Concerning Reason and Common Sense: 
Rousseau, Wonder Woman, and the 
Hyper-Vigilance of Children

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Abstract

A considered voice needs to be given to concerns regarding reason and common sense as applied to early childhood education, child protection issues, parenting, and school vigilance over such matters. This paper utilizes the theories of H. Giroux and N. Postman, amongst others, to discuss the knowledge and critical acumen of those who actualize policy with regard to child safety, education, protection, and the vigilance or perhaps hyper-vigilance which results.

Résumé

Les questions soulevées au sujet de la raison et du sens commun eu égard à l’éducation de la petite enfance, à la protection des enfants, au rôle des parents et à la vigilance à l’école méritent l’attention. Ce texte utilise les théories de Henry Giroux et de Neil Postman, entre autres, pour explorer le savoir et la pensée critique des personnes qui actualisent les politiques ayant trait à la sécurité des enfants, à l’éducation, à la protection et à la vigilance, voire même l’hyper-vigilance, qui en résulte.

“My son, do not expect learned discourse or profound reasoning from me. I am not a great philosopher, and I have little desire to be one. But I sometimes have common sense, and I always love the truth.” So says the Savoyard Priest to his young pupil in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s (1974, p. 233) landmark educational treatise Emile. The stage is thus set for the great debate: reason versus common sense, and the context in which Rousseau drafts this remarkable discussion is

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the education of children. We are reminded of Rousseau, and his brilliant polemic about reason contra common sense, chiefly as a result of a recent personal experience that has caused us to wonder if, when it comes to our children and those who purport to care for and educate them, perhaps there is neither.

This reflection is not intended as a protestation against any grievous injustice done to the authors and their family, nor do we mean to plead our own innocence. Neither of us claims any status as model parents; indeed we would be quite satisfied to be considered average, if average includes the possibility of passion, love, and seriousness in the extreme. Nor is it our purpose to lash out at the various actors involved in what can only be described as a disorienting drama. In fact, the major impetus for explicating what follows is primarily to give a considered voice to some rather disquieting concerns regarding reason and common sense as they pertain to the question of child protection issues, parenting, and school vigilance over such matters. In no way do the authors presume to generalize from a single isolated incident or to cast aspersion upon all of those professionals who take the matter of child safety and protection to heart. However, the issues discussed herein are serious, and require sober, reflective address. To clarify the matter, it is necessary to begin with some background detail.

Our daughter is a spirited five year old. She is vivacious, energetic, and to put it mildly, imaginative, perhaps as a result of our encouraging such virtues in her from very early in her life. In fact both of us, as parents, are a tad pretentious in our frequent use of unnecessarily big words, or as the current saying goes, “age-inappropriate verbiage,” in front of our children. As our daughter is possessed of a rather precocious vocabulary, to say nothing of imaginative acumen, such is quite likely the consequence of demanding that your children aspire to a certain sophistication of language and thought. At any rate, she is often given to what one might describe as humorous, inventive, and perhaps even charming comments, stories, and rather personal narratives. However, such characteristics have also demonstrated the potential for a rather disturbing avenue of interpretation.

As a result of some of her more creative remarks about our approach to discipline, we were suspected of child abuse by the teachers at her daycare centre. Specifically, she commented that she was “grabbed by the neck by daddy” among other things. Admittedly, such statements might very well appear suspect upon an initial hearing, and in fact one must support the vigilance of those charged with the professional teaching and care of our children. They must pay serious heed to our pre-school children when they
express themselves about matters that may reveal situations of real concern. However some level of reason, or indeed common sense, should prevail.

What is particularly alarming here is that the matter, originally brought to a close following a discussion between us, our daughter’s teachers, and the director of the daycare centre, was re-examined following an incident which can only be described as surreal. It seems that our daughter had taken a few of her Wonder Woman comic books along with her to school one morning. The teacher confiscated the magazines on the ground of inappropriate imagery, specifically violence, suggestively clothed women (though it seems that outright nudity was alleged), and themes not befitting the developmental stage of a five year old. In itself we can accept this, for it seems reasonable to suggest that other children not be subjected to such material without the expressed consent of their parents. However, we objected to the implication that this might be harmful to her and moreover, that we as parents, had perpetrated an act of potential malfeasance toward our child by allowing her to view the comics. What is particularly disquieting about this occurrence was that in a meeting with the new director of the daycare (as opposed to the previous individual who had dealt with the aforementioned concern), she gave little rational foundation for such a view.

We conceded that the material was inappropriate for school but defended what we believed was our right as parents to decide what our child can and cannot be exposed to, all the while having to remind ourselves that we were discussing a Wonder Woman comic book. We further defended our position with a rational argument, complete with the citation of Henry Giroux (of critical pedagogy fame) and Neil Postman (the cultural critic and media ecologist). We admitted that, while the content of the magazine was not what one might consider ideal for five year old (ideal of course being a matter of important debate), it was in the context of a story, moreover one that, when deconstructed, clearly contained a moral theme if not a cogent life lesson for some (the reference is Wonder Woman: Her Enemy Revealed, issue 202, May, 2004). We further presumed to critique the narrative in the light of Giroux’s concept of the Disneyfication of Youth and Postman’s Disappearance of Childhood, largely from technological parenting, assuming in the spirit of Rousseauian discourse, that if reason would not suffice, surely common sense would.

The significance of Disney’s animated films as a site of learning is heightened by the widespread recognition that schools and other public sites are increasingly beset by a crisis of vision, purpose, and motivation…Disney films…carry
cultural and social messages…[of] racist, sexist, and antidemocratic ethos. (Giroux, 1999, p. 84-5)

Ecstasy is the key idea here, for [TV] commercial parables depict the varieties of ecstasy…Everything on television is experienced as happening “now”…As a consequence, the present is amplified out of all proportion, and it is a reasonable conjecture that adults are being forced by television into accepting as normal the childish need for immediate gratification, as well as childish indifference to consequences. (Postman, 1994, p. 112-113)

Although we did not refer directly to Rousseau or to George Ritzer’s “McDonaldization” Thesis (1996), to Alissa Quart’s Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers (2003), to Francis Fukuyama’s concern over the abject commercialization of childhood and his discussion of Ritalin and the control of children described in Our Posthuman Future (2002), or to the recent position statement of the Canadian Paediatric Society (2003) that “The influence of the media on the psychosocial development of children is profound…including television, radio, music, video games and the Internet” (p. 301), we did avail ourselves of their respective theories, research, and thought in support of our argument.

Our children are not allowed to use computers, or play video games; they have never eaten at McDonalds, or for that matter had junk food at all; they watch almost no television whatsoever (however, yes – they do watch Disney movies, though with guidance and in moderation); and our house is filled with books (the prosaic and discursive kind, as well as the so-called age appropriate), music, and non-technical (though perhaps least technological is the best we can seem to manage these days) toys. Moreover we tolerate, even encourage the use of imagination, self-expression, and free inquiry. Regarding our manner of discipline, we believe that anyone who knows us at all would agree that we are stern, but fair, and moreover the only thing our children are in danger of is a set of very high expectations as thinking, knowing, feeling persons and a general deprivation of all things superficial. This is no doubt, a primary source of some of our previously noted troubles. We do not imply that there is something saintly in such an approach to parenting, nor is it at all easy. It turns out that television and related forms of technology are effective babysitting tools in the short run; however, we believe that they are anathema to child development in the long run.
We left our respective meetings believing that the matter was closed, but resolved to discuss the comic once again with our daughter, both the matter of its content and why it should not be brought to school. In fact, an altogether different course ensued. A cumulative mathematic seems to have been employed wherein the previous incident (our daughter’s disconcerting reference to the nature of her discipline) was somehow added to the new happenstance to finally equal a high index of suspicion. As a result of this course of events, the school felt it necessary to report the incidents, and the entirety of accumulated evidence, to Family and Children’s Services.

We would like to clarify here that, in our view even this action, in and of itself, does not appear to us to be wholly unreasonable. No doubt the staff, teachers, and supervisors of early childhood education are beholden to policy and procedure, as are most professionals at work in the age of bureaucracy. In fact when the first episode of suspicion was brought to light and resolved in a professional manner, both parents acquiesced, in good conscience in the face of policy. By this we mean we were made aware and did not disagree at the time, that should a similar occurrence develop in the future that the daycare centre would have no choice but to alert Family and Children’s Services. It is also important to note that at the time of admission to the centre, staff was made fully aware of our daughter’s tendency towards impulsivity and emotional upsets, and by extension, the issue of our parenting had been evaluated by no less than three physicians. The centre was continually updated as to our efforts to work with our daughter, including almost daily debriefings following her play therapy sessions and various evaluations and consultations with child health care professionals. However, the greater point to be made here is that the second occurrence was not any suspicious comments made by our daughter, nor any other evidence concerning the person, behaviour and/or demeanour of our five year old, but rather the presumably questionable parental fitness based on – the content of a Wonder Woman comic book. Moreover, the consultation with the Children’s Aid by the director of the centre did not occur until after we were led to disagree over the nature of the material and, as previously recounted, our defence of it by recourse to the work of those aforementioned theorists. The mother also had a brief meeting with the director following the father’s meeting, and it appears (though we cannot be certain of this) that we had already been referred, yet were not informed of this at all. Now perhaps they were operating under the assumption that we would immediately flee the country, or if the children were in danger, our knowledge of the identification of such might place the children in even greater peril, or perhaps we would have time to, as it were, hide the evidence. However, it does seem odd that if any of this were the case, we did not actually meet with the child protection worker in any manner in which
she could appropriately assess the situation until nearly a week following the identification of the dangers of Wonder Woman’s trials and tribulations.

Perhaps most enlightening, though distressing is a somewhat better characterization of our immediate reaction, were the moments spent reviewing the notes and charting of the daycare teachers during preparation for the child protection services impending investigation. The daycare centre, by virtue of policy, keeps detailed records on virtually everything a child says and does, including quite literally, every mark, scratch, abrasion, contusion, and so on that is found on the body of the child. Such documentation however, is informed by precious little organization (outside of a running narrative), purpose, or clarity. In fact much to our dismay, we found inaccuracies (for example, apparently the first author’s mother has a boyfriend that neither the author, she, nor her husband are aware of who regularly chants “black power”), verbatim comments without contextual explanation, occurrences that we were not even informed of (for example, our daughter was seen to be positioning two dolls in an apparently sexually suggestive orientation that was never conveyed to us) and concerted attention to detail without any accompanying rationale for the accumulating record of information.

One might be tempted to conclude from such a procession of events that early childhood educators are acutely aware of the sinister effects of Wonder Woman comic books on our young, but not those of technology, television, video games, commercialism, and a host of other profound social influences that have been noted by scholars, academics, and theorists. Moreover, it appears that these individuals are not educated about the nature of stories (and at that, moral stories), parental guidance, the imaginative nature of children, or the difference between contextualized, and thus educational, aspects of violence, sexuality, and other age-appropriate inappropriates. Is there an understanding of the presentation of emotional concerns and exceptional difficulties pre-school children might face? Perhaps though, the more thoughtful conclusion to be reached here is that policy rolls down hill, as does information, or as Langdon Winner (1986) put it, myth-information. This is to say that though policy originates with educated, knowledgeable, and critical individuals and is intended to be applied by educated, knowledgeable, and critical professionals, this may not indeed be the case.

The quintessential questions are what are the education, knowledge, and critical acumen of those who actualize policy with regard to child safety and protection, and what is the nature of the vigilance, or perhaps hyper-vigilance, that results? Both of the major scholars whom we have cited, Giroux and Postman, state, though with certain differences, a form of critical pedagogy. The authors find it nothing less than ironic then that the events that were to unfold
began, not just with concerns over the content of a Wonder Woman comic book, but following our evocation of these important theorists in an attempt to defend our rights as parents, for we have no objection to the assertion that one ought to be willing to defend one’s parenting approach, to decide what our children can and cannot be exposed to in the process of child-rearing.

To anyone who has read seriously, or examined the history and development of the modern and the post-modern world, it is evident that Rousseau, who favoured a certain brand of common sense over reason, lost the argument or at least the motivation for history. Perhaps in the well-intentioned engineering of policy, we sacrifice not only reason, but also some forms of common sense. If this is the case, it might be advisable and just to return to Rousseau and his like for a sober re-examination of some of the fundamentals. Despite the difficulties of the events described here and felt throughout our family, we would be more than willing to brook such discomfort if every educator, every parent, and, given age-appropriateness of course, every child, were to read some of the thinkers, ideas, and findings to which we have referred.

References