtones. Anything even remotely sexual is a big taboo in school. But you don't have to be sexual in order to be physical. On the contrary, the most sincere gestures of physical courtesy – giving a friend a warm hug, say – contain no sexual element whatsoever, because the person who offers them does so without any selfish motivation. It's ironic that the school system should be so strict with teachers about the matter of sex, when the students themselves have such an excessive preoccupation with it. The most explicit and unabashed sex talk comes out of the mouths of fifteen-year-olds, right out loud, without the least concern for whom might be within earshot. Where are they learning this kind of talk one wonders? And why are the authorities permitting it? Of course, today's generation of students goes way beyond the talking stage of sex. Boys and girls will make out in the hallways, and even in class, right in front of you, if you don't say anything about it. Yet if you try to tap a kid on the shoulder to get him moving, he is likely to jerk his body away and warn you not to touch him. How is it that children have come to react this way? Where did they pick up these exaggerated mannerisms? The answer is that the kids are a reflection of our own collective character. It's another illustration of how inept we are at interacting civilly with each other. The fact that people view physical contact only in these extreme terms – you either beat the kids, or you keep your distance from them – shows how poorly we understand the issue of force, and how badly educated we ourselves are in the field of courtesy.

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<sup>2</sup> Teachers soon learn that this rule is totally impractical. From what I've seen, no one observes it and it's not at all enforced.

The only argument against substituting nature for sports that presents a problem is the one that questions whether we ought to excite passion at all, about anything. You find yourself asking whether it's okay to be thrilled, say, by the song of a warbler, or to be alarmed by a sudden thunderstorm, or to weep at ... what? A pod of beached whales? A polluted river? A night sky devoid of stars? What about anger? Is it okay to feel enraged now and then? Does it serve any purpose to become angry on learning that another indigenous tribe has been uprooted, or another wetland filled in, or another species lost? Modern man has inflicted serious damage on the natural environment, damage that is now global in scope. The damage is not only happening at the macro-biological level, but recently we have begun to bring powerful technology to bear at the molecular level of life. Scientists are conducting experiments in gene-swapping that threaten to irreversibly corrupt the very DNA blueprint that carries life on earth forward. The anger that arises when one realizes the extent and the permanence of this environmental damage is a very righteous anger. It is magnified when you consider that those who inflict the damage have chosen to ignore some alarmingly clear warning signs. Yet I must tell you that anger, however righteous, does not yield any benefit, neither for the environment, nor for ourselves. Just as it was when we focused too intently on the negative aspects of crime, all that happens when we get angry about environmental destruction is that we ourselves get worked-up, but nothing else changes. In the final analysis all that matters is the action you take, not how upset you are. In other words, don't get mad about the environment, get busy on it. Furthermore, if you do decide to do something on behalf of the environment, you might as well go about it joyfully, or if that's not possible, then at least do it with firm resolve and a positive outlook. But don't indulge your feelings of indignation, as I am wont to do. I mentioned that I myself have a strongly passionate character. I find it hard to harness that passion and to keep it pointed in a positive direction. I swing too easily from seething rage to buoyant exuberance, from despondency and gloom to hopeful enthusiasm. I submit that neither of these extremes is healthy. One should avoid lingering for very long on either strongly negative, or strongly positive, feelings and emotions. Here again we encounter the idea of detachment that we brought up in our discussion of the infinite. It's the paradoxical notion that one can achieve a state where happiness and sadness, pleasure and pain, are all the same. Detachment doesn't mean that your senses are numb, rather, that you don't get overwhelmed by what your senses deliver to you; your sense of self is not overshadowed by what is external. Thus the answer to whether or not it's okay to thrill at the song of a warbler is, yes it's okay, but don't dwell on it. Enjoy it for the moment and then let it go.

It is actually the letting-go of things that we need to teach to kids. This is the better way to touch their passions; not with rah-rah pep talks, that work from the

outward side of emotion, but by approaching from the *inward* side, from the place where passions form and from where they emanate. The technique we discussed in connection with spiritual growth, Maharishi's Transcendental Meditation (TM) program (see Section 5.5), is designed for this purpose. It's the real way to let go. Talking about letting go, or thinking about letting go are not effective. Dropping everything to go on vacation doesn't work either. Taking walks, relaxing in a hot tub, listening to Mozart – these all have some value, but it's only with the practice of transcending that you achieve the sort of letting-go that cultivates the detached state that we've been describing. The TM technique gives you this transcendental experience. It eliminates all of the extraneous stuff, and gets right to the heart of the matter, to that inner silence that underlies our thoughts, and our existence.<sup>3</sup>

On the physiological level TM works to lower the body's metabolism – breathing, etc. – to a state of deep rest. But it's not a drowsy state. Rather, people experience increased alertness during the twenty minute meditation, a result which is born out by measurements of brain wave activity. The unusually coherent brain wave pattern is so distinctive that a fourth major state of consciousness has been identified with the TM practice. "Transcendental consciousness," as it's termed, is a state that is quite different from the normal waking, dreaming and sleep states that we're familiar with.

While TM acts on the physiology to give deep rest, it also allows you to experience the pure awareness in which one's connection to universal intelligence is uncovered. It is thus a practical philosophy, bringing what is deeply abstract into one's immediate reality. Moreover, by the repeated experience of transcendental consciousness you refine the other three states of consciousness. We've been saying that it is through the refinement of awareness, individual and collective, that improvements can be made in the quality of life in the neighborhood. The same process should also work for improving the quality of life at school. We know that many kids aren't able to focus the way they should. They can't seem to pay attention. The way to overcome this problem is to teach kids how to redirect their attention; to turn it inward so that the mind can more clearly see its own nature. Moreover, kids suffer from stress just as the rest of us do. They bring that stress to class with them, and it shows in how they behave. So why not have kids meditate? How about giving them a few minutes of quiet time, in home room, say, so they can get rid of the mental junk they carried in with them and be primed and ready for the day ahead? At the same time you would be providing them with a head start towards understanding concepts that very few people tackle even at the college level, much less in high school. The reason why

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<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to the Transcendental Meditation program see *Transcendental Meditation*, by Robert Roth (New York, Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1994)

no one tackles these concepts is that they haven't been exposed to the experiential aspect of the knowledge. Having school kids meditate would create a pool of budding young philosophers, a crew of nascent metaphysicists. What's more, all aspects of the knowledge that they gain in school will be enriched, because as their intuitive faculty improves, their comprehension will broaden. Not only will this produce better metaphysicists, but better biologists, better journalists, better accountants, and perhaps better community servants as well. Who knows, a Garden Zone Manager or two might eventually emerge from this pack.

I'd like to bring up one final point regarding the education of children. We've mentioned a couple of times the idea of instituting community rituals. I argued that pot juggling and patrolling should become rituals in the neighborhood, and suggested that the activity of kids should be ritualized as well. I think most would agree that the disciplined practice of any activity is generally speaking a good thing. On the personal as well as the societal level life seems to flow easier when you follow a definite routine. Thus it's okay to get "strict" with kids in the sense that one must train them to adhere to a strict regimen. It's the "boot camp" philosophy that the military subscribes to: obey orders, support the team, stick with the plan, etc. Apart from the notion that a recruit has to suffer in order to learn, which we know is erroneous, there is nothing wrong with the boot camp concept as far as it goes. As we've already remarked, a kid's job is to follow instructions, nothing more. But what the military folks don't seem to comprehend is that a person must also learn to think for himself. Yes, you follow orders, and yes, you maintain the routines and rituals, but the regimentation must be balanced with a program that develops a person's ability to make decisions on his own. Moreover, the way we carry out our rituals can yield varying effects. The variance does not so much depend on how strict we are about performing them, but on how deeply infused with spirituality is our performance. To use the terminology of the last chapter, the degree and type of spin that we put on a ritual determines how much power it has. Depending on one's state of mind, a ritual can be positive, evolutionary and life-supporting, or it can be just the opposite, a negative, retarding force in the community. The fact is, the schools, and society as a whole already rely heavily on ritual. Especially the government, which could not function without the formal rituals required in courtrooms, parliamentary proceedings, diplomatic dealings, and so forth. Yet for the most part these rituals are devoid of spiritual content, which is to say, the people who perform them are not acting from that deeper level of awareness where the internal side of life is distinguished. Without spiritual content the rituals are lifeless and mechanical. Without the Tao,

Kindness and compassion  
are replaced by law and justice;  
Faith and trust are supplanted  
by ritual and ceremony.<sup>4</sup>

The verse is ancient, but it describes the condition of modern society perfectly. When the spiritual path is not realized, society is devoid of trust, devoid of compassion. To make up for this deficit we fall back on the empty rituals of law.

I must admit that much of this ritual business is over my head. When you look back on the civilizations of antiquity, it's difficult to comprehend how the seers and priests of old divined their complex practices. The Egyptians, the ancient Greeks and Hebrews, the native Americans ... what faculty within them inspired the creation of their temples, their ceremonies and their offerings? The beliefs and customs of these dead societies are just quaint curiosities to us now – "primitive" is how we term them – but don't you wonder if man hasn't lost something over the millennia? Doesn't it seem that we who live on earth today ought to have the same power that functioned within our ancestors? I would like to suggest that the ancient myths and theologies contain structures that represent deep connections between man, nature and the universe. Not that I'm about to clear up those connections in this work, but I claim that we can indeed recapture some of the lost spirit of the ancients. The way to accomplish this is to get back on the path that leads to a recognition and experience of that other aspect, the infinite aspect, of reality. We have to get back to the way of the Tao in other words. Only when the spiritual side of life becomes enlivened will we be able to create rituals that are not just empty shells, but that capture the timelessness of life. Schools and communities must come together to accomplish this, and I'd like to suggest that Garden Zone Management can facilitate the process.

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<sup>4</sup> Ray Grigg trans., *The New Lao Tzu, A Contemporary Tao Te Ching* (Rutland, Vermont, Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc., 1995) ch. 1 (38), p. 3