

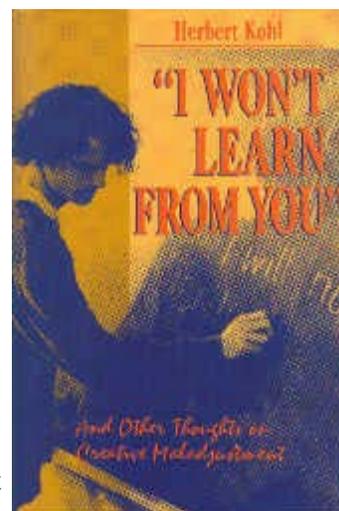
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A READER'S JOURNAL

I Won't Learn from You — and other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment by **Herbert Kohl**

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2007



The author starts off with what could be considered a Primer for Not-Learning. Because his mother didn't speak Yiddish, he decided not to learn Yiddish so that he wouldn't be party to conversations which involved his father and his grandparents who spoke it a lot. Here's how he went about making sure he didn't learn to speak Yiddish:

[page 3] There was Yiddish to be heard everywhere in my environment, except at public school: on the streets, at home, in every store. Learning to not-learn Yiddish meant that I had to forget Yiddish words as soon as I heard them. When words stuck in my head, I had to refuse to associate the sounds with any meaning. If someone told a story in Yiddish, I had to talk to myself quietly in English or hum to myself. If a relative greeted me in Yiddish, I responded with the uncomprehending look I had rehearsed for those occasions. I also remember learning to concentrate on the component sounds of words and thus shut out the speaker's meaning or intent. In doing so I allowed myself to be satisfied with understanding the emotional flow of a conversation without knowing what people were saying. I was doing just the reverse of what beginning readers are expected to do — read words and understand meanings instead of getting stuck on particular letters and the sounds they make. In effect, I used phonics to obliterate meaning.

Seems an unlikely personal history of someone who became a well-known educator and author on the subject of education, doesn't it? But we find well-known doctors who do research on the mal-functions of the human brain, for example, in order to figure out how a normal brain functions. There's a lot to be seen if you observe, as Yogi Berra likes to say.

My story of how I never learned to speak Cajun French, while growing up in a culture which spoke it, is completely different. My grandmother on my mother's side spoke only French growing up in south Louisiana even though her father's ancestors, the Himels (originally Himmel) came from Germany. When her first child was forced to speak English in the state school around 1918, Grandma Babin decided to learn English and speak it to her children. By the time I arrived some twenty or so years later, she only spoke English to me. So the best I could acquire was a vocabulary of French words for things, some adjectives, few verbs, and no syntax or conversational ability except for some pat phrases. I knew when to use phrases like *Cher pitié*, for example, but its literal meaning escaped me until a year or so ago. Kohl had to not-learn Yiddish in the face of immersion, and lacking immersion, I was unable to learn Cajun. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that my Grandma's strategy worked so well that none of grandchildren grew up speaking with a recognizable Cajun accent.

Kohl's next story that caught my attention was when he applied his not-learning Yiddish techniques to not-learning Hebrew. Since mostly Jews speak Yiddish and Hebrew, one might think that one is a dialect of the other, but Yiddish is a dialect of German, not Hebrew. Kohl's powerful not-learning technique could work as well for one language he didn't want to learn as another, no matter the root. Kohl scraped by for two years, reading the sounds, reciting from the Mahzar and the Torah. But one day the rabbi gave

everyone a test with all the questions written in Hebrew and the answers were to be likewise written in Hebrew. Kohl said, "Cheating in Hebrew school was not a moral issue to me but a matter of saving face." His friend Ronnie knew his dilemma and wished he could also not-learn Hebrew, but his father tested him every night, so that was not an option.

[page 5, 6] During the test I succeeded in copying Ronnie's whole paper, which I knew was a sure A, only I failed worse than if I had written letters at random in mock Hebrew on the test sheet. The rabbi returned all of the papers except Ronnie and mine. Then he called the class to attention and said he felt a need to give special appreciation to Ronnie, for not only had Ronnie gotten one A, he also received a second A which, the rabbi said, was the first time in his career that any student done that well. And, he added, Herbert didn't hand in any paper at all, which he told the class was worse than trying and failing. It seems that I had copied Ronnie's paper so accurately that I had answered the Hebrew question, "What is your name?" with Ronnie's Hebrew name. I was thoroughly humiliated in front of all my friends and, for all my arrogance about getting away with not-learning Hebrew, felt very stupid.

Kohl makes the very important point that as a free individual, a student in school may choose to adopt a not-learning strategy, and instead of dealing directly with the not-learning strategy, administrators treat it as a major threat to the entire system of education. Given that parents and school authorities are more interested at times in discipline than in drawing out the best from children (the essence of what education means), this is not surprising. So how do these disciplinarians respond to a single student's not-learning strategy? Not as simply as Herbert's rabbi did to his not-learning Hebrew strategy. They respond by over-kill — when you can't shoot one evasive duck, you call in your buddies with machine guns and kill *all* the ducks that fly just to get that one tricky duck, a student like Rick, for example.

[page 11] Experts are consulted, complex personal or family causes are fabricated, special programs are invented, all to protect the system from changing itself and accommodating difference. People like Rick then get channeled into marginal school experiences and, too often, marginalized lives.

Since this happens in a so-called "free" school system (which is in reality a "tax" school system), parents who actually want their children to have a full education are stymied. They are forced to take evasive measures and thus the parents become another disciplinary problem for the school authorities. Again the administrators call in their buddies with the heavy weapons, consultants who are "expert" in dealing with "tricky parents." This is what passes for education in the "tax" school system. Often parents are denied the simple expediency of moving their children to another public school. Their only recourse is to a private school. Then, if they have a problem with the private school administrators, they can move their child to another private school which charges the same tuition, but does not cause their children the same problem. It is amazing what a simple solution exists for parents beleaguered by recalcitrant administrators. A simple, but expensive one.

This is the only way for some parents to provide a *true* education for their children *as they see it*. Of course when the parents move their children to a private school, they must pay exorbitant tuition prices in addition to their property taxes which continue *unabated* to support a dis-functioning public school system.

If department stores were run as school systems are, think of the long lines to get the free stuff and how many people would disdain such lines for a private department store where they could get higher quality goods without the problems(1). People insist on "free-ways" which are actually "tax-ways" but when given a choice of a crowded tax-way and a privately financed turnpike with tolls, they will take the toll-road because of the convenience and easy passage. But even as they drive the toll road in comfort, they support the "tax-ways" through the taxes they pay on their fuel as they drive. It pains me to hear people

say this is a “free country” and then watch these same folks pass coercive taxes to provide public services. Such taxes effectively destroy our freedom to choose among proprietary providers who, but for their tax-supported competitors, could compete in the market place for so many of our services and needs. I mention these ancillary considerations here because one should not be left with the impression that our public school systems are the only maladjusted portions of our United States’ governments. Neither should we expect that a solution could be found to our public school systems without abandoning the entire system of tax-supported public services.

Herbert Kohl had a fantasy companion and teacher he called the Masked Rider. Always masked, dressed in black, and riding a black horse, this was clearly Herbert's "shadow" in Jungian terminology. Herbert accompanied him on his adventures which often included an anima figure, "a sweet, accepting young woman who could like you without controlling you." When he wasn't sleeping and dreaming of the Masked Rider, he enjoyed some of the same radio shows I did back in the 1940s and 50s. But he added a personal touch to his fantasy and dream world.

[page 37, 38] During the day I listened to *Captain Midnight* on the radio. I also listened to *The Shadow*, *The Lone Ranger*, and *The Thin Man*. The Masked Rider was my personal reconstruction of the freedom and power these programs represented to me. My encounters with the Masked Rider were not like other dreams over which I had no control I was both in a fantasy world and semi-awake outside of that world, aware of what was going on. I could at times experience the adventures we had together and at other times witness my own adventures. I could even give advice to the me in the dream, and somehow in dream logic it made sense for me to exist on both planes simultaneously, within and outside the fantasy. My double and I lived through all those adventures together.

The Masked Rider joined *The Tattooed Man*, a series of adventure novels by Howard Pease that he enjoyed reading, as his personal guides through the outside world.

[page 38] With both *The Tattooed Man* and the Masked Rider, I was learning to move through and beyond the world as I knew it and imagine other, more congenial and exciting possibilities. Over the years, I've also encouraged my students to learn how to dream beyond the world they lived in and imagine ways in which life can be made fuller and more compassionate. The ability to see the world as other than it is plays a major role in sustaining hope. It keeps part of one's mind free of the burden of everyday misery and can become a corner of sanity as one struggles to undo the horrors of an unkind and mad world.

No one told me that I was listening to too much radio or reading too many library (or comic) books as a child or that I was spending too much time playing Cowboys and Indians or Cops and Robbers. Those role-playing games my brothers, friends, and I invented on the spot always involved shooting cap pistols at each other for hours at a time, swapping roles as good guys and bad guys from day to day. We killed each other in our imagination because that created the energy for our play. So far as I know, none of my childhood companions ever hurt a single human being as an adult. We played being scared, being brave, shooting to survive, shooting to save the world from bad guys. We burnt up a lot of exploding caps in our Western replica six-shooters, we smelled a lot of gunpowder from those caps, but we never once let fly a real bullet at a real person. Have the caregivers who have removed such play-toys from modern children denuded their fantasy life? If so, they have unknowingly fostered children growing up and doing for real what they never had a chance to do in fantasy life. The spate of senseless shooting sprees in schools may be a result of those very well-intentioned caregivers who would be horrified to find that they have created what they most tried to avoid by trying to fix a system that was *not* broken(2).

Consider what fantasy lives children live today where they try to achieve the same level of excitement in fantasy warfare: video games. And the well-intentioned caregivers are trying to remove those exciting

avenues for child-like learning and replace them with bland substitutes, all of which may be doing more harm than good. Either the child will learn to become devious in order to play the video games they want or they will submit docilely. Children faced with such controlling caregivers will grow into one extreme or the other: a very docile or very rebellious adult — neither of which is a boon for civilization.

The Tattooed Man was a novel about Tod Moran's voyages on a tramp steamer. Kohl said that reading about those voyages "made my world larger, provided me with a romantic vision of what I might become." When Tod finally arrives in port on the *Araby*, he stopped to look back at the ship that had been his home at sea for so long:

[page 87, passage from p. 331 of *The Tattooed Man*] As he turned and looked across the straining hawsers at the Araby, lying there so quietly, so lifeless, yet withal so gallant, he felt his heart tug at its moorings. Here, this wouldn't do! At this rate, within a month, he'd want to be at sea again. He stood there in silence, while about him the life of the water flowed on.

Apparently Herbert Kohl has had asthma for as long as he can remember. I wondered as I read the passage below whether a simple [doyle trace](#) might remove his asthma. When some external trigger is identified with a symptom such as an allergy, that is a live giveaway that the allergy is doylic in origin and therefore is susceptible to be extirpated by a simple [doylic speed trace](#).

[page 87] I still have asthma, though it is usually under control. Every once in a while I get that clutch in my chest and feel the same anxiety at dusk that I did as a child. Fears and early terrors may recede, but they don't disappear.

When Kohl remembers the clutch in his chest at dusk when he was a child, he is having a cognitive memory of some post five-year-old memory. A simple speed trace the next time that happens would allow him to convert the "clutch", a pre-five-year-old doylic memory, into a cognitive memory, and that clutch would never again happen. Then his asthma would literally become a *memory*. He would never have asthma again. Unfortunately most people are so well-adjusted to the medical profession claim that asthma is a medical condition requiring medication to overcome an asthma attack, that few have tried to trace away their asthmatic symptoms. Perhaps someone with the creative maladjustments of a Herbert Kohl might be able to show the rest of the world what is possible using the nascent science of doyletics. A few minutes [learning](#), the application of a simple memory technique, and they can convert the bodily reactions (doylic memories) of their asthma attack into cognitive memories. And be rid of asthma for good.

To quote Kohl's own words, "A decent world can only be made by people whose growth has not been stunted by the imperatives of others." (Page 88)

Kohl's book is a testament to the creative maladjustment that Carl Gustav Jung called *individuation*. Sigmund Freud took his patients who were maladjusted because of their neuroses and removed the neuroses or ameliorated them so his patients became normal well-adjusted human beings again. On the other hand, Carl Jung took his patients, who were well-adjusted people living normal but empty lives, and helped them to individuate or become creatively maladjusted so that they might live unusual but fulfilling lives.

When I was twelve to fifteen years old, I delivered newspapers. One of my subscribers was a couple who were "deaf and dumb." That's what I was taught to call them. They couldn't hear and could barely speak more than a few words. This man and woman were products of a culture in the first half of the twentieth century in which deaf people were not taught to speak even though their vocal apparatus was fully functional. They were called "dumb" meaning "unable to speak" even though they were in fact able to speak, but were not taught as a child to do so. Even at my tender age, I could tell they were intelligent even though I had trouble communicating with them. They could understand each other okay. They always paid on time and were one of my best customers until they had some problem, like missing a newspaper, and then it took me a long time to find out the problem and resolve it.

Kohl tackled the problem of not teaching deaf children to speak while in graduate school. Here's his own report on what happened.

[page 138] I wrote a graduate school paper on the language and education of the deaf, concluding that deaf children should be taught in sign language or bilingually, and that the parents of deaf infants would be best served by learning to sign. A year later the paper was published as the booklet *Language and Education of the Deaf*. The response was explosive. The Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf, one of the most powerful forces in the area of deaf education, attacked me as an irresponsible outsider who had no right to intrude into the field of deaf education. At the same time, I was invited to Washington, D. C., to speak about the subject at Gallaudet College, the nation's major institution of higher education for deaf people, and to do a summer program at Kendall Green, the elementary school on the Gallaudet campus.

Kohl's work played a part in ridding the world of the "dumb" part of "deaf and dumb." A whole generation of children have grown up without ever hearing that appellation applied to people whose only handicap is being deaf. Not only is the onerous name gone, but few deaf people grow up without being taught sign language and at the same being taught how to speak aloud. In the place of dumb deaf people we have increasing bilingual deaf people who can handle American Sign Language and English-speaking at the same time.

[page 140] I have not had much to do with the education of the deaf since 1968, but the idea has stayed with me that the way students behave is as much a consequence of the system in which they are required to learn as anything within themselves, their families, communities, and cultures. The task of helping my students figure out how to creatively maladjust to dysfunctional systems of living and learning has become a significant part of my work as an educator.

In fact, I can imagine classes in creative maladjustment at teacher education institutions, for without teachers who are willing to take the risks on creative maladjustment, public education will continue to fail or be dismantled and privatized.

Recent movies have portrayed examples of creative maladjustment in which teachers have taught their students to become productive members of society through poetry (*Dead Poets Society*, 1989), rock and roll (*School of Rock*, 2003), ballroom dancing (*Take the Lead*, 2006), and writing in journals (*Freedom Writers*, 2007). In every case we find the school administrators fighting aggressively against change at every step of the way, often striving to oust the teacher. Only *after* the results have been proven, will they finally relent, if ever. And some may even come to agree that, well, maybe, this is a good way to teach our students.

Thus a Teacher, so also a Learner is one of my [basic rules](#). No one should be allowed to teach who thinks that teaching is a one-way proposition where the teacher, the fount of knowledge, simply pours what they know into the children. Our children have much to teach as well as learn from the world. Teachers must be open to what their pupils are ready to teach them at every step of the education process. Teaching is like a dance that the teacher must do with their pupils. All dancers must learn to modify their moves to their dance partners at every beat of the music. One cannot prepare a detailed lesson plan for



a dance. Or for a rock performance. Or for a journal writing session. Or, rightly understood, for a classroom. One does best if one comes prepared to teach and to learn in the dance of life within the classroom.

One of my favorite comic strips growing up was Lil Abner, drawn by Al Capp. He was a celebrity in the mid-twentieth century when his mythical Dogpatch creations turned into a musical and then a movie. He gave us such memorable creations as Sadie Hawkins Day, the Triple-Whammy, the Schmoos, Daisy Mae, Moonbeam McSwine, and many others. One of the things little known about Al Capp was that he walked on a prosthetic leg from an early teenager. In fact after he was run over by a trolley and lost a leg, he was deemed to be retarded and sent to a school for retarded children! Imagine the state of an educational system back then which could have thought that losing a leg causes one to become stupid! His autobiography, [My Well-Balanced Life on a Wooden Leg](#), is an eye-opener for school systems yet today. Our school systems have recovered from this one version of stupidity, but have created multiple versions of modern stupidity to replace it, to which they are as blind now as the system which condemned Al Capp to the retarded school.

Kohl found a ready source of material to introduce his creative maladjustment into his classroom one day while standing in a grocery checkout line. A sensational headline on a tabloid newspaper blared out, "Baby Boy Born with a Wooden Leg." Few people realize that the headlines for such articles are written first and then the photo is created and someone is assigned to write a plausible story to go with it. The only semblance to reality is that the tabloid is printed like a real newspaper. Kohl chose that article to give to his class as an assignment. They were to write a three-page essay to confirm or deny the claims of the article.

[page 143] The students, to my thorough astonishment, took me perfectly seriously and behaved as if I had given them another essay by Piaget to analyze. It was a tribute to the effectiveness of the current educational system that any nonsense handed out by an authority figure would be taken seriously(3). The students' responses were equally surprising. Some contained serious arguments about whether a baby could actually be born with a peg leg. Others were discussions of reincarnation. A few tried to make logical arguments about why the article couldn't possibly be true, while two claimed that it had to be true because scientists and a doctor were cited.

Kohl noticed a "puzzlement and the kind of emotional stress that often leads to productive thinking." Milton Erickson, a world-famous hypnotherapist, would often confuse people who came to him for help, either by his hard-to-understand voice or the amazing stories he told. Unable to remain conscious during these stories, people would enter a spontaneous trance and often not awaken until the end of the story. They would leave and find that their problems had gone away. This process of Erickson's was called "the confusion technique." The students of Erickson showed others that when you break the expectations of

someone, the stress which occurs cracks opens the door for productive thinking to move in. Once that happens, the stagnated unproductive patterns of behavior dissolve — which were the root of the problem they sought help for in the first place.

When Kohl got a group of teachers together to speculate on how they might use the confusion technique such as he did with the "Baby Born with a Wooden Leg" he was asking them to think outside the box of expectations that they had been carefully taught to remain inside of.

[page 146] The teachers in the class came up with their own strategies for pattern-breaking in the classroom. One teacher said that she would not grade the most important paper of the year but ask for revisions instead. Another decided that the reward for finishing assignments would not be time off but time on — that is, she would allow students to get into discussion groups and mural projects. A third decided that half of all formal class assignments could be fulfilled by writing ungraded novels and poetry instead. And all came up with a commitment to talk about at least fifteen minutes a day about something happening in the world or something of a sensitive nature that was on the students' minds.

When I was in school I made mostly A's with a few B's. The only consistently low grades I received was in Conduct. Once I made a D in the third grade. Don't recall how I got that low grade, but I didn't like the teacher very much. My parents got so angry that I decided that no matter how much I disliked a teacher, I would learn to ignore her, and find something more fun to do than upset her. So my grades in Conduct returned to B level and stayed there. I was mostly bored by 90 percent of what the teachers asked the class to do, but I creatively found ways to make it fun for me. When others took notes, I drew airplanes in dogfights. Or I would draw elaborate diagrams of scientific lab equipment and ink in the colors. Once in English we were given 17 words and asked to write sentences containing them. Clearly we were to use each word in a separate sentence, but that was no challenge to me, so I wrote *one* sentence that used all 17 words. Lucky for me, my teacher appreciated my effort and accepted my assignment as complete. This is no strategy for someone who wants to be valedictorian because not all teachers have a sense of humor and I got my B's from the humorless pendants posing as high school teachers.

Probably I would have been labeled as having ADD, had such a category existed back then.

[page 149] Recently a new category of stigma has been constructed: Attention Deficit Disorder. Students designated as ADD often refuse to sit still and listen silently when a teacher or another person in authority is talking; they resist following instructions blindly; they refuse to do boring worksheets and other assignments if they feel they already know the material. Interestingly enough, these conditions are positive qualifications for future participatory citizenship, and an argument can be made that ADD is one way that public school authorities are suppressing the spirit of democracy.

From ADD we have gone to EH or educationally handicapped, and most recently to the stigma category of "at risk." The movie *Freedom Writers* (2007) gives us a hard look at these "at risk" kids and how one courageous teacher dealt with them.

[page 152] What makes a child at risk? What is the hidden agenda of the people who have manufactured the "at-risk" category? What are at-risk children at risk of doing? In plain language, at-risk children are at risk of turning the poverty and prejudice they experience against society rather than learning how to conform and take their "proper" place. The children are maladjusting, and it is their teachers' role to make that maladjustment functional and creative rather than to suppress it.

Teachers today are like Al Capp who have lost a leg to the relentless and unstoppable trolley of the administrators who want them to fill all of their time with curriculum plans and pre-canned texts that they are expected to read to their students. The very agent of crippling the teachers then defines them as

retarded so that the teachers themselves must have their lesson plans prepared for them to fit some national grading system. The successful teacher has the challenge before them as Al Capp did: "How to become a Well-Balanced Teacher on a Wooden Leg." Only by creative maladjustment can these teachers succeed and ensure that our children will survive a public school system which seems to be designed mostly to ensure that the administrators survive the system, up until now.

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. It may occur to the Reader that department stores were actually run that way in the USSR for about 70 years until the whole communist-led system collapsed in 1989. We used to laugh at those stores in Russia with the long lines and empty shelves, but all the while we were sending our kids to similarly organized "free school" systems. Sadly, we still do this, up until now.

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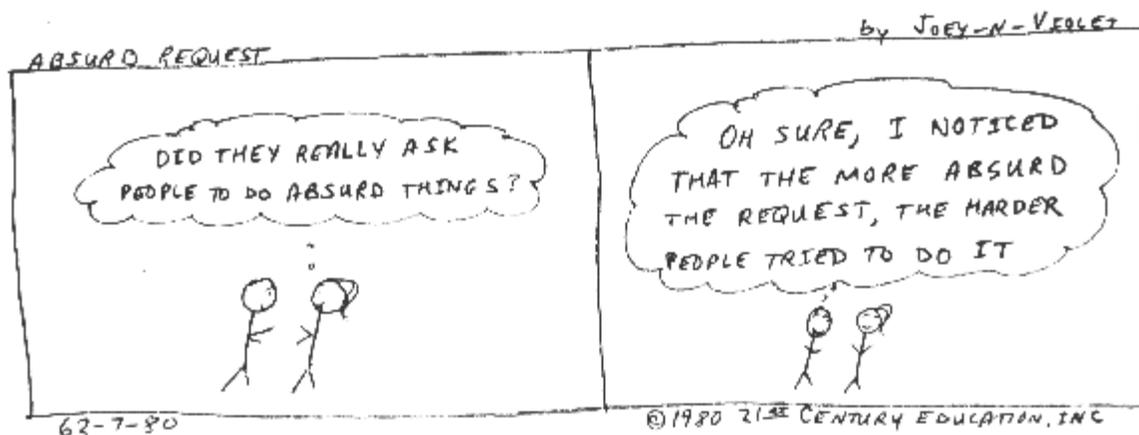
**Footnote 2.** What we try to avoid we create — out of our awareness. That seems to be a psychological truth, but one most often ignored. I created a simple acronym, EAT-O-TWIST, to help one to recall this truth and avoid fostering out in the world the very fears one harbors within oneself: Everything Allways Turns Out The Way It's Supposed To. The EAT-O-TWIST process is embodied in [Matherne's Rule #10](#).

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Footnote 3. This tendency of people to try harder instead of noticing the absurdity of a request from a group leader in a classroom or workshop is highlighted this Violet-n-Joey Cartoon drawn by Bobby in 1980:

"Absurd Request" at <http://www.doyletics.com/07208062.gif>



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