

Radical Excellence explores the decline in critical thinking of today's students. Returning to traditional values and changes in leadership styles are proposed as steps towards solving this educational problem partially created by the "No Child Left Behind" law.

Radical Excellence

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# **Radical Excellence**

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Printed in the United States of America.

The events described in this book all occurred, although names have been omitted or changed to protect the identity of the participants. Dates, when given, are only approximate, but are close to the time of the actual event. All references or paraphrasing from the Bible are from the New International Version.

Permission to use the cover picture has been given by the author's son. It represents a venture into Radical Excellence, not only because of the actual mountain experience, but some other venues in which the photograph was used.

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# **Radical Excellence**

**John H. Hitchcock**

# 1

## THE PROBLEM GROWS

*The Significant Problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.*

*Albert Einstein*

ALMOST EVERY DAY the newspaper continues to remind us that our kids are at risk. Student violence, the breakdown of the family, a violent society, and an increasingly secularized world combine in making educational achievement just that much more difficult to pursue.

### **Kids are Killing Kids**

Peer pressure has taken on a horrific new meaning. According to *The Sun*, San Bernardino, California's daily paper, thirty-four people had been shot dead between January 1, 2006, and June 27, 2006. Many of those killed were teenagers shot by other teens.

*The Sun* devoted much of its June 27, 2006, issue addressing the problem. They presented a litany of prescriptions to keep kids from killing each other.

"The issues driving gang violence...are multifaceted. This is a different generation and different dynamic," said a probation officer. He continued, "...the players in the best position to try (and fix the situation) are the local faith based communities."

A Staff Writer for *The Sun* says, "Psychologists say the children are adapting the best they can - learning behaviors that,

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while abnormal to many, are sensible adaptations to their situation."

In the same article, "Greg Pfau, a San Bernardino marriage and family therapist, said it's not uncommon for children to get their values from their older brothers or sisters or from negative role models like drug dealers and gangsters," The article continues, "And if their peer group doesn't value academic success, Pfau said, they'll absorb the values espoused by their friends."

A 12-year old student says, "It's not a good thing to be an academic standout."

Pastor Raymond Turner says, "We have to talk about ethics and morality and the value of life."

### **Kids are Failing Chemistry**

As of June 6, 2006, almost one-half of the chemistry students in a nearby high school failed a relatively easy, district-wide final examination in chemistry. While not generating headlines in the daily paper, such lack of performance in the academic world is symptomatic of the deplorable demise of foundational characteristics that, if left unchecked, will destroy a generation of kids.

Just as the city of San Bernardino is attempting to create programs and policies to stop the killing, school systems and governments are establishing programs that are intended to exorcise the demons that result in poor academic performance. The national No Child Left Behind program and California's High School Exit Exam are traditional efforts designed to create an educational system that will cure the academic malaise present in so many of the nations youth.

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Visit any faculty room, whether public school or private, and horror stories abound and the lament is loud about the inadequacies of students.

- math computational skills are severely limited
- memorization ability or incentive is minimal
- reading the text is as painful as visiting the dentist
- critical thinking skills seem like a foreign concept
- long-term retention is marginal at best

Language difficulties play a role in some cases, yet more frequently, difficulties appear to be rooted in a major lack of motivation to achieve academic success. Academic skills are not perceived to be important in the students' lives, and their performance on standardized tests validates that perception.

Educators must not fall into the "blame game" trap, faulting parents, cultures, society, prior schooling, or even the traditional whipping boy of conservatives, the radical left-wing liberals, for these deficiencies.

Before an effective prescription can be applied, however, it's critically important to search out the foundational causes that have created this impending chaos and crisis. Once foundational causes are identified, it becomes possible to build a philosophical basis for attacking the problem. Most importantly, once a philosophical basis is established, it becomes necessary to produce a practical system that addresses the root causes and creates effective change in student performance and behavior.

#### **So What's the Point?**

One might wonder about the relationship between gang shootings and chemistry failures. I posit in this book that both issues are intimately related at the root level, and the only long-term way of solving both social and academic deficiencies is really the same foundational method. I shall explore exclusively

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the academic component, but it seems reasonable that the solutions proposed can be effectively applied to much more dangerous and life-threatening characteristics of societal interaction.

This is not a research based book. Rather, it is based on experiential events I have encountered in over forty-three years of classroom teaching. I do not write from a formal viewpoint. Much of what I propose has been developed by reading an amazing volume of literature during those classroom years. That, and the unending coffee-cup conversations with colleagues and students, has helped crystallize my views.

My immediate and at-large families, many of whom are teachers or associated with education, have contributed to the gradual development of the concept I call Higher Order Learning. Concepts without connection to the real world of living are useless, thus I will present a model for implementing Higher Order Learning that I have labeled Lateral Leadership.

Put simply, there needs to be more cowboy in teaching!

Cowboys worked for the rancher, they did their job; tending the cattle, branding, rounding up, mending fence... yet each cowboy was his own man, an individual whose personal story invoked intrigue and admiration.

Our classrooms need to have a similar sense of adventure that is expectantly real to those who enter. Teachers need to do their academic job, but must be courageous enough to adopt a radical form of excellence that creates memorable experiences as they interact with their students.

Unfortunately, teachers and administrators are more often like cookie cutters than cowboys. Cut from the same tin mold they line up as an array of knowledge-givers differentiated only by the time of day the students sit before them. In the search for higher standards they find a safe comfort level by following expressly defined curriculum to the letter. Those kinds of



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teachers and administrators have confused identity with consistency.

The mold is hard to break. Administrators have professional expectations of teachers that consist of being on time, filling out all the forms correctly, doing hall duty and making sure the lunch money comes out right. Parents want teachers to fix all that's wrong with their kids while imparting enough knowledge to guarantee a SAT grade sufficient for entrance to an Ivy League school. Boards of education, especially in Christian education, pay salaries so low that excess energy is drained from potential mold breakers as second jobs are needed or both adults in a teaching family must be employed. Many well-molded teachers hold to a historical model of curriculum, dispensing information and maintaining traditional classroom behavior that creates a legacy of safe conformity.

The challenge of these writings is to encourage a few good teachers and adventuresome administrators to shatter the mold, even if in only a corner of the cookie. Maybe even emerge with a new mold. The challenge is to actively transcend the myopic professionalism of predictable administrators and teachers. It will require a unique and courageous vision to lead, teach and live in a radical form of excellence that frees us from hierarchically impressed restrictions.

After that rather harsh indictment, let me say that the process of bringing our own adventure into the school scene can be quietly, almost gently, accomplished. It's not about bells and whistles. No snake oil potions or magic spells need be applied. We can do the expected "professional" actions, follow school board policies and be traditional enough to give parents confidence. Yet in our own snug corner of the world we can walk with our students on an adventure of a new sort as we travel paths not yet explored.



## 2

### How We Got to this Awful Place

*There is a way that seems right to a man,  
but in the end it leads to death.*

*Proverbs 14:12*

IN 1959 MY PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL English teacher's acidic vocabulary created a healthy fear in my friends and me as she stood before us each day of our senior year.

"OK, you heathens, stand up and be patriotic and religious. And mean it!"

We then joined her in the Pledge to the American Flag and recited aloud the following prayer.

*Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence on thee, and ask your blessing on us, our parents and our country. Amen.*

She followed that with the statement, "Ok, now Tommy, (or another student she selected) you read the next chapter from the Bible."

#### **The Sins of the Fathers**

Through the efforts of the ACLU and other "don't offend anyone" types, those days are banished forever from the public school classroom. Unfortunately, many Christian schools have become increasingly secularized and are essentially undifferentiated from the public sector in this area.

Three years after I graduated from high school, a 1962 court decision (Engel v. Vitale) determined that it was

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unconstitutional to have officially sponsored prayer in public schools. This decision was pivotal in hastening a decline in our educational system that continues unabated even into the iPod culture of today. In a later chapter I explore more in depth the tragic consequences of pushing God out of the public school system.

### **The Subtle Symptoms of a Quiet Chaos**

In the world of chaos mathematics there exists the phenomenon of the strange attractor, a point of infinitesimal magnitude towards which plotted functions tend to converge. Interestingly, in some of these functions, a point of radical divergence occurs, and the plotted function goes screaming off into a new abstract universe.

The historical educational pendulum has always behaved itself, oscillating around its own fairly well defined attractors. Fundamental academic ability, universally accepted social values, concepts of thinking, all eventually attracted the swinging pendulum back to an acceptable modicum of educational performance.

I fear this pendulum isn't coming back! I think we've reached the point of subtle, quiet chaos where the system is defining its own intrinsic principles and rules of education. As educators, we cling to a pendulum, but one whose path is no longer predictable and defined.

At times I picture educators in our own carnival of learning, standing at one of those game booths where obnoxious stuffed animals pop from various holes. We smack them back down with a wildly swung mallet, only to have another beast emerge from the next hole. We exist as symptom-smashers, blasting can't read animals down with our acronym labeled hammers only to have the "can't do math" animal emerge.

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The simple fact is, we exist in an environment with God-created kids, but kids with societally molded hearts. They come to our schools with unlimited potential... but polluted promises.

Have you ever noticed how disconcerting it is when someone else has the TV remote? Visual and mental chaos is created as they switch channels just as your mind is focusing in on your own interest. That's how I've felt dealing with the students of our remote-generation. Just a glimpse, then CLICK!... and a new event, a new deficiency surfaces.

"I hate that teacher" ..... CLICK!  
"This course is hard" ..... CLICK!  
"My job sucks" ..... CLICK!  
"We aren't in love now" ..... CLICK!  
"This is boring" ..... CLICK!

In the Old Testament, the Law was a schoolmaster which brought people eventually to Christ. My fear is simple. Our students come to us with no law. Even more scary, the remote is in their hands. Compounding that fear, Dad and Mom keep supplying fresh batteries. In their quest to provide a good and safe life for their children, parents have acquiesced to being constant enablers.

"That assignment too hard? Okay, I'll call the teacher," they say.

"You missed the deadline? That's okay, I'm sure they'll still let you go." and once more the child is not given the opportunity to learn from the results of natural consequences.

Life is lived with the remote in hand. If an event or encounter isn't one I like, a simple push of the excuse button and on to the next more enjoyable event.

Booze, gangs, pre-marital sex and drugs are certainly difficulties and evils that need to be avoided by teens today. In

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my opinion, however, there are more insidious evils that need addressing. More insidious since they're quiet, appearing almost safe, yet corporately those evils join to produce a generation of students almost devoid of the most critical skills needed to live a productive and successful life.

### **The Flat Screen Generation**

Students today are being raised by flat screens. TV, videos, computers, movies, video games, and cell phones create a concentrated culture of flat screens carrying messages that require little thought or meditation. Almost everything kids watch today is at the shallowest, most emotional level of interaction. Car chases, dragons to slay, and videos with startling images enter the eyes, titillate the emotions, and quickly transition to the next intense image. Nowhere does the watcher have the time to relax, muse, ponder or repeat. Should we wonder, then, why students struggle with critical thinking issues, panic when in-depth analysis is required, or shut down when readings contain polysyllabic words?

Flat screens rule. Not only do they rule, they consume. There was a day when little children woke up in the morning and did something. They played, they read, maybe even went and bugged mom and dad. Now, even very young children slip quietly from their bed, find the remote and sit transfixed on the floor as the every-morning cartoons (or worse) enter their eyes and infiltrate their minds.

As kids consume a continuing diet of visual stimulation followed by emotional reaction, they can kiss thinking goodbye.

Ray Bradbury predicted it. In *Fahrenheit 451*, the elimination of books had essentially demolished thinking. The burning of books had essentially removed the concept of vision from the minds of people. Hope arose when Bradbury writes,

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"...Then he met a professor who told him of a future in which people could think...and Guy Montag suddenly realized what he had to do!"

We don't need to burn books now to keep kids from reading. We don't even need to hide them. Just give the kid a TV-remote, iPod or video game player and the books go unread.

Francis Schaeffer warned us in *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* that "... men will end up owning only two values...personal peace and personal affluence." By personal peace he meant that men would hold to the concept of "let me do my own thing. Don't bug me." In Schaeffer's mind, personal affluence meant that men would have the economic ability to make entertainment and easy enjoyment very affordable.

The movie *Star Wars* launched an exciting new generation of graphics, and in so doing, may have generated a whole new way of absorbing information. One amazing special effect after another kept us on the edge of our seats, not thinking, but reacting. Movies started advertising the special effects, often even more than plots or story lines.

So what's the big deal? What's intrinsically wrong with great action? What can be harmful about amazing car chases or explosions?

For starters, God wrote to us. He really did. And books require reading. I know that's a simple thought, but it's true. It isn't just God-words, either. Ideas are communicated by rather lengthy written discourse. For example, the philosophies and ideas of an American Revolution did not occur by a series of ten-second sound bites on the evening news, but were transmitted by extensive publication and distribution of revolutionary pamphlets.

People read books and pamphlets... and the world was changed.

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## **Having Learned the "Not"**

Once upon a time, in a land that's gone forever, kids actually knew about responsibility and acted that way. Not all, of course, but most seemed to understand and accept the properness of appropriate behaviors in the area of accountability, work ethic, and accepting consequences of actions.

Then society progressed. Mom started working outside the home, and the number of kids who acted responsibly shifted slightly. Many kids still acted properly, but an ever-increasing number began to act counter to what they knew to be right. Their behavior was frustrating, but because they knew the right way, that behavior was fairly easily fixed.

Then came the nineties. Entertaining technology grew exponentially, single parent families became more common, radical-isms and political correctness were societally imposed, and comprehensive acceptance of a broadly defined diversity changed the way we looked at the idea of right and wrong. Now in the twenty-first century we have students living lives counter to the positive characteristics that have been scripturally and historically based.

Students now come to school having learned how to be NOT responsible, NOT polite, etc. Profoundly more important than what's not taught is the inevitable learned lesson.

Let me illustrate with a basketball lesson.

One day on lunch duty I watched three boys doing some mild practicing in a one-on-one game in our outdoor court. When they finished, I called them over.

"Good job, gentlemen. Nice shooting practice." I said.

"Hey, thanks." they replied, pleased that I had noticed.

"By the way, you were very effective at practicing two other things other than just shooting." I continued.

"Really. What's that?" they asked, surprisingly intrigued.



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"Well, for one thing, you did a great job at practicing not blocking out your opponent when he shot. Furthermore, you also really perfected the technique of not following your shot." I said.

The point is simple. Our students come to us knowing how to use their "remotes" to make life choices easier, and they also come having learned their lessons well. Too bad it's the WRONG lesson. They have learned that NOT doing homework is okay, that NOT studying for a test the first time only leads to "credit recovery" systems, and almost any other NOT characteristic you can think of.

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