I have questions about education.

July, 2023

I have questions. I have lots of questions. I have questions about education, its purpose, its delivery, and how we measure it. I have 'big picture' questions about how education fits into our society. I have questions about how we define success in education, and quite frankly, how we define success in life. I have questions about how education connects and how it contributes to what is widely considered a mental health epidemic. I have questions about who, in education, decides what is in the best interests of my child. I have questions about narratives and how they ultimately bring us back to education's related opportunity. I have questions about unintended consequences.

These are just a few of my questions. We all have our own questions. For myself… and anyone else who cares to listen in, my evolving answers may help me to understand and articulate my own world view. I judge for no one but myself. My answers are based, in part, on findings from more than 500 comprehensive constituent surveys I've conducted for independent schools over a span of 28 years. I'll be highlighting some of these findings here as I flesh out both my world view and what you may feel is an accompanying indictment of a tired, out-of-date system of education.

Your answers to these questions, I suspect, will depend much on how you feel about our natural human state. I do not accept, as some suggest, that we are, and should be, self-centred individuals. Some of us appear so. Some part of each of us may, indeed, be so. I believe, however, that our dominant human nature is one of interdependent "co-opetition". While we

do compete with one other, and competition is certainly a good thing, this cooperative competition, in a virtuous and balanced world, is not to the detriment of the collective. From an anthropological perspective, zero-sum is not applicable. The pie can and does get bigger. You may feel that we don't live in a virtuous and balanced world, and this may be true. Let's leave the jury out on that one for now.

Our species has survived and thrived, not because we play King of the Hill, but because we cooperate and work together with a "higher purpose than self". In graduate school, more than 40 years ago, I was introduced in my six-person study group to the zero-sum board game of Risk. The object is to take over and dominate the world by way of calculated probabilities, attack strategy, trade deals, and carefully crafted alliances. Deals and alliances didn't often come early in the game, but whenever one player showed signs of becoming too powerful, the dynamic of our childhood King of the Hill adventures, atop mounds of snow in parking lots, was immediately invoked. Enemies became allies, deals were made, and near winners were hauled down before they could reach the summit and declare supremacy. New powers arose and old alliances were abandoned in favor of new… for a time. It was a fluid display of migrating loyalties. To a group of ambitious young MBA students, the embedded lesson was not lost. Whereas 60% of our classmates crashed and burned before graduation, we six remained intact to the end. While our board game was, in fact, a foundational display of the zero-sum concept, so-called "success" in this game depended heavily on cooperative competition. You are only as strong as those who surround you.

Our natural state does not present an insurmountable challenge. Our disregard of that natural state, however, poses a very great challenge. At the core, we are not different from most other

creatures. We are, first and foremost, social. We recognize that we are social creatures. We feel, physically and psychologically, that we are social creatures. Our history teaches us to understand the importance of our condition as social creatures. Where we differ from other animals is in our uncanny ability, sidetracked by external forces, to disregard this social condition. This sidetracking, I submit, is key to any understanding of how and why we keep falling off the righteous track. When you abandon or disregard foundational blocks, on a personal level, and on a societal level, prepare to pay the price.

"The other" is at the core of my world view. Don't get me wrong. Although I'm a Canadian, I'm no socialist. I'm as selfish as the next guy, maybe more. Just ask my wife. At the same time, my selfishness is best served when I am a net contributor to something larger than myself. I need to make a difference to "the other". Making this difference is, to be frank, in direct service of selfishness… call it my selfish altruism if you will. For some of you, this may precisely fit some textbook definition of socialism. I promise you, it does not. Rather, it reflects my preference to look at the world, and my very small place in it, through a wide angle lens, rather than through what I see as a disturbingly narrow zero-sum lens.

Our task, in my view, is to create, promote, and protect a healthy, balanced structure of the whole and in so doing improve our chances to survive… and perhaps to thrive, both as individuals and as a society.

I mean to explore many questions like these, always tied back to education… but first, let's back up a couple of steps to have a look at the big picture.

To start with, I have questions about questions

In the context of educational programming:

- Why do we ask questions as we do?

- Do we ask too many questions or not enough questions?

- What's the right mix of questions and answers?

- What value do questions, posed in an educational setting, bring to the big picture of our lives? I do like the big picture.

Here's what I see:

To me, questions are far more important than answers. Admittedly, this could be because I make a living asking questions. I reside mostly in Knowledge Quadrant #2, meaning that: I don't know, but I know that I don't know. This is a healthy place to live. Recognizing that you don't know compels you to craft a question. In turn, if you ask the right question, a workable answer should be the natural consequence.

For me, life is a meandering journey, punctuated by checkpoints. I say checkpoints, because I do not see a destination anywhere on the landscape of my life. If I ever "arrive at some destination," I'm done. End of story. Time to go home, lay down, and die. Questions, for me, are the segments of my journey. Answers are mere checkpoints along the way, leading to more questions in pursuit of the next adventure in my journey.

Artificial intelligence, it's been said, may soon replace the human side of answering most questions. I'm a little skeptical on that, but let's play with the notion for a moment. Let's stipulate for now that artificial intelligence may soon be in a position – if it isn't already – to

search out and provide us with all things factual. AI is already writing college essays. AI may soon replace architects, engineers, geneticists… the list goes on. Technical and mechanical knowledge workers – in short, all logical skill holders – are at risk, myself included: At least a significant portion of our contributions may be farmed out to AI. Just something to think about…

In our surveys of teachers, we regularly ask them to identify, from a list of perhaps 20 items, the four most important factors contributing to success for students at their schools. One of the listed items is the "ability to retain facts". When I was in school, I imagine that fact retention would have been named in the top four by more teachers than not.

As students, we saw exam week as a silly exercise during which we opened the lid on the top of our heads, poured in every fact we could find, wrote one exam, then unscrewed the bolt in our Herman Munster necks, drained out all those useless facts, and then did it all again for the next exam.

From our surveys of teachers, we regularly see 0% identifying *ability to retain facts* as among the top four. When more than 4-5% do name this as a top-four factor, I make a point of saying so to school leaders, as perhaps indicative of an opportunity for follow-up discussion.

Einstein once said that the only thing he needed to remember was the location of the library. Google has been substituted for library and artificial intelligence may be next in line.

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The OECD just predicted that AI could replace up to one-quarter of all jobs in member countries. As frightening as that prospect may be, we've got to ask and answer the question: What are the key skills that will prepare our children for success in the current century?

Almost 20 years ago, I was asked to present survey findings at a Board retreat for a school that was exploring the ideal profile for graduates of the 21st century. Nothing new in that, and this kind of conversation, today, remains a common event. Everyone is grappling with an unknown future in a rapidly changing environment.

Soon after the pandemic. I was reviewing a school's pre-pandemic questionnaire, in preparation for the next round of surveys. One of the pre-pandemic questions was something to the effect of: *What changes in the world do you anticipate that we should consider as we begin our upcoming strategic planning exercise?* As you might have guessed, no one said "pandemic".

In short, we don't know, and in many cases, we don't know that we don't know. I call this the quadrant of the teenager.

Assigned readings for the Board retreat were Jim Collins' book, "Good to Great" and Tom Friedman's "The World is Flat." I'll confess that I sometimes like to throw a hand grenade into the middle of a conversation and wait to see who picks it up. At this particular session, someone suggested that, if the school's graduates were to lead "great" lives, then careers in engineering should be considered front and centre. I wondered how many people in attendance had actually read the part of Friedman's book that described how China and India, each year, were producing ten times the number of engineers produced annually in the United States, at a tenth of the cost. "If one accepts that globalization is here to stay," I asked, "wouldn't we just be

preparing our students for minimum wage jobs?" Again, I'm just asking questions. The room fell silent with my question and moments later, the Chair called for a break.

Someone approached me during that break, suggesting that creativity was what made the difference. American education prepared graduates to be creative. Chinese and Indian schools did not. Well, the late Sir Ken Robinson made a good living shining a light very pointedly on our schools' spectacular success in killing creativity in children. Quite regularly, I take phone calls from people in Asia who are creatively determined to separate me from my money. The creativity gap, if it ever existed, is long closed. To this day, my hand grenade minimum wage question remains unanswered.

As far as factors contributing to success in the 21st century are concerned, the first four I'd offer are the same four that have been at the top of the list since the beginning of time: habits; discipline; character; and values. It's really that simple. With these four traits in hand, everything else has, historically, been within reach. A fifth factor I would add today is adaptability. Our world is changing at such a pace that the body of knowledge in many fields turns over as frequently as every five years. Facts, alone, won't take us very far… and remember… that side of things may soon be covered by artificial intelligence. Our children will need first to learn to learn. Once we stop learning, we're done. Careers for our children are likely to include numerous postings with multiple employers. They'll need to know how to adapt to new environments, to learn constantly, and along the journey, to engage in many new and diverse relationships.

As Alvin Toffler put it, "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." It's more than a little ironic that

education turns out to be one of the least adaptable sectors of our economy. In 1980, Toffler published the book, "The Third Wave", a sequel to his blockbuster, "Future Shock". In Toffler's assessment, education, as the sector of the economy that needs most to change, is the sector that has changed least since its creation in the 1830s. If adaptability is, indeed, one of the key factors likely to contribute to success in the decades ahead, we ought first to model that quality for our children and our students.

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Mathematics is the only place where there *might* be a "simple, defined answer," and then, only sometimes. All the rest is pretty much up for grabs, with an evolving collection of acceptable answers. Your answer may work as well, if not better, than mine… for you. My answer, in turn, may work better for me. These answers may work better today than tomorrow… or in 1830 better than today.

In the absence of singular answers, why do we so disproportionately ask students for singular answers? Whoever invented large scale standardized multiple choice examinations should be hauled out behind the shed. Whatever happened to the Humanities? I suspect the answer to that question will be filed in history's cabinet of "unintended consequences". Why don't we assess the quality of the questions students ask? After all, better questions are the drivers of better answers.

In high school Math, I remember the days of being marked down for not showing my work. Apparently, there was not only one right answer. There was also, in the mind of my teacher, only one right path to that answer. Without showing that specific path, it mattered not whether my

final answer was correct. Truth be told, even mathematics often offers more than one path to the right answer. Witness Jakob Trachtenberg.

Why, then, the need for singularity in answers, and for singularity in the path to those answers, other than for the sum of 1 + 1? The answer to this question is central to all that follows. Here's my take: Modern education remains derivative of a scaled system designed to transform farmer children into factory workers. Compliant, conforming, docile people, prepared to have a boss tell them what to do (not to think, but to do), to show up on time, to work in a line, and to do the same thing all day without question. Questions were not required. Questions, in fact, were undesirable. Structurally, it's easier to ask students for answers than to field their questions. Nothing Socratic about this at all. What could go wrong?

With the abandonment of the master/apprentice model, increasing numbers of students asking questions of a lone instructor would render any teaching environment untenable. Moreover, schools were designed to become factories themselves, not just suppliers to factories. The Industrial Revolution required a lot of sameness. Novel thinking was discouraged, or was at least restricted to a very small number of people.

So… for the parent who aspires for their child to become the next "leader of the free world," how does such an aspiration square with an education system designed to train out key skills necessary for residence in the corner office? It's in complete contradiction. Leadership requires that you have one foot on the inside of the circle and one on the outside. How does that work when your training ground is one of conformity and compliance, and when it's from the inside of a closed system?

In a world where we spend the first five years of our children's lives teaching them to walk and talk, why do we then tell them to sit down and shut up for the next 15-20 years... and just listen? Children have so many "cute" questions that are eventually weaned right out of existence. Curiosity is cute only to a point. Then we all get tired and impatient. "Because I said so!" becomes our ready response. As I see it, curiosity is perhaps the best predictor of success, both in education and in life. Kill curiosity and with it destroy any opportunity for extraordinary achievement, let alone extraordinary leadership.

As a parent, do you really want your child to become the shiniest cog in a large wheel? Do you want your child to be the gopher running to find the answer for the boss, or would you prefer to see your child asking wonderful questions that may move our world to a better place?

We are bent... I would argue broken... in our determination to encourage and prepare our children to become successful cogs in a gear of someone else's design. I ask again, why?

Do we, in our hearts, believe in the machine turned by this gear? Do we, in submission, accept this machine, and our small part in its operation, as inevitable? I do not believe. I cannot accept. Can you hear the haunting lyrics of Pink Floyd or Jethro Tull in the background?

Is the narrative so strong that we've lost sight of ourselves, and of our children, as unique? Whose narrative is this anyway? In whose interest, I ask, has this narrative been so carefully crafted, seemingly into perpetuity?

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If you're still with me, let's complicate things a bit and add grades to the picture. Students are graded on answers, not questions. As suggested, that's already a problem in itself. Our focus on

answers that we already know will not lead to new discoveries. Regurgitation, to put it politely, is the only near-term outcome that can come of this. Only those very few students with access to the highest levels of education, commerce, government, and industry will be permitted to ask questions… and there's no guarantee that they'll remember their toddler years well enough to craft the right questions when the opportunity arises.

Nowadays, as in 1830, students are graded for one reason alone, in the end, to separate the wheat from the chaff. To think otherwise is seriously in error. Not only have we inherited a system of education designed for what are now mostly anachronistic purposes. We've also created a grading system that incorrectly, and inappropriately, tells one-half of our students that they are unworthy. "You're below average… oh, and how's your day going?" By rank grading, and by measuring the wrong things to start with, are we not creating collateral damage in the form of students who are not considered the cream of the cream? Are we not also depriving society of great contributions by otherwise potentially creative people, set aside because they don't fit a mold created almost 200 years ago? In the animal kingdom tree metaphor for education, those who can climb win. Unfortunately, that leads to a lot of monkeys at the top of the tree. Conformity has its benefits in an assembly line environment, but it has a very high price in non-assembly line environments.

Money and power designed a system of education to produce, promote, and sustain compliance and conformity. This presents the most important challenge facing humankind today… compliance and conformity designed to serve obsolete ends that ultimately serve an increasingly concentrated elite. Joseph Schumpeter would be disappointed to see our poor application of *creative destruction*. To be blunt, this is at the heart of what I see as the source

for our current unfolding demise. The flaws of our decaying industrial model for society are

apparent for anyone who can see and think, including those in the control room. The will to take

corrective action, however, does not appear to exist in substantive measure. This ocean liner

will not change direction on its own. My fear is that its ultimate change in direction will come

only by way of an iceberg. Will the arrogance of corporate exceptionalism bring western society

to a similar outcome? The Industrial Revolution created a model for the world we live in today.

An arrogant free market, in the absence of external regulation, tends away from free market

and toward oligopoly. Arrogance has only one outcome and it's not a pretty picture.

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Canadians invented hockey. We dominated the sport for a century. We believed that this sport

was and always would be ours. We taught the world to play hockey. Since the Canada-Russia

Summit Series in 1972, the Russians and the rest of the world have returned the favour. We

barely survived that series and were close to devastating loss because of our arrogance. As I say,

arrogance has only one outcome and it's not a pretty picture.

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The farm-to-factory scoop has created factories called schools. The 1830s, I believe, will provide

history's best explanation for the downfall of society as we know it today. The seed that was

planted and nurtured to support a societal revolution 200 years ago will ultimately be the seed

that destroys that same society. Isn't this always the case? Look to the seed of creation for understanding of ultimate collapse.

So… the system of education created in the 19th century was designed to support a model whose history has now run its course. We've entered a new phase of history, but history has a nasty habit of repeating itself. Just as the horseless carriage put buggy whip manufacturers out of business, artificial intelligence will relieve our children of sitting in rows, repeating known answers. Be assured of it. Money and power will have no hesitation in sweeping us and our children to the sidelines just as quickly as they dragged us off the farms two centuries ago.

What are we doing for our children?

What are we doing to our children?

As I say, I have questions.

I have questions about education, its purpose, its strategy, and how we measure it

Years ago, I fell upon this passage:

"The desperadoes and thieves of today were school boys ten years ago, and if society is ever to find complete protection against such offenders, it will probably be through the schools… The implication is that, to a very great extent, the future safety and welfare of society depend upon the school; in other words, that the school is the greatest moral agent in the world today. Unfortunately, it is too often regarded merely as a place where young children acquire a certain skill in language, reading, writing, and number, and a certain knowledge of geographical,

historical, and scientific facts – a skill and a knowledge that are supposed to be useful in helping the individual to make his way in, or sometimes against, the world. If this were all the school accomplished in the life of the nation, it would fall far short of the complete achievement of the purpose for which it is designed. This narrow conception of its purpose has led some teachers to view their responsibilities lightly. What teachers need most is not higher scholarship, not better technique in instruction, not greater skill in management, but a keener perception of their function in moulding the life of the nation, and a more intense desire and stronger determination to discharge that function fully and efficiently."

This passage pretty much captures our current dilemma. Our greatest worries today are derived directly from failure to provide character and values education. A society devoid of citizenry is a society doomed. The passage cited here is both a damning indictment of our system of education (I can't wait for the guilty verdict so it can be replaced), and at the same time, a bold statement of immense importance going forward. Our own ambitions pursued to the exclusion of "the other" can lead to nowhere good. Steering an entire system into the mountainside and jumping off with all the gold just before impact, is not acceptable. Do you hear me, Wall Street? Those who cannot see this are the unfortunate products of our collective failure to educate.

If our school system were to embrace the notion captured in the cited passage, I would rise and applaud with unbounded enthusiasm.

Here's the thing, folks. This passage comes from a book called Principles of Method. Written for studies in education, this bold prescription for our schools was authorized by the Ministry of Education for the Province of Ontario (my home). Are you ready for the punch line? It was published in 1930.

Huh?

The spirit of educating citizenry is not new. More than a century ago, Dr. John Dewey published Democracy and Education, much quoted and more often ignored. Talk is cheap. Action speaks volumes. Employers demand mechanistic skills. Educators respond by delivering those skills, too often at the expense of character and values education. Such short-sighted actions, it's sad to say, leave us in our current predicament. What's more, Dewey did not originate these notions on civics and citizenry in education. You'll need to look back all the way to ancient Greece (and perhaps further) for that.

The Greeks would tell you that a proper education covered numeracy, literacy, music, physical fitness, and philosophy. Moral understanding and a sense of civic duty were seen as key to the survival of Greek society, but seems to have been lost in the shuffle over the past 200 years. Balance of a full program in education should be re-affirmed as central to success in preparation for life.

Note that the overarching purpose of education for the Greeks was in service of a civil society, not of the individual. Only the well-educated and well-prepared can protect and promote the interests of society at large. We'd be fooling ourselves badly if we thought that any system of education, in ancient Greece or today, is designed first with our personal interests at heart. The very word "system" points to a purpose larger than the individual. The difference in the modern case is in the hijacking of education by special interests who, mistakenly, don't see or feel the benefits to society at large as attuned to their own benefits as measured in dollars and cents.

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As for our system of education, so the same for our system of society. Education and society comprise an inseparable cycle. One serves the other and it goes both ways. In our times, is this a virtuous or a vicious cycle? The great experiment, not just in the United States, but in Canada and in every other Western nation, broadly speaking, is one of participation, place, and belonging. Insofar as representative democracy can be a meaningful enabler of participation, place, and belonging, the great experiment is well served. The same is true for education.

Our task at the outset is to understand the system (be it education or society at large), its creation, and its purpose. Only then can we properly explore and assess whether it is appropriate and effective, as we strive for both systemic correction and continual improvement. We already know that our system of education was created largely in the service of the Industrial Revolution. Special interests, as always, held overwhelming influence over how this system was formulated and delivered. Since then, special interests, guided by an obsession with Taylorism and profit margins, continue to bring inordinate influence on our system of education. We are social creatures but mechanistic thinking (Taylorism), to this day, impedes structural consideration of the social. People, like machines and inventory, have become measured inputs of production. Time and motion studies lead to efficiency. Repetition of hyper-specialized activity, in turn, leads to technical mastery, productivity, and profitability.

On my first visit, early last year, to meet an orthopaedic surgeon about my knee, I mentioned the potential for additional work on my shoulder. A specialist, he just smiled, holding one hand open just above my knee and the other just below, saying: "If it's between here and here, I can help you. Otherwise, I cannot."

With purpose or by accident, over time, special interests have perverted classical education, in favour of production and have done so at the expense of citizenry. Our leaders, focused on the short-term horizons of election cycles and quarterly reports, or their own personal careers, have overlooked or disregarded citizenry as an essential component in our children's education.

Purpose, strategy, and delivery of education, onward from the 1830s, has been viewed inordinately through the obscuring lens of this mechanistic perspective. Mechanistic thinking relegates to secondary and tertiary levels those important social-emotional elements that are not easily measured. By default, in education, our focus narrows to the things most easily measured, at the expense of attention to the whole child. Not only is such narrow focus insufficient. It is also, I would argue, counterproductive. Strict adherence to mechanistic thinking will ultimately lead to the collapse of the whole system in the midst of failure to take into account the undeniable social aspect of human nature. As successful as Taylorism can be, and has been within a relevant range, I am reminded that success is one of the best predictors of failure. Once fixed in a successful routine, we find it particularly difficult to look for, recognize, and adopt better ideas when they come along. Start running! The train is now leaving the station…

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Coupled with this blatant disregard for informed citizenry, perhaps stemming from this disregard, we live in a zero-sum society, increasingly imbalanced in favour of the individual over the community. The combination provides us with a system of education that encourages parents and students to think primarily in terms of what they can take from education, rather

than what they can bring to it. As a preparatory microcosm for society at large, formal education today abdicates a very large and very important responsibility.

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Years ago, when our youngest, now 23, moved from the local Montessori school into Grade 5 at the public school, we were summoned to a meeting with her teacher, the Principal, and a psychologist from the school board. They wanted us to consider placing her in a gifted program. While that wasn't surprising to us, our response was certainly surprising to them. "No thank you… our kitchen table is Alana's enrichment program. We can do everything the school can… and more… to challenge her to meet her academic potential."

My wife is a former educator. Our business is education. We live, eat, breathe, and sleep education. "Thank you very much," we said. "We want Alana to stay in the regular classroom, but we'd ask that you provide her with as many opportunities as you can to allow her to share her gifts with other students. She does well and will continue to do well. It's every bit as important to us (if not more) that she learns to do good."

For our part, we feel inclined to remind our children (and ourselves) to focus on a "higher purpose than the self".

The self, in isolation, is nothing.

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The greatest potential for gains in life balance, I would contend, is found in a balanced education. To whatever extent we can convey to our children that they can make a difference in the world, and that they have a responsibility to do so, there is hope. Pursuit of individual

aspirations, without reference to the whole, is a recipe for certain disaster. We need leaders willing to step outside of a model that promotes the individual, irrespective of the collective. This can only come with the education of informed citizenry. We need to develop and strengthen ourselves... and our children... not in answer to isolated personal ambition, but in the need for service of others. From Albert Pine, "What we do for ourselves dies with us. What we do for others and the world remains and is immortal."

Let me emphasize that I am all in favour of pursuit of individual ambitions. At the same time, these ambitions need to be pursued in the context of something larger than the individual. Focus on the individual, in the absence of consideration for the needs of others, may turn out to be a fatal blow for western society. We are nothing if not part of something larger than ourselves. How we relate to others must always be the starting point for the creation of well-being and for repair when required. This is true both for individuals and for society.

This is an uphill battle, to be certain, but one worth fighting. I may die on that hill, but am prepared to do so if there's any chance at all for success. Just saying...

I have questions about how we define success in education, and quite frankly, how we define success in life, generally

The answer to the first question should be embedded in the answer to the second. School is supposed to be preparatory for life, so for the moment, let's consider these questions as one and the same. Success, of course, hinges on your definition of purpose. What's your life's purpose, your mission? What is our society's mission? As suggested, much of our current system in education has devolved, in purpose, into narrow preparation for the workforce. Also

suggested, this is in error, at great cost both to our children and to society at large. Workforce preparation needs to be considered in the larger context of life preparation. Failure in this more holistic approach leaves our children hobbling down a misguided path with one leg shorter than the other.

Is bigger better? This is a question that has nagged at me for many years. My best answer is "yes, but...". Bigger is better to a point, after which returns from growth diminish, then turn negative. I've run my own business since 1989. A close childhood friend, now retired, also ran his own business, actually several of them. Whenever he encouraged me to grow my business bigger, into an empire, diversifying into other fields, I would ask, "How many employees do you have?" And then with a smile, "How many problems do you have?" To each their own.

Bill Ouchi's "Theory Z" (1981) ran afoul of scale-obsessed accountants when he suggested that there was a limit to the number of employees in an effective organization. He put his theory to a real-world test in auto manufacturing plants, ultimately demonstrating that, beyond 500 employees, quality and productivity consistently took a downward turn. This loss in quality and productivity was suggested by Ouchi as a function of our ability to "know" only up to 500 people. Beyond that number, we get lost in the shuffle and lose cohesion. In other words, our social nature restricts our capacity for scaled performance.

Theory Z was assigned reading for Organizational Behaviour 650 in my first term of the MBA program (1982). Ouchi offers an easy read toward understanding of Kaizen techniques and Quality Circles. Relevant to anyone aspiring to a leadership role. I recommend it highly.

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On a wider societal perspective, many years ago, I listened to Alex Himelfarb, Canada's former Clerk of the Privy Council (our most senior civil servant) sharing his views on what makes a sovereign nation. I found his lecture thought provoking as I pondered both the notion of how to define a nation, as well as its potential implications for me as an individual. His definition embodied what he called a "collective capacity to shape the future." I found this articulation intriguing, and broadly applicable, not just to nation states, but to organizations of any type and size. One might even consider one's own personal condition as a collective – bearing some capacity to shape the future.

I smile on the side as I say so, thinking of a friend in a country just south of here who shudders every time I use the word, "collective". He equates that word with the image of a hammer and a sickle, bathed in red. He bristled when I explained that his beloved football team was a "collective".

For the moment, accepting that a nation state must embody a collective capacity to shape the future, I wonder about relevant metrics that could be employed over time as a gauge of a nation's health… or that of a business, a community, a school, a family… or as I say, of myself. How is my collective doing today? Have I been successful in crafting my personal "collective" capacity to shape the future? In the end, am I adding value? To my business? To my health and fitness? To my marriage and family and friendships? Am I adding value to your life today? Have I prompted you to consider the world differently from yesterday?

Rightly or wrongly, I am deeply smitten with a strong internal locus of control. Accepting my own capacity to shape the future should be a critical component in how I connect to the world around me. Telling myself repeatedly that "I'm in charge" of my life regularly helps sustain the

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illusion that it's actually true. I'm thinking that my very awareness of this capacity also helps to inform frequent corrective action as I meander through the adventures and misadventures of everyday life. It follows, then, that *intentional* conscious effort to create, promote, support, and sustain a capacity to shape the future will contribute meaningfully to my state of success or fulfillment or happiness, whatever that residual may be. Should the same not be true for our children and students?

Widening the lens, I wonder how happy our nation (or planet) is, enabled or constrained by the state of this collective capacity. Is our capacity as a collective greater than it was ten years ago… thirty years ago? As assorted players jostle for dominant roles on the world stage, do we feel enhanced or diminished in our capacity to shape the future? Do we enjoy congruence as a nested collective of collectives? Himelfarb would argue that the capacity for national identity is tied to the proportionate mix of rights and responsibilities of the individual versus rights and responsibilities of the collective. As a direct function of this mix and of the condition of this so-called collective capacity, are we as a nation in a happy place?

Narrowing the lens again to education, I wonder if school program that reflects intentional conscious effort to create, promote, support, and sustain student capacity, and importantly, belief in a capacity to shape the future will contribute meaningfully to student outcomes and to student well-being. By *intentional*, I mean more than just, "yes, we do that, too".

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Depending on your perspective, success for you may mean something very different than for me. Economists and tradition-bound accountants measure success primarily in terms of

revenues and profits. As I suspect you've gathered, I've long outgrown that point of view. To a limit, revenues and profits reflect success, but not in and of themselves. See my Guiding Value #9: "Profit is just one tool by which we move closer to our objectives."

Revenues and profits are necessary, but not sufficient. They are mere scoreboard servants along the path to success. Moreover, revenues and profits are not linearly tied to success. The flaw in profit-centred thinking is that it can mask our view of human reality and lead us to make decisions that disregard the social centre of human nature. When energies are expended on the increase of profit, *and* when this is done at the expense of larger purpose and meaning, these efforts first diminish in resulting value, then work against the attainment of real success. The classic saddle effect. Diminishing, then negative returns. My own business' profits have enabled me to spend a good chunk of the Summer engaged in this exploration of my world view. Money, to me, is only the time it can buy for pursuit of greater things.

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In my own defense, at this point, it's perhaps worth insisting, again, that I am NOT a socialist. I am, indeed, a "numbers guy", I have an MBA, and I run my own business. I spend a lot of time every day crunching numbers, likely more than most in my audience. For decades, I've been listening to a constant drumbeat of numbers. These numbers put irrefutable hard values to the so-called soft issues facing educators and students every day.

You know how, sometimes, we deceive ourselves because it's easier than facing the soft drip of evidence that says something's afoot. As teens, we're invincible. Just one more chocolate chip cookie can't do that much damage. By forty, we sense that maybe something is not quite right.

Later in life, we may decide that it's too late to set things back on track. As a perpetual 16 year-old, I'm not there… yet.

We are most vulnerable when dripping evidence is allowed to accumulate to a point when it becomes so powerful that we're overwhelmed by a flood through the broken dam of denial. Denial plagues us all. The steady drumbeat of numbers pounding in my ears, for almost three decades now, tells me that our system of education is no longer an invincible teenager. We live in a world that twists and turns like Lombard Street… and yet, in denial, we carry on as if we're on the Trans-Canada Highway between Regina and Moose Jaw, with our feet up on the dash and the steering wheel tied off to the stick shift.

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I'm not just a numbers guy. I'm also a dyed-in-the-wool English major who, one day, just happened to fall on a calculator. In the best of times, I use both sides of my brain. The alternative would be both boring and unsatisfying. Both sides are necessary, but each on their own, insufficient. In my final year of high school, I took four courses in mathematics, one in economics, and one in Spanish. From there, with a twist, I completed an undergraduate degree in English Literature… and then with another hairpin turn, an MBA with accentuated focus on the quantitative side of the equation.

The only regrets I feel for my meandering journey in education are for the roads not taken. For example, I wish I could spend each year to the end of my life in a different country, learning a new language and culture. I wish I'd studied Latin and Greek and Arabic. I wish I could say much more in Russian than, "I'm sorry, I don't understand Russian."

When I became a homeowner, I wished I'd spent a little time in the tech wing at school. I don't do electricity and I don't do plumbing. What little experience I have in these areas over the years still has my siblings sharing a good laugh, and wondering how I'm still alive. So much to learn. So little time.

***

I would be remiss if I didn't take the opportunity here, since this is about education, to indulge in a short rant on the topic of homework. It's a hot topic in homes and schools today, and worthy of greater exploration. From our constituent surveys, many parents (and I'm afraid, teachers) clearly equate volume of homework with quality and rigor in education. This is another of those "yes, but…" dilemmas. Time spent on homework by high schoolers is not linearly associated with success. Like excessive focus on revenues and profits, like how many bags of fertilizer you distribute on your lawn, time spent on homework displays diminishing, then negative, returns.

I say this not just as my opinion. I have supporting data. From both parent and student surveys, once the 3-hour per day marker is passed, other key barometer measures often decline, sometimes in a plummeting fashion. These measures include, from a long list of distinguishing elements: sense of belonging; emotional safety; and love of learning. Such losses are contrary to growth-in-learning objectives. Where excessive time is spent on homework, our children sacrifice critical opportunities for both social-emotional development and psychological well-being. With only 24 hours on the clock, balance in program is key to survival, let alone success. Ask Finland about homework. Ask Finland about student performance on international tests, for what they're worth. Ask Finland how their teachers are selected, trained, and treated. Perhaps

more to the point, ask Finland where they rank in the world happiness index. There is a Golden Middle. More is not always better. The saddle effect, once again.

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Before you jump on my use of that word, "happiness" I should quickly interject that I don't think much, if at all, about happiness.

For me, happiness is merely an emotional residual derived from a good journey in good company. Happiness is captured in being true to my guiding values. Happiness is embedded in pursuit of opportunities to explore and to learn. Happiness is tied to the belief that I hold some measure of influence in my own life as well as the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of those around me... productive and healthy relationships.

I am careful not to articulate any notion of happiness for myself in the context of "arrival" at a destination, an objective, or a goal. This, I believe, is folly. Have a destination... have an objective... have a goal... just don't look for happiness upon arrival. The journey is the thing. Specifically, the daily journey is the thing. In the game of golf, they say, "Don't think so much about what your score card might look like at the end of the round. Just think instead about your next shot. Then just think about the one after that, and so on." Borrowing from the 'think global... act local' dictum, I say, "consider the future... then think and act here and now."

Here's my rather simplistic framework for personal workplace preparation. I've always encouraged our children to pursue career success by way of three easy steps. Step 1 is to figure out what you love most to do. Step 2 is to become the very best you can be at it. Step 3 is to find someone crazy enough to pay you to do it. At the same time, make sure that you're a net

contributor to society. Leave more than you take. In the end, even if you can't find someone

crazy enough to pay you for it, you're still doing well what you love to do... and importantly,

you're making a difference. There's nothing wrong with that, and all things considered; it's a

recipe for success.

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The mission proposition for my business, simply put, is: *How can we add value to conversations*

in education management? Just ten words, but they say a lot. More than 40 years ago, my

policy professor, Chris Bart, declared that, if your mission statement is longer than 15 words, it's

not a mission statement. It's an essay. In my observation, mission statements designed by

committees of committees more closely resemble essays.

We also have a list of guiding values:

1. Conduct yourself in all matters with honesty and integrity.

2. Listen... think... then speak, but only if you have something to say.

3. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."

4. Add value to everything you do.

5. Be only your best -- everything else will follow.

6. Plan to learn something with each new assignment.

7. Re-state all problems as opportunities.

8. Your career is an adventure comprised of a long series of mini-adventures called
   workdays.

9. Profit is just one tool by which we move closer to our objectives.

10. Grow personally and professionally on a daily basis.

11. Stay in balance.

12. Enjoy your work and help others do the same.

To whatever extent we are true to our values, our mission proposition is served. When we fail to live by our values, success in achieving our mission can only be diminished.

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Viktor Frankl's defining work, "Man's Search for Meaning" (1946), should be required reading for every parent, teacher, and student. Meaning, purpose, mission… for me, these are captured, very simply by the phrase, "making a difference". When my time is done, I have hopes that someone will say that I made a difference. I hope to be measured, if that's possible, by my contribution to others. When I am true to my purpose, "The Other" is front and centre. I'm no Mother Theresa. Don't get me wrong. This focus is aspirational, not factual… not even close to factual. I fall down… I get up… I fall down… I get up… and I fall down.

I cannot consider my purpose in life without first and foremost recognizing our natural state as social creatures. Community, connectedness, and belonging are central to surviving and to thriving as individuals… and to surviving and thriving as a civil society.

***

In November 2022, my friends, John Gulla (Executive Director of the E.E. Ford Foundation) and Steve Piltch (Director of the School Leadership Program at UPenn's Graduate School of Education), and I launched a month-long survey across 96 independent schools in the U.S. and Canada. With 22,297 participating students, this was our Community and Belonging Survey. We

wanted to explore and quantify the importance of relationships, connectedness, engagement, and emotional safety, to name a few, as correlates to community and belonging for students in grades 9 through 12. No one paid to participate and none of us made a dime on this project. We took it on solely because we saw it as an important topic and a pursuit worthy of our time and efforts. We wanted, as I say, to make a difference. Great masses of data, tables, graphs, and reports that comprise this project reside on my computer inside a folder simply called, "Making a difference project". The full results and my interpretive analysis are posted on our website (www.lookoutmanagement.com).

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Many years ago, an acquaintance shared that he had recently become *engaged*… to be married. A visit with his betrothed to the priest offered the following lesson: "*Now you are engaged to become married. I would encourage you to remain engaged if you'd like to stay married*." Ever meet a couple who have been married for years and years, and still act as if they're on their honeymoon? That's because they're still *engaged*.

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Noureddine was the Chair of Mathematics at a small school in Southern California. In preparation for a round of surveys, I was invited to sit in on a class or two, just to immerse myself a bit within the school community. Noureddine was teaching a class on Multiple Variable Calculus. I studied this stuff… back in 1976… couldn't understand a thing Noureddine said… but what he was doing was perfectly clear. For 70 minutes, he had his students up at the boards in

small groups, attacking a number of problems, and then, across groups, sharing their answers and various strategies for solving these problems.

Nobody sat down for 70 minutes… except me. With the conclusion of each problem, Noureddine would call out, "change 'em up" and one student from each group would shift to the next. These kids were living and learning the subject that day… at the same time, their social, peer pressure, group-goal, leadership, and team skills were being advanced … and they were having a blast.

As for me, I came away with no better understanding of the math… but I was mesmerized by the sheer beauty of what Noureddine had achieved. It looked and felt like no math class I had ever attended. When I talk about 'higher performing schools', my Noureddine story always comes to mind.

<center>***</center>

I cringe when I see clients overstressing small class size as a key point of distinction in their marketing materials. Is class size important? Of course it is. At the same time, class size is not the heart of the matter. *Individual attention* and *engagement* are the key variables. Class size is important only insofar as it enables you to deliver more and better individual attention to students. Success in the provision of individual attention, it should be stressed, is best reflected in *engagement*. Students who go home and rave to their parents about things like… *Multiple Variable Calculus classes*… are engaged. For the discerning parent, this is success in education, no matter what the class size is. Such an *engaged and engaging* teacher is the principal asset of a higher performing school. *This is the heart of the matter.*

Society is well served by enabling full engagement of every member of the community. Equal engagement? No, that's not realistic. Equal opportunity for engagement? Still a reach, but a good objective just the same. Opportunity for improved engagement? That's one we should pursue for every member of society, and in preparation, for every student.

My brain is near bursting with aggregated data that tells me over and over again that the variables I've listed (relationships, connectedness, engagement, and emotional safety) are so much more important than anything else. Things traditionally thought immeasurable, in fact, are measurable... and they're important!

I suspect that what we do measure in education, too often, is a waste of time. We measure what's easy to measure, though it may not be important. I'm reminded of the story of a drunk man searching for his wallet under the streetlight when approached by a police officer. Soon after, the officer asks: "Are you sure you lost it here?" The drunkard says no, he lost it down the street. When asked, then, why he's searching under the streetlight, he answers, "well, this is where the light is". Are we drunk or have we just become complacent in strategies that "sort of worked" 200 years ago?

From our community and belonging project, and from all the work I've done over the years, it is clear that, until a student finds a close friend, until a student finds a trusted adult, until a student finds a place of engagement and belonging within the school community, nothing else that's good can happen. It is my fervent belief that failure to connect with others touches everything, including what has traditionally been seen as success in academia. Connectedness,

place, belonging… these are not just "nice events" to happen incidentally while in pursuit of academic excellence. They are, I submit, meaningful contributing factors leading to academic excellence… and to so much more.

Actively, and intentionally, we must create opportunity for greater connection. Life is too short for the alternative. I was once stuck at the airport in Newark for eight hours during a tornado watch. I didn't see any tornadoes that day, but I did strike up several conversations during the delay with a number of likewise disconnected people. I could have suffered in isolation like so many others, but I did not. Instead, I chose to *engage*… and as we all know… engagement is everything!

In the end, it always comes back to our natural state as social creatures. Without place, without belonging, without connectedness to something larger than ourselves, we are deficient, incomplete, and unfulfilled.

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From the community and belonging project, one of my 12 summary recommendations was, "Intentionally create opportunity to nurture in students curiosity, passion, and engagement. These three are key correlates to sense of belonging, time and stress management, and facing challenges with confidence." Critical here is the word "intentionally". My use of that word, itself, is very intentional. All schools will tell you that their students have opportunity to be nurtured in curiosity, passion, and engagement. I say, that's not enough.

These three should not be passive opportunistic aspects in education, but rather central and intentional objectives.

Curiosity is supported by research as a much better predictor of career and life success than grades. Grades predict grades and not much more. High grades (raw intellect) in the absence of curiosity are wasted. Without curiosity, nothing good happens. No growth occurs. Nothing new is imagined. No gains are realized for either the individual or the world. Success in answering the need for nurtured curiosity varies widely across teachers and schools. I watch with great interest and hope the efforts of the Mastery Transcript Consortium as these schools explore an intentional alternative that may help to answer this need, among others.

I once sat in on a mission review session at a client school. Listening for more than an hour, I was finally asked what I'd heard them saying. "It's rather simple," I said. "Your mission is to help students find and feed their passions." This is a mission I could get behind for any of my children.

In our surveys of parents, we often include the agree/disagree measure: *My child has developed a passion for at least one area of academic study at School X*. Passion and a love of learning are inseparable, and are both key correlates to so many other desirable variables in a child's education: curiosity; the development of character and values; looking forward to going to school each day; setting high expectations for the self; thinking creatively, thinking critically; research skills; confidence; courage; school as a transformational experience, making choices that support their emotional well-being… and the list goes on and on. I'm not just blowing smoke here. I have the data and the data says it's so.

Engagement is everything! Over 28 years of doing this work, it's almost become a mantra for me. I say it every single time I present results from surveys of parents, students, alumni, and

teachers & staff. Engagement for students, in and out of the classroom, is the necessary starting point for all good that follows.

Parents say so. In every single survey, parents whose children are actively engaged in OOCA (out-of-classroom activities) report higher ratings for the school's success across all major social-emotional measures.

Students say so. In every single survey, engaged students report stronger scores throughout. They feel a stronger sense of belonging. They look forward more to coming to school. They feel better prepared for engaging with people holding perspectives different from their own. It's a win all around.

Alumni say so. I remember presenting the results from an alumni survey more than 20 years ago. As just one from a large collection of positive associations, I reported that those alumni who indicate having been actively engaged in OOCA were dramatically more likely to have made a financial donation to the school. The development director, an older man, was paying close attention. His response was to slap his hand down on the table, proposing, in his older man's creaky voice, that the academic program be shut down and replaced with more out-of-classroom activities.

Teachers say so. I remember sharing results from an employee survey with about 100 teachers. At the end of the presentation, a teacher asked how I would counsel lesser satisfied teachers to become greater satisfied teachers. My answer? Just two words. Get involved! Those teachers engaged with students in OOCA are consistently and dramatically more satisfied. They align

themselves with the school's mission. They feel a much greater sense of belonging. What's true for students is also true for teachers.

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In employee surveys, we often ask the question: *From the list below, please identify the four most important factors contributing to an employee's success at School X*. The results are fascinating. Those most satisfied in employment are more likely to identify *working collaboratively* as a key factor contributing to success. Those lesser satisfied are more likely to identify *working independently*. The lone wolf is not a happy wolf. Noting that this indicates correlation, not causation, such distinctions should be taken into account as schools undertake recruiting efforts.

This is not rocket science. This is intuitive. Just the same, it's nice to see the data supporting what we think we already know.

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On the subject of belonging (or not), in the community and belonging project, we asked students: *Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ2S+ community?* 3,691 said "yes" and 16,951 said "no". 24% of female respondents said "yes". 7.4% of male respondents said yes. Another 1,655 did not answer the question. The distinctions between the "yes" and "no" answers are stark and deeply concerning. If I'm a teenager who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ2S+ community:

- I'm more likely to sleep less than 6 hours on school nights

- I'm more likely to spend more than 3 hours on homework each day

- I'm more likely to spend more than 3 hours on social media each day

- I'm meaningfully less likely to feel:

    - respected and valued at school

    - a strong sense of belonging at school

    - emotionally safe at school

- I appraise myself as meaningfully lesser prepared for:

    - coping with peer pressure

    - conducting myself with confidence

    - organizing time effectively

    - handling stressful situations

    - making choices that support my emotional well-being

- I am more than twice as likely to indicate that I have personally been affected by experiences of discrimination at school and significantly more likely to report having been affected across each of eight listed types of discrimination.

Clearly, many members of the LGBTQ2S+ community do not feel as welcome as the counterpart. They do not feel that they belong. I should add that a small number of schools did not see such discrepancies in ratings for those who identify with the LGBTQ2S+ community. These are schools who report that they have taken intentional steps to ensure inclusivity for all, including specifically for members of the LGBTQ2S+ community. This said, these schools are the exception. Our schools and our society at large both need to advance this conversation in a big way. These findings represent a clarion call to action.

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When I went to high school, one-third of students went on to university, one-third went to community college, and one-third went directly into the workforce. While the university path proportion has risen a bit over the past 50 years, overall, we're still looking at more than a third heading directly into the workforce.

Let me put my devil's advocate hat on for a moment. Assuming that the primary role for a high school is as a filter to identify those "qualified" for entry into post-secondary study, why are the other students in high school for four years? Is it merely to identify them as "not good enough"? In my day, they weren't all in the tech wing, learning trades. What did they learn after Grade 8, then, that better prepared them for life after formal education? In their work life, did proficiency in a foreign language give them a leg up? What about polynomials and trigonometry? Maybe they made use of Pythagoras once when moving a sofa up the stairs. What about the periodic table or Newton's laws? Who really cares that the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066? Marking labels on geographic maps with a height of exactly 1/8th of an inch? To study Shakespeare or not to study Shakespeare? That is the question.

The answer, of course, is that we study all these things, many of them never to be seen again, to give us a small taste of the world, to begin to explore the world close to us, and also to explore the world not so close to us… a critical exploration as we endeavour to find and forge a place for ourselves. How and where do we fit in? Without this sense of place, we don't belong. We cannot belong. We cannot belong to something we don't know or understand or identify with. While few students, and likely few teachers, operationalize this larger purpose for education on a daily basis, this part of education wasn't designed to help us find work. It was designed to help

us fit into society, to help us identify with others like us, and importantly, to help us to better understand others not like us.

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So much of what I learned in high school took place outside of the classroom, in clubs, in student politics, on the soccer pitch, and on the wrestling mats. I consider my high school wrestling experience as one the greatest contributors to any character I now possess. Grit, personal responsibility, staring down adversity, and importantly, failure. Wonderful learning opportunities. While I had hopes and dreams to follow my brother to a provincial wrestling championship, adversity intervened. In the Summer between Grades 11 and 12, I was a hit-and-run victim, hospitalized in a coma. When I left hospital three weeks later, I had to learn to walk again. At 17, I had no vestibular balance. I still don't. You walk by way of vestibular balance (in your ears). I walk aided only by my eyes, focused constantly on the ground in front of me. If I close my eyes, there's a good chance that I'll fall to the ground. It gets really interesting when you lace up the skates and add ice to the equation.

Long story short, I continued to wrestle through high school but, clearly, there was to be no provincial championship in my future. Here's the thing. My failure to win contributed to character growth that led to many later successes. I continued to wrestle and play soccer, though not well. I played lacrosse one year, again not well, and also made a very small contribution to the track and field team.

I even tried out for the football team in my final year of high school. Time after time, whenever I carried the ball, the defensive coach shouted to his players, "Graham's got it. Take him down!"

And they piled on hard. I don't think he liked me. I went down and got up and went down and got up and went down and got up. When the last defender got off the pile, he stood over me after one of these pile-on plays with hands on his hips, demanding, "Well, are you going to get up or are you finally going to accept that you won't make this team?" I said nothing, but scraped myself off the ground and stumbled once again back to the huddle. The pile-on never happened again, and I made the team, though admittedly my position was left end on the bench. Life is not what happens to you. Life is what you do about what happens to you.

When wrestling season arrived, that same football coach was there in the gym, cheering for me as loudly as anyone else. Never give up, I say. Never!

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At 66, I still play pickup hockey for 90 minutes every weekend, 12 months of the year. This is not old-timers huff and puff hockey. Some of these guys are very good and fast enough to make me feel like a pylon. Some are also very young. This past week, the youngest was just 16 and we had only 7 skaters per side. I will confess that I was, indeed, huffing and puffing. I'm not a good skater, nor shooter, by anyone's definition… but I do my best with what I've got. Not everyone on the ice is aware of my balance issues. Those who are, when they realize that it's me they're about to crush, abandon the puck in hopes of protecting me from injury. I call it my senior's discount. I'll play until I can no longer lace up my skates… and as long as they'll let me on the ice.

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I've recently read Martin Seligman's book, "Learned Optimism". Very interesting, but I'm a convert so there's not much needed to convince me on the merits of optimism. They say that optimistic people live longer happier lives. Sounds like a good argument to me.

I'm optimistic, some will tell you unreasonably so. Here's a recent personal example of optimism that still has my wife shaking her head.

A little over a year ago, I was on the edge of hanging up my skates. I'd play on a Saturday night, then find myself unable to go downstairs to the home gym for a workout. With one medial meniscus worn down to nearly bone-on-bone, I was in pain for a whole week after playing. Even walking around the block was a chore. At my age, I could not consider playing hockey with younger stronger players without regular workouts.

I was fortunate to find a surgeon willing to give me a second chance. With no compelling reason, other than to play pickup hockey once a week, I elected to have my leg nearly sawed off and re-aligned. Who does that? The surgeon all but amputated the tibia, just below my knee, and rotated the shin outward, creating an open wedge that took the pressure off my inner knee. My dangling shin was then secured in place by a titanium plate and eight screws. This procedure is called a high tibial osteotomy. Google the video if you're curious. Be advised, though. It's pretty gruesome.

The surgeon promised to have me back on the ice seven months later, but I'm not a patient patient. Ever the optimist, I engaged a personal rehab trainer to come to the house once a week, working to recover full range, use, and strength of my leg while my body created new bone in the empty space. Three months in, not seven, with the surgeon's approval and

encouragement, I was back on the ice, plate in. Fast forward another six months, the surgeon removed the plate and screws, a full year ahead of schedule. Six weeks later, I was back on the ice, and am now working out in my home gym 3-4 times each week. As I say, never give up. Fifty years later, adversity remains among my best teachers. Not so much concerned with happiness, I'm more focused on the journey. Time alone will tell how long I live.

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As I say, much success in my education took place at school but outside of the classroom. With this in mind, it grieved me greatly to see the OSSTF (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation) invoke a work-to-rule initiative that saw them still in the classroom one year but not participating in out-of-classroom activities. Their spokespeople emphasized that education in Ontario was not to be interrupted by this campaign, and that everything was "business as usual". To me, this reflected a complete lack of understanding of what is meant by education. I refuse to use the word "extracurricular" to describe out-of-classroom activities. The word connotes something less than central. Reality is something entirely different. What happens outside the classroom bears the potential to be as important, if not more so, in comparison to what happens inside the classroom. Our focus on core academia, when at the expense of those benefits from lesser structured education as offered outside the classroom, comes at a meaningful price. That price is paid by our children in underdeveloped social-emotional skills... and in consequence, a lesser sense of place and belonging.

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As I listen to arguments about education as a supplier of workforce, it strikes me that we're stuck on Maslow's lower levels, both out of balance and past their point of relevance. Workforce provision is important. No doubt of it. There's so much more to be had from the educational experience, however, that bears on both personal and societal considerations. The 13th scoop of ice cream is not nearly as satisfying as the first. More is not always better. Let's move onward, up the hierarchy.

I prefer Frankl to Maslow anyway. Meaning, for me, stands well ahead of self-actualization, if there even is such a thing. Meaning in life is important even if you cannot find a job. Frankl found meaning while a prisoner at Auschwitz. Meaning was his key to survival. Meaning came to Frankl through his relationship with others, from making a difference to others. Without meaning, times tables, periodic tables, and course content from all sides is of little to no value. With meaning, with articulated purpose, anything and everything becomes possible. From Nietzsche, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

Helping our children to learn how to find, feed, and articulate for themselves this "why" should be Step 1 in their education, not something to worry about later if there's enough time. Success in education, success in life, generally, are both hinged on this nurtured and articulated discovery.

I have questions about how education connects and contributes to what is widely considered a mental health epidemic

Clearly, western society faces a mental health crisis. Look at the headlines. Depression is on the rise. Suicides are on the rise. Violence is an everyday "breaking news" report. Senseless killing.

Gun crime… no, I won't get into the gun issue. Personally, I don't like guns, but that's a story for another day. Guns enable, but guns don't kill people. People kill people. I ask, why? What would lead someone to strike out at another person, often someone they don't even know? Is it a return to our base instincts? I think not. What creates the impetus for such aberrant events? And how might this all relate to education? The Freudians have their theories. The behaviourists and cognitive psychologists have theirs. I ask: Is there something that most, if not all, perpetrators of violent attacks have in common? I'm no psychologist but, from where I sit, there is. They don't belong, or rather, they feel that they don't belong. They don't belong to what most people see as healthy spheres of relationships. I see a lack of healthy belonging as perhaps the strongest precipitating factor leading to the current mental health epidemic, and to the anti-social behaviours that follow in consequence. These lack-of-belonging behaviours erupt both in the streets and in our schools. They also erupt in the form of international conflicts, but let's not go there today.

What to do about it? How can we protect ourselves, our children, and our society from unhealthy behaviour? I'm a structured thinker, so I say, let's set the stage for success.

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Consider that we live in a time of sick care, not health care. The starting position, too often, is with the assessment of something as broken. Why is this so? Why do we spend so much energy, time, and resources on fixing broken things when doing it right *ahead of time* would set us up for better outcomes?

In our daily lives, we all take steps to ensure that we do what we should do – remembering birthdays, not missing appointments, setting out our gym stuff the night before so we are prompted to actually follow through on the intention to exercise.

Preparation is always better than having to react to a crisis. I once presented results from a parent survey to a school's senior admin team. One particular slide stood out for me. Ratings of parent satisfaction in quality of communication with advisors was off the charts, in a good way. This is not a measure that typically does extraordinarily well in parent surveys. Advisors are student focused. Parents, not just of the helicopter variety, don't like to be out-of-the-loop on activities in their children's lives. This is a pronounced point of concern for parents of teenagers. Vocabulary in parent-teenager conversation tends toward single-syllable grunts, so parents often feel left out of the picture. For the survey in question, I tore the advisor data apart trying to understand what they were doing differently from other schools, but found nothing. When I challenged them to explain, they just laughed and gave the best of answers. Every five weeks, all advisors are tasked with calling the parents of each advisee… with nothing to report. The script, essentially, is as follows: "Hi, it's your child's advisor calling. I've got no issues to discuss, but wanted to check in to see if you have any questions or concerns." Thirty seconds later, the call is done, and the next call begun. Administrators swore to me that they'd done nothing else but institute this very simple proactive step as part of the advisors' routine. A few minutes spent every five weeks served to establish and maintain open lines of communication with parents. The stage was set so that, if and when an issue did arrive, the lines of communication had created a baseline of trust in the advisor. Again, not rocket science, but it works.

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Rather than repairing the broken, I say, why not set up circumstances and structures that prepare for success? What structures would best contribute ahead of time to psychological health and well-being? What structures could help to prevent breakage? What might help to set the stage for successful outcomes?

Physical and mental and psychological well-being can be promoted, supported, and protected both by the creation of positive structural elements and by the removal of toxic elements. By this, I mean setting before our children intentional opportunities for healthy engagement and its consequent belonging. By this, I also mean protecting our children from unhealthy engagement… and its consequent belonging to toxic gangs and extremist fringe groups, for example.

At every turn, I see a role for healthy relationships. As a believer in our human nature primarily as social creatures, my own reductionism takes me, in the end, to the fundamental of relationships ahead of all else. There's no shortage of studies out there in support of relationships as the key to longevity in life. As I see it, depth, breadth, number, and diversity in relationships, across ecological systems (see Bronfenbrenner), are the hinges to all aspects of health, physical, mental, and spiritual. Belonging, community, connectedness. These are the foundational underpinnings to equilibrium in our human condition, both as individuals and as a society at large. For me, healthy relationships are the singular lowest common denominator in our search for success in life, no matter what success means to us. Where relationships with others (people, creatures, the environment) are not integrated with the pursuit of success, success cannot be attained.

If you were to ask what I see as my greatest accomplishment in life, I'd have no hesitation in saying that it was on the day I applied the Heimlich manoeuvre for an elderly family member who was turning blue and choking. Solar plexus landmarked. Mark two finger-widths down from there. Lock hands. Pull up and in. Repeat if necessary. No thinking involved. It was entirely reflexive. Almost 40 years after the CPR course. There's no question of it. That was the best day of my life, and my greatest accomplishment... bar none. I made a difference for someone else. Again, best day of my life.

P.S.: Take the CPR course... and don't laugh while you eat.

Looking only internally for answers offers little hope. The longer we spin around our navels in isolation, as if stuck in puberty, the lesser capable we will be in controlling outcomes. Imbalanced stress on isolating individualism has done great harm to countless individuals, just as isolating nationalism has done great harm to societies at large.

In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, we ran parent, student, and employee surveys for a school that presented an excellent "experimental-control group" opportunity. About one-half of students attended classes in person. The other half attended virtually. The social-emotional ratings came out looking like night and day. As you might guess, those who attended classes virtually, isolated from their peers, were less connected, felt lesser emotional safety, and were less likely to report the presence of a close friend or trusted adult at school. They also felt a

much lesser sense of belonging. Again, this is not news, but the numbers certainly make the case in support of in-person learning.

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Social media, too often, is pointed to by teenagers as their best way to "stay connected". My work says otherwise. I've got the data, in fact, to say that the opposite is true. From our survey of 22,297 high schoolers, I'm in a position to say that, with increased time spent on social media, student ratings go down for all of: hours of sleep; engagement in out-of-classroom activities; passion for academic study; sense of belonging; feeling emotionally safe; (interestingly) feeling encouraged to express one's opinion; feeling respected and valued; feeling a love of learning; feeling capable of handling the academic workload; and feeling capable of engaging constructively with people holding perspectives different from their own.

Those who spend more time on social media (some indicating greater than 5 hours daily!) also rate themselves as lesser prepared throughout a list of skills, including for: adapting to face new challenges; approaching life with intellectual curiosity; assuming a leadership role; conducting oneself with confidence; coping with peer pressure; handling stressful situations; making choices that support emotional well-being; organizing time effectively; setting high expectations; thinking critically; and working independently.

Increased time on social media does not just replace another type of connection. It reduces connection. Correlation versus causation aside, there's lots of research out there that points to a causal relationship.

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Again, "The desperadoes and thieves of today were school boys ten years ago, and if society is ever to find complete protection against such offenders, it will probably be through the schools…"

Relationships and belonging, then, should be a primary focus in our system of education. Academic pursuit, from my perspective, is just the medium of the exercise. The primary purpose of education should be to help students learn how to contribute to, and how to belong to, something larger than themselves. This learning must include reference to character and values. When we disregard or forget, or even minimize the need to develop character and values, we walk straight into the C.S. Lewis indictment: "Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil."

With modern society's decline in a sense of connectedness and belonging, coupled with, and resulting from, a lack of understanding and a loss of trust in societal institutions, we must look to schools as a natural starting point for the re-build of community and of society itself. This is at least as true now as it was when declared so by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 1930.

I belong to my family, close and extended.

I belong to my friends, both new and those I've known for more than 50 years.

I belong to my neighbours. It sometimes takes us two hours to complete an 800 metre walk around the block.

I belong to my community and nation.

I belong to the group of guys I play hockey with.

I belong to the people I engage with at airports and in line at Costco.

I belong to the family with whom I spent a wonderful evening in Moscow in 1984, building one small bridge between the East and the West.

I belong to every person at every school I've ever worked with.

I belong to each and every person with whom I strike a connection.

In the words of my friends at Southridge School in Surrey, British Columbia, "We are all one."

I belong… therefore, I am.

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My world of belonging is diverse, and I am richer for it.

A friend once lamented to me, "when can we get back to being one people… one nation?" People, and nations of people, reside in different places of comfort along the continuum of simplicity versus complexity. To the extent that people, or nations, embrace simplicity or complexity – sameness or diversity, their entire world landscape moves in concert.

Some people do view themselves, and their societies, in very simple terms, and wish greatly for this view to be accurate. Others, like me, see themselves and their societies as best defined by a lack of definition… as fuzzy, fluid, flexible, and open to change. The first of these viewpoints, in my view, is doomed to failure in realizing any more than a very narrow and very simple measure of fulfillment or success in life. The second declares a soft and quiet boldness in its lack of clarity.

There is a place among us for soft and quiet boldness, ill-defined as it sometimes may be. Ten years ago, I said of my late mother: "Lake Erie is the most quiet of our Great Lakes – still and shallow waters. But from those still waters flow the mighty and thundering Niagara Falls. Sometimes, the most quiet among us play the greatest of roles – contributions overlooked, noticed too late, or never recognized at all."

Complexity, lack of certainty, and dynamic diversity in relationships characterize a people comfortable with society as a work in progress, and rich in potential.

Eight years ago, I was blessed again, this time to deliver a eulogy for my older sister, Karen. I've since advised my four surviving siblings that I've run out of kind things to say, so they better stay healthy.

My sister passed away just weeks before she was scheduled to retire. She was a nurse in the Canadian Arctic, and so much more. She had seven degrees, diplomas, and certificates after her name, and was planning to pursue an eighth upon her return to southern Canada.

When Karen came to visit, one of the first things she'd ask was, "what have you been reading lately?" She'd grab a book... or three... and sink into the most comfortable chair in the house, sipping her tea... with lemon... and read.

Over her final 26 years, Karen was instrumental in the creation, development, and delivery of the advanced training program for nurses in the Canadian North. Without Karen, we're told, this program would never have gotten off the ground. I asked one of her colleagues how many nurses there are in the Canadian North, and how many of them would have known Karen, or her work. The answers: about 600... and every single one of them. Whether they knew her

personally or not, every nurse in the Canadian North was touched in some positive way by Karen's efforts. She made a difference.

In Karen's own words, she reveals a poignant understanding of the world and her place in it:

"Northern nursing has been a most rewarding career for me. Work situations demand creativity, independence, and collaboration with other health care providers and community members. The work is challenging and there is always more to learn. I enjoy the fact that northern nurses can combine clinical expertise in primary care with knowledge of family and community which gives them a unique opportunity to offer primary health care in a truly holistic way. I like the fact that working in a cross cultural situation frequently challenges my assumptions and broadens my perspective on the world and people."

Clear, singular, and fixed definitions work well to a point… and in some matters very well. Beyond a very few universal truths and values, however, simple and singular is not the world we live in. Striving to be "one people" has consequences. Intended or unintended, narrow definition of "us" or of "normal" creates marginalization, and in turn, a lack of belonging. Be careful what you ask for. Balance in all things.

Those who create narratives packed with simple labels do a great disservice to society. Clarity, singularity, and fixed definitions lead straight to ideology. Ideology, in turn, leads straight to conflict. Absent the staking out of simple ideological positions, we would not live in such a polarized world. Absent ideology, people in conflict would see much more clearly the many points they hold in common with one another, rather than just those few points in contention.

Reduction in polarized discourse is best served by diversity in spheres of healthy, supportive relationships. The less dependent we are on singular relationships, the better prepared we are for times of change. With greater diversity in spheres of relationships and belonging, our children can learn better to discern between healthy and toxic connections. Fringe groups are more likely to fall out of favour as we acquire this discernment. Our sense of place and purpose within the whole, as a direct result, becomes more clear. With place and purpose and clarity, in the framing context of enhanced diversity, comes greater opportunity for well-being.

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This notion of strength in diversity is well supported by data from our surveys. Many other surveys ask for respondents to explicitly rate their satisfaction across a list of measures. Then, they ask respondents to rate the same list in terms of what is most important. Not my surveys. I skip the second of these steps because it's unnecessary. No matter what people say explicitly on rank of importance, I assign much greater credence to what they say implicitly. By this, I mean, when you cross-tab data, you know what people really think is most important. They've already answered that question, without even knowing it. On the subject of diversity, these implicit answers offer great insights.

To illustrate:

Consider the agree/disagree measure for parents: *School X has contributed meaningfully to my child's ability to engage constructively with people holding perspectives different from their own*. On the scale from 1 to 5, we obtain an overall rating. Then, we cross-tab (correlate) parent ratings on this account with more than 100 other measures in the survey, and watch to see

what bubbles to the top. Agreement with this statement consistently correlates meaningfully with ratings for each of: development of character and values; promotion of a love of learning; the school as a transformational experience; mission success for the school; emotional well-being; adapting to face new challenges; handling stressful situations; coping with peer pressure; thinking critically; thinking creatively; and sense of belonging. The list goes on, but you get the idea. Successful engagement for their children with "the other" is important to parents.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The irony of belonging is that it implies a level of conformity which I've described here as undesirable. I'm reminded of a cartoon from decades ago. In the first box, a parent is complaining about the teenage girl's tattered blue jeans and tie-dyed t-shirt, as she prepares to leave for school. "You've got to let me be myself, to express my individuality!" the daughter declares, stepping outside. The next box reveals a gathering of teenagers in the street, all wearing tattered blue jeans and tie-dyed t-shirts. Maybe this is what they mean by mass-produced individuality.

If we belong to just one thing or one group, our conformity risks becoming a limiting factor. If we belong to a more diversified, intersectional collection of groups, our sense of conformity becomes less singular and more fluid, enabling us to experience and weigh conflicting narratives as we continue to explore ourselves and the world around us. People, organizations, groups, or communities that require complete and fixed conformity, it goes without saying, are not on my list of sources for belonging.

My friend who wishes for the "return to one people and one nation" adamantly declares himself a dedicated member of a particular political party. He's a smart guy, well educated, and runs his own successful business, but feels compelled to accept the full platform of his political party without question. For me, this falls entirely into my "huh?" collection.

"A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points… have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good." Federalist Paper #10 – James Madison

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I recently watched a Netflix documentary series called Chimp Empire. I was struck by the narrator's comment that, unlike humans, chimpanzees have not evolved to a place where tribes cooperate with one another, and that each tribe remains an enemy of the next. My immediate reaction was to think that our own evolution still has a great distance to travel before such a generous assessment can be made. Certainly, there are signs of this evolutionary step. Human tribes do cooperate. Neighbours, communities, communities of communities, nations all cooperate with one another. This noted, they also tend to retreat into an isolationist stance when they feel vulnerable. Isolationism, of course, is the instrument of manipulators who play on the fears of those under their influence. "We-they" becomes the rallying narrative cry. Isolationism derives directly from the viewpoint that the world is a zero-sum game. Emphatically, it's not, and that's pretty much the core of my world view. Waving flags is nice but only to a point. Beyond that point, we're building walls, not bridges. Where we build bridges, we've evolved. Where we build walls… well, there's this Netflix series called Chimp Empire…

Severing diplomatic relations, even in times of open war, eliminates opportunity for dialogue. The absence of dialogue can only exacerbate and prolong conflict. Conflict may be good for business, but it's not good. This is true of nations, of marriages, and of friends at school. Conflict resolution is a topic that sometimes creeps to the edges of the educational stage, but could use a push more often and more strongly to the front and centre.

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Only through diversity in relationships can our children learn that our world is rich in its complexity. Only through diversity in relationships can our society learn that our place in the world is just one of many… and rich and healthy as a consequence. Only through living in a thriving, diverse, healthy society can our children hope to find a thriving, diverse, and healthy place of well-being. Again, it goes both ways.

Is mental health in crisis mode in part because we've turned our gaze inward on ourselves and lost sight of the whole? I think yes. Is mental health in crisis mode in part because we've lost faith and trust in societal institutions? I think yes. Is mental health in crisis mode in part because we've allowed ourselves to be subjected to narratives that divide us, pitting us one against the other? I think yes.

Fear and hatred are powerful tools of propagandists. When our critical thinking skills are asleep or underdeveloped, these narratives can be very successful in leading us, both individuals and society, away from a state of well-being. Our children's education, and preparation for life, generally, will best be served from a place that embraces diversity, not fear and hatred. Our own capacity to watch for and to dismiss the fear-and-hatred narrative, and the capacity of our

children on this same account, will come only from persistent intentional effort to learn about and appreciate "the other".

I have questions about who in education decides what is in the best interests of my child

As a young child, I was hooked up to a harness in the yard, with the other end of my leash tied to a long pulley-type clothesline. I had free rein of the yard within defined limits. At the advanced age of five, I was set free to walk the 5/8th of a mile to school all by myself (now, it's a kilometre, but kilometres didn't exist in Canada in those days). For the journey between home and school, I was both *free* and *responsible*. This rope got longer and longer as I grew, and I learned many times the price of freedom exercised in the absence of responsibility. I first kissed a girl in Kindergarten. I was also first slapped by a girl in Kindergarten. Freedom in the absence of responsibility. I learned very abruptly what was not in my best interests, and where I didn't belong. I should hastily add that I've not been slapped by a girl since that day in 1962.

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Some of our parent surveys have included the question: *Which 4 of these 20 school-life elements do you feel are most important to a successful experience for your child?* Data collected, we'd tabulate and cross-tabulate, searching for nuance in answers across sub-groupings. One such breakdown was by grade of the child. Our findings were both interesting and entertaining. To paraphrase what we learned, parents of students in Kindergarten through Grade 3 wanted most for their children to be well adjusted, socially adept, and "not to bite

anyone". By the time their children got to Grades 11 and 12, however, it was more like, "Harvard, Princeton, or Yale… and I don't care whom they have to bite to get there?"

There's lots of work out there under the heading of child developmental psychology. Perhaps there's opportunity for a chapter or two on parent developmental psychology.

At conception, all of our children's decisions are made by us. By the time they leave home, hopefully most, if not all of their decisions will be independent of us… and will make us proud, both of their independence and of our own efforts to inform, support, and respect that independence.

In the case of new enrolment by older children (starting at a school in Grade 5 or higher), we often ask, "Who held the greatest influence in the decision to come to the school?" Options are: parent; child; and shared equally. What do we learn from answers to this question? First, more parents than you might expect will confess to having dominated this decision. Second, according to their children in student surveys, many of the other parents are lying. Students report in significantly greater proportion that their parents dominated this decision. I should add that there are many other questions for which parent ratings are disputed by concurrent student surveys. Some parents haven't the first clue about what's going on in their children's lives. Third, and here's where it gets really interesting. As you would expect, students who say that their parents dominated the enrolment decision consistently report lower ratings throughout the survey, compared to those who report active involvement for themselves in selection of the school.

But… and here's the takeaway… parents who confess to dominating the school selection decision also regularly report lower ratings of satisfaction, throughout the entire survey. One entertaining example: Those parents who admit that they made the decision in the absence of involvement by their children, like clockwork, rate the school much lower in its contribution to their children's development of *self-advocacy*. Hmmm… who would have guessed? What we don't know is whether these lower-rating distinctions are a function of who these parents are as dominant decision makers… or if their kids, after the fact, have just torpedoed a decision to which they were not invited.

Of course, the highest ratings come from parents and students alike who report that this decision was shared equally. Full engagement. Engagement is everything!

My sense is that, somewhere between Kindergarten and Grade 12, a parent's perspective and values get distorted or perverted, leaving them, the parents, in an overly anxious state, and in turn, projecting their anxiety on their teenagers. Where does this projection ultimately come from? I think you know my answer.

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Get over it, Kevin! That's just the reality of the system! Kids have to grow up and get with the program. There's no choice in the matter!

Really? I'm not so sure. Is it really a systemic *imperative*… or is it just a *narrative* that we've been sold? Has our historical compliance with an outdated system of education transformed a narrative into an imperative? More on narratives in the next section.

While much in my children's education has, indeed, been in their interests, it is clear to me that much in education today was designed with someone else's interests in mind.

As you might imagine, suspicion and skepticism are my natural response when someone says, "trust me… I know what's best for you and your child". In whose interest is this system of education primarily presented? It's like a graphic of concentric circles with our children at the core. For credibility on the "whose interest" question, as we move progressively outward, we find our children, ourselves, our children's teachers, and so on, leaving government and business on the extreme outer rings. When you say that something is in the best interest of my child, I ask, "How so?" "What's in it for my child?" "Whose values and whose interests are best reflected here?" "Do these values and interests align with my own?" "Can I live with this?" Stay as close as possible to the centre of this graphic, I say.

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The interests of business and government are not well aligned with the interests of my children. Nobody is sitting in the back rooms of business and government addressing the question: "How can we help little Johnny or Susie become successful or achieve personal fulfillment." But that doesn't make business or government evil. Don't get me wrong. These people are just coming at the world from a different angle.

Businesses are not immoral entities. They're just so narrowly defined as to hold a set of objectives that may or may not align with anyone's interest but their own. The profit motive is not immoral. It's amoral. Our task is to be on guard and to identify contradictions of square

holes and round pegs when they arise, and not to be cajoled down a path not best suited to the needs and interests of our children.

In the end, as parents, we need to assert ourselves as the primary advocates of our children's best interests. There are many well meaning friends to our children's interests in education. At the same time, the system, itself, was created, not in the interests of our children, but in the interests of larger forces, some good, some not so good. We need to constantly remind ourselves of this fact, and to be on the watch for points of alignment... and points of contention.

I have questions about narratives and how they ultimately bring us back to education's related opportunity

When I listen to our complex world in search of understanding, it helps to accept much of the noise as no more than a collection of competing narratives. I ask myself: Who's talking? What are they saying? What do they have to gain by my acceptance of what they're saying?

Such an exercise in critical thinking is well applied, I think, to consideration of our system of education.

There's the teacher narrative, the school narrative, the bureaucratic narrative, the political narrative, and of course, the business narrative. Everybody has a narrative, it seems. Let's not forget the parent narrative and the student narrative. We and our children have voices and they should be heard. I'm not saying that parents should be dictating curriculum. Far from it. At the same time, we need constantly to take an active role in our children's education, ensuring that their experience helps them to become everything that they can become.

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The business narrative has been very successful in equating the profit motive with such aspirational notions as free market and democracy.

When these two banners are waved high and wide, the accompanying narrative becomes very powerful. Are you with us or against us? If you're against us, you're undemocratic and unpatriotic. Nonsense, I say! At the tender age of 12, I was, fortunately or unfortunately, too young to attend Woodstock… but I'm still not buying the corporate narrative.

As suggested, this business narrative has trickled down through legislatures, departments of education, all the way to Kindergarten classes as we train our children for someone else's vision of their place in society.

In the end, we need not only consider our system of education from a position of critical thinking. We need seriously to be more intentional in preparing students, themselves, to be critical thinkers. Now, you may tell me that we already do this. In response, I need look only to the ease with which huge swaths of populations are moved by truly simple narratives founded on fear and hatred.

Political leaders, seeking power, manipulate and mobilize masses so easily with appeal to fear and hatred. It tells me that our system of education has failed miserably to impart basic skills in critical thinking.

I listen to the far right and to the far left. Then, I sit back and think for myself. I've read the Communist Manifesto. I've read two-thirds of Mein Kampf (it wore me down with its toxicity). I've watched Channel 1 Russia (aided by my spousal translation service). Notably, we can't

watch that one these days as it's been made inaccessible in Canada. Wrong move! In my view, you cannot engage in critical thinking fully if you don't listen to, watch, or read the works of "the other side". Censorship leads ultimately to inflexible and singular viewpoints.

In the early days of the pandemic, I listened to the government narrative about vaccine efficacy. Now, to be absolutely clear, I'm a big fan of prevention, and support vaccination. For 50 years, I suffered annually for three weeks with the flu. At 50, I began annual flu shots and for 16 years, have not had the flu once. Sample of one, but I'm convinced.

As for Covid, I've had four shots so far. I was exposed to, and contracted the virus, the day after my first shot. Perhaps the vaccine rendered my immune system vulnerable. Perhaps it was just too soon. No matter. I was taken to hospital in an ambulance with dangerously low blood oxygen levels. Once recovered, three months later, I resumed the vaccination program, suspecting all the while that I had likely already acquired adequate natural immunity.

Here's the thing. I listened and listened and listened to government representatives repeatedly dismissing natural immunity as of no value. Get the vaccination, get the vaccination, get the vaccination. It's easier to say, "everyone should get the vaccine" than to exempt those who have previously contracted the virus, even though the research increasingly shows that the infection confers at least as much protection. As a typically compliant Canadian, I got the vaccinations and continue to do so.

At the same time, I doubt pretty much everything government tells me, turning to the questions I've set out at the top of this section. Who's talking? What are they saying? What do they have to gain by my acceptance of what they're saying? Say what you will. I'll trust the numbers. I

spent a lot of time, researching, reading peer-reviewed journals, and looking for original raw numbers on the government's claim, and ultimately found them on the Ontario government's own website. They had archived weekly statistics, beginning on June 5th in 2021, covering first-time infections, re-infections, and deaths from Covid. It took a whole weekend, but I built, entirely from the government's archived data, a spreadsheet calculating the chances of contracting the virus. Plotted over 28 weeks, the results showed very clearly that, if you had not previously been infected, you were 18.4 times as likely to contract the virus as if you had already contracted and recovered. At no point in time did the government report this fact. It simply did not serve their narrative.

Two major studies, one involving the entire population of Israel, the other of 50,000 employees of Cleveland Clinic, clearly showed no benefit from vaccination to those previously infected.

So, policymakers were not transparent in their treatment of the topic of vaccines for those already recovered from the virus. Commentary that accompanies the growing collection of research suggested that policymakers were simplifying the "message" about vaccinations for logistical reasons rather than scientific. Simplifying is one thing and I can get on board with that. At the same time, I'm listening to Albert Einstein, who said, "Everything should be as simple as it can be, but not simpler." What's more, when you "simplify" by lying, you lose credibility and the narrative inevitably goes to Hell in a handbasket.

Of course, the suppressed voice of reason eventually broke through and government began softening its position and policies, acknowledging the full value of prior infection as a source of immunity.

Government must stop trying to "protect" us by making false claims. Respect us enough to tell the whole story. Of course, step one in this would be to attend to our system of education so that we're better equipped to listen and to think for ourselves. Critical thinking, critical thinking, critical thinking.

Beer drinking does not bring with it beautiful women running toward you in bikinis. Pharmaceuticals do not cure all ailments without side effects. Billionaires telling you that their primary interest is your interest should be taken with a lot more than a grain of salt. These are just narratives prepared for personal gain.

Patriotism is yet one more complicated and sometimes dangerous narrative. It's complicated because patriotism is a cornerstone in the creation and sustenance of nations. At the same time, it's a narrative that gets abused on too regular a basis, and not in the long-term interest of the nation. Patriotism is a narrative that impacts very strongly on our system of education. In fact our system of education is the primary source for the creation and spread of patriotism. This is a good thing, but not without risk. Packed with emotion, patriotism can be extremely powerful. I'm a patriot, especially when Canadians are competing in a hockey game with the Americans. Beyond that, as I've already said, I'm not so hung up on the waving of flags. I'm grateful for the sacrifices made by my forebearers. No question of it. My life is blessed as a result. As Warren Buffet declared, the smartest thing he ever did was to be born in the right place at the right time to the right parents. This said, carried to extremes, patriotism displays the classic saddle effect, diminishing, then negative returns. Taken to extremes, patriotism becomes just another powerful narrative. From a (BrainyQuote.com) sampling of great thinkers:

Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. Samuel Johnson

It is lamentable that to be a good patriot, one must become the enemy of the rest of mankind.

Voltaire

Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all others because you were born in it. George Bernard Shaw.

Dissent is the highest form of patriotism. Howard Zinn

Heroism on command, senseless violence, and all the loathsome nonsense that goes by the name of patriotism – how passionately I hate them! Albert Einstein

The love of one's country is a splendid thing. But why should love stop at the border? Pablo Casals

Patriotism is a kind of religion; it is the egg from which wars are hatched. Guy de Maupassant

Our government has kept us in a perpetual state of fear – kept us in an continuous stampede of patriotic fervor – with the cry of grave national emergency. Douglas MacArthur

As a patriot, I try, just the same, not to get caught up too much in emotional fervor. When I am confronted by political narrative, I am compelled to challenge the logic, to question the motivation. Not to dismiss… just to ask "why?" in hopes of better understanding the full picture.

Only through enhanced critical thinking skills can our children protect themselves from the onslaught of narratives that will be presented to them. In my travels to schools, everywhere, people are keying in on critical thinking skills as a missing link. A wise move in my view.

I have questions about unintended consequences

We live in a world of unintended consequences.

A few years ago, I drove across Manhattan en route to Brooklyn on a quiet Sunday afternoon. I figured, naïvely, that this would be a 15 minute journey. Unfortunately, my journey happened to coincide perfectly with a climate change protest, smack dab in the middle of my path. For more than three hours, the protest had me, and thousands of other drivers, contributing to climate change. What could go wrong?

History is replete with examples of unintended consequences.

The sewage system leading to the Thames River in mid-19th century London led to an outbreak of cholera. When you don't know what you don't know, lots can go wrong.

The punishing Treaty of Versailles to end WWI set the stage in a big way for WWII. What were they thinking?

Because of the Titanic disaster, a law required passenger vessels to be retrofitted with an adequate number of lifeboats. Seems like a good idea. What could go wrong? Ask the 844 passengers and crew members who died, trapped below deck as the newly top-heavy SS Eastland rolled over in just 20 feet of water in the Chicago River.

When I said I wasn't going to talk about guns today... well, that was on a previous day. The opportunity is just too tempting. The 2nd Amendment to the American Constitution was put in place to protect the 13 states against potential tyranny of the new federal government. What could go wrong? Keep in mind that this was a government created in the context of fear and

loathing for government. But that's a story for another day. This protection, to be clear, was articulated very explicitly as in the form of "a well-regulated Militia".

At the time of the Amendment (1791), the federal army numbered as few as 80 soldiers. The States were much more powerful than the central government. The constituent states were the intended beneficiaries of this Amendment, given the right to bear arms as a "People," in the form of, let's say it again, *a well-regulated Militia*. See Shays' Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion for better historical context. In part, this Amendment was put into place to enable the quelling, not the support, of such rebellions.

I've heard too many times that the 2nd Amendment supports the case for people to rise up with arms against government. It does nothing of the sort. To do so would be a criminal act, as described in Article Three, Section 3 of the United States Constitution. You can't have it both ways. What level of lunacy would it take to possess founders of a nation to protect the right to armed insurrection against the State... while at the same time, in the very same document, forbidding armed insurrection against the State? Pure nonsense and nothing else.

The gun issue is a classic case of rights versus responsibilities. To avoid the major rabbit hole detour I feel tempted to take on the subject, let me just say that my reference to this unending gun debate enables me to underscore two points.

First, rights and responsibilities are inseparable. Imbalanced attention to rights over responsibilities results in a failure of the individual to appropriately consider "the other". This failure is both a reflection of, and a contributing factor to, the current decay of society. Failure to hear JFK's "Ask not..." inaugural address may soon see western society take its final gasp.

Second, failure to follow the simple logic of this Amendment, including at the highest court in the land, should be understood as an indictment of our system of education. Absent basic critical thinking skills, we're in deep… well, trouble… to be polite about it.

Finally, and bringing the point home, in the same way that the 2nd Amendment could not have foreseen modern weaponry, those who created large-scale factory schools could not have foreseen the resulting drip-by-drip abandonment of civics and civil society. Function created the factory school in response to a need of that day. We then got "married" to this form well past its functional utility. Our failure to be mindful of the natural sequence allowed a reversal, and today, we're paying a high price for it. Function is supposed to drive form… not the other way around.

What could go wrong? Maybe that's a question we should be asking more often.

The good news, looking forward

Okay, I've told you that story so I could tell you this one. There is hope.

At many schools I work with, what I've said here will resonate for those in leadership positions. My arguments reflect hundreds of conversations with people at schools. I'm not a lonesome Don Quixote, tilting at windmills. There's an army of us out there, tilting at this one. I don't think I'll lose any business with today's entry… and if I do, it's business I didn't need.

In fact, many schools already assign "relationships" to a more equal footing with "core academic" priorities. One of these schools is led by my good friend, Kevin Plummer. His school, Tampa Prep, hits it right on the button with the mission statement: "Preparation for life, with a higher purpose than self".

The challenge is that these school leaders are facing the same boulder-up-the-hill battle I've described, but they're just inside the schools. While there is definitely opportunity for autonomy within the school and within the classroom, schools are, in large part, takers, not makers of the "big picture" structure set for education. Until and unless: college and university admissions; departments of education; legislators; and business leaders change gears, adopting a wider, societal perspective with much longer time horizons… they… and parents will continue to pressure schools to focus on the subjects they feel are most amenable to numerical grading as students prepare for the next level of education, and for life after formal schooling. Structurally, this poses a meaningful impediment. As long as business owns government, and make no mistake of it, money runs the nation, this structural impediment will remain. As long as people with wider perspectives and longer horizons are not in positions of influence, this structural impediment will remain.

All said, I've described myself as an optimist, unreasonably so, hopefully not fatally so. I leave you with one more quotation from Shaw: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

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I still have questions, but for now, this is a brief collection of my evolving answers. I welcome your feedback. Agree, disagree, poke holes in my view of the world. Dialogue is our only path forward. Please don't be shy. We can best learn together. Relationship above all else.

With respect,