



## **Freedom and Beyond**

*John Holt*

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"Freedom and Beyond" represents a significant turning point in Holt's work. This is the first book in which he looked beyond schooling as the sole problem of education or as the sole solution. No longer would Holt argue that if we could only make schools better, the problems that he and other critics outlined would be solved.

## **Freedom and Beyond Details**

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### Anne says

extremely dated, but the kernels about the importance of finding a different way to teach and learn are still very true. it is helpful and reassuring to be able to read the words of someone who feels the same way about the state of schooling....

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### Deborah says

This was first published in 1972. Both Vietnam (or what Holt refers to as the "Asian War") and the segregation of Boston schools are frequently mentioned. If you're squeamish about revisiting those topics, best to stay away.

But the real discomfort is in Holt's critiques of the schools vis a vis race and poverty. The intrinsic promise of the schools is that they will make children into better, productive adults, and that our community/society/country will be better off for it. Holt provides evidence for why that's not possible within his system (and his system is much like the one we have now). Never mind the myriad ways schools have come up with to teach math and reading; for most children, those methods are unnatural, and in many cases interfere with the normal progress they would make if left to do so on their own. How can we expect our children to be creators and critical thinkers if they are taught that deviating from the right answer (or, as may be the case now, the correct method) is considered "disobedience", and that the consequences of that behavior can follow them for the rest of their lives? Certainly, some children are allowed more latitude, but it's not a coincidence that those children also have more flexibility in the rest of their lives as well.

As much as we bemoan how little we understood about the facts of climate change and pollution up until now, Holt spends half a chapter on how the promise of "better employment through schooling" is directly connected to the growth mindset that was ruining the planet in the early 1970s. Might there be a way Holt can see for growth that won't lead to destruction? Yes--but it was dependent on using natural resources, not irreplaceable ones.

While cities and towns across the country have been fighting for more resources to educate its children for decades, Holt bemoaned that education was seen as something that not only had to be so expensive but something that had to be so competitive. Difficult to argue that the real lessons taught by filling some elementary classrooms with state of the art equipment and getting into bidding wars over feted college professors was anything more than Consumerism 101.

For all of his criticisms of schools and the negative aspects of our civilization that they feed, Holt wasn't arguing that schools should be blown up. He understood that some people would \*want\* to be in schools, and he's open to the probability that some things are better learnt in a system with a prescribed curriculum (e.g., medicine). Let schools exist--but let them be a choice. Let children take classes when and where they want to on whatever subject they want, and let them leave when they're satisfied. (He recommended this a la carte approach not just for K-12 but also for colleges and universities.)

Holt understood that some of what he recommended was harder to implement than, for example, no longer

giving grades. It's unfortunate that as of yet many of his recommendations haven't been implemented. However, this wouldn't have surprised Holt at all, who noted that many of the reforms he suggested had been discussed decades before he himself was in school. More depressingly, some reforms had been implemented by the writing of this book, but they had been abandoned before publication. It's for this reason, I believe, that Holt began to lose faith in remaking "the system" and began advocating that people simply leave it.

Recommended for anyone concerned with education.

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## Weathervane says

A few points made:

- "Schooling" is not equivalent to "education" or "learning" -- schooling is about packaging a product and selling it; instilling students with dubious values comes free-of-charge. This is the "hidden curriculum." (Though I don't believe Holt uses this term.)
- Compulsory schooling eliminates freedom from a child's life. The only choice is between jail and school -- do we cut off your head or your hand? Teachers will never know which of their methods students are truly enthusiastic about if these methods are delivered under the shadow of coercion. Though "higher education" is not compulsory, it carries a similar choice: Do this for four years or you won't get a good job.
- The system of evaluating and grading each student based on performance teaches students to regard the label stamped upon them as deserved. Poor students believe they are incapable of learning, and good students believe they are superior persons to those with lesser grades. Schooling breeds fatalism.
- Schooling separates work from play, drudgery from joy. Holt argues that this is unrealistic. When getting a glass of water, for instance, you don't calculate the effort required to open the cupboard, turn on the sink, etc. This is a dubious claim; humans are constantly performing cost/benefit analyses, unconsciously much of the time. Holt's fierce opposition to compartmentalization in modern life is a bit strange, but he makes a good point when he notes that schools waste vast amounts of money, yet produce nothing. Learning has been enclosed in its own locker-and-hallway bubble, insulated from the rest of the world.
- Reforming the system from within the schools is a lost cause. (Contrast this with Holt's views in his previous books. He progressively becomes more and more against school as an institution.) He says we should replace most schools with learning networks, as Ivan Illich also suggests. Libraries are one sort of network; the internet, of course, is a vast modern learning network which Holt could not have foreseen.

This would've gotten five stars if Holt hadn't embarked on a few tedious tangents concerning economics. His slavish devotion to the environment is also a bit concerning, as is his opposition to industrial growth, which, overall, raises the standard of living in a country. Holt's utopia is willfully backwards. More power to him, I suppose.

A whole lot to digest in this book, and what a great book it is.

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**Megan says**

Picked this randomly off a shelf at the library and thus far it's amazing. Most down-to-earth description of what genuine 'freedom' is that I've read in awhile.

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**Bwags75 says**

Wow - if the shifts in society that Holt describes could ever happen, it would be wonderful.

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