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Chapter 8

Kurt Hahn

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The phenomenon which has become known as *Hahnism* (Skidelsky, 1976) is the unique approach to experiential education explicated by Kurt Hahn and embodied in the many institutions that he founded, as well as a host of adventure-based experiential education programs, one of which is Outward Bound.

There were four discernible phases in Hahn's life. The first is the period of his childhood, youth, and schooling which eventually took him to universities in Germany and England. This was a time when he was strongly influenced by both family and teachers. The second phase did not begin until he was 34 years of age when he opened his first school in Germany. This is a relatively late age to be starting into the field of education. He would probably have remained with this school, Salem, in Germany, and would not have had an international reputation had it not been for the Nazi movement and Hahn's imprisonment by Hitler. It was the result of this imprisonment and his subsequent release which led him to seek exile in Britain and begin the third phase of his life. This third phase was particularly important because of the number of educational ideas he spawned that led to the establishment of several new schools, programs and indeed institutions. Hahn was in his late 40s when he opened Gordonstoun School in Scotland and Anavryta School in Greece. He also created during his middle age the County Badge Scheme and its outgrowth, Outward Bound. The fourth phase started with Hahn's serious illness at the age of 67, which forced his retirement as headmaster of Gordonstoun. A successful

operation in 1955 enabled Hahn to continue to initiate educational projects. The Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and Atlantic College were established during this phase, and as an octogenarian he was still active in some of the decision making at various board meetings.

During some of the most turbulent times in recent history with two world wars and educational reform, Hahn was still able to make his mark with a brand of education that has continued to be prominent today. However, it was his unity of purpose without a unity of focus which allowed continual adaptation. One of his weaknesses was his inability to let go and hand the reins over to someone else. Whenever another person or group took over his program (e.g., Outward Bound Trust in 1946), he immediately took this adversity and turned it into an opportunity to create something new. He was a living example of one of his favorite sayings, "your disability is your opportunity." However, in his twilight years he was gracious enough to favorably recognize the variety of agencies which had taken over his programs and ideas.

Hahn was a trained propagandist. His apprenticeship with Prince Max von Baden as a political writer in the German Foreign Office helped him to articulate his position in a very convincing manner. Hogan (1968) felt that Hahn was an "artist with words" and that he was always able to gain "maximum emotional consequence." This was particularly evident in his speeches. His style of presentation utilized aphorisms and anecdotes which were generated from concrete examples. He was often accused of

speaking with an economy of truth and inventing statistical evidence when little or none existed. The translation from German to English was not as precise as it might be. This resulted in some of his phrases and expressions being perceived as offensive or radical. For example, in reference to normal adolescent sexual development he used the expressions, "deformities of puberty" and the "poisonous passions." Nevertheless, Hahn made no attempt to moderate these expressions because they had substantial effect and impact during his speeches.

For all the limitations that Hahn had with respect to his language, suspect sources, and dogmatic style, he was still able to impress the "right people." The result was substantial support for his ideas both fiscally and morally. When he was promoting a new idea or program he would leave no stone unturned in order to achieve success. This tenacity of pursuit became one of his trademarks and a notion that pervades all of his programs.

Kurt Hahn was not a prolific writer. Most of his original writings are in the form of transcribed speeches. On several occasions he issued a limited edition of a particular article or would stamp the manuscript "confidential." There appears to be no reason for this other than the fact that he did not want his writing to be made available to the general public for fear that he would be challenged on the grounds that the information was his definitive statement on education. There is no doubt that he had a brand of education that was eclectic in nature but was seen as unique and original.

From the very early days of Salem, Kurt Hahn would say of the school's methods that "there is nothing new." They were borrowed from many sources: from Plato, from Dr. Arnold of Rugby, from Eton, from Abbotsholme, from Hermann Lietz, from Fichte and from Wilhelm Meister. Each of them had proven successful in his own time and Hahn attempted to take the best from each. He was not concerned that some of the sources were not German. As patriotic as he was, he was still liberal enough to accept ideas from other countries provided that they were useful. He had no time for his colleagues who would reject ideas on the basis of their origin and not consider their merit. He would often say, "nor do I sympathize with the continental (German) gentleman who refused to be vaccinated because Jenner was an Englishman" (Hahn, 1940, p. 11).

Hahn was extremely clever at borrowing without copying. His adaptations and application of the elements he borrowed were unique. He had the ability to manipulate and create a new and novel way of delivering an educational experience from common practices such as was evidenced in the English public school system or from the fundamental educational ideas expressed by Plato.

Hahn's conception of education was simple. Its purpose was to develop a righteous man who is vigilant and an active citizen, who has a sense of duty to his fellow man and to God. Whereas this notion was not particularly

earth shattering, the process by which he achieved his ends made his educational style effective. So much so that his delivery ideas began to take on the ambience of a philosophy rather than a mere novel teaching method.

In Hahn's writing he seldom refers to academic achievement as being the primary purpose of his schools. In fact, he frequently provides examples of end of term reports which are sent home to parents. In these reports he lists, in his order of importance, the categories in which the teacher is to comment. The evaluative items are public spirit, sense of justice, the faculty of precise evidence, the power to do things right in the face of dangers (e.g., exhaustion, hostile public opinion, skepticism and boredom), imagination, and the power of organization. At the end of the priority list comes Latin, Greek, mathematics and other academic subjects (Hahn, 1947, 1956, 1957).

Educating for active citizenship was fundamental to Hahn's philosophy. He believed that every child was born with innate "spiritual powers" as well as an innate faculty which enables him or her to make correct judgments about moral issues. As the child progresses through adolescence, he or she loses the "spiritual powers" and ability to make correct judgments because of, what Hahn referred to as, the "diseased society" and the impulses of adolescence. In addition, he criticized the "nerve exhausting" practices which were employed in other schools (e.g., examinations). There is, of course, always the counter belief that such powers and conscience are acquired characteristics and not innate, but such beliefs were not Hahn's.

Hahn was obsessed with the social "declines" or social diseases which occurred in his society. These declines have been variously identified by Hahn as:

- decline of fitness due to modern methods of locomotion,
- decline of initiative and enterprise due to the widespread disease of spectatoritis,
- decline of memory and imagination due to the confused restlessness of modern life,
- decline of skill and care due to the weakened tradition of craftsmanship,
- decline of self-discipline due to the ever-present availability of stimulants and tranquilizers, and
- decline of compassion due to the unseemly haste with which modern life is conducted.

Hahn (1934) concluded that the civilization of the day is diseased, often sapping the strength of the young before they can grow up. In 1938 he referred to the "phlegmainousa polis" (the inflamed city) in which youth grow up. The only solution to these problems, Hahn believed, was through education. It is interesting to note that the concerns, and sometimes the criticism of youth in the 1990s are centered on these same declines even though the turn

of phrase and manifestation may be a little different. For example, a simple study conducted in 1943 of the outcomes of an early Outward Bound course in Aberdovey showed that the boys returned home some 10 pounds heavier as a result of the good food and exercise. A claim of a modern North American Outward Bound school may be that the participants would return home 10 pounds lighter following a course. The results are opposite but both programs are addressing the first of Hahn's concerns, the decline of fitness.

Each of the "declines" was addressed by Hahn through prescriptive activities which would bring about a collective cure to each disease. His rationale varied according to the group he was addressing or the kind of project at the time. The solution to the six declines appears in the justification for all of Hahn's educational enterprises: Salem School, Gordonstoun School, the County Badge Scheme, Outward Bound, the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, and the United World Colleges. Hahn's solutions to the six declines follow.

The Decline of Fitness

There was widespread "physical illiteracy" around the time that Hahn was developing the curriculum for Gordonstoun School. He believed that it was curable. His solution was to introduce a 45-minute daily physical activity program. Each boy participated in running, throwing and jumping activities. These track and field events had a specific set of standards to be achieved by each boy. The reason for having to work toward these standards went beyond the physical benefits. It was as important for each boy to develop and improve on his weak events as it was to nurture his talents. In fact, the phrase used by Hahn (1961a) was that each boy should "defeat his own defeatism."

Another phrase which has become more popular with Hahn disciples is, "your disability is your opportunity." This occurred frequently in the physical activity program where boys often found hidden talents such as in Hahn's story of a sprinter discovering that he was a better distance runner when a slight injury prevented him from competing in the shorter faster event. The carry-over into the real world allowed many of the boys not to be discouraged by minor setbacks, but to look at them as an opportunity to move in a new direction.

This daily physical education program differed from those of other English public schools which had a strong emphasis and even stronger tradition of team games. Both Salem and Gordonstoun confined their team games to two afternoons per week. This allowed more time for personal development. It was Hahn's experience that this somewhat extensive physical activity program during the morning break did not disturb, but actually enhanced the subsequent classroom work (Hahn, 1938).

Another reason for including an extensive physical activity program was the concern for decline in vital health which was more than a mere absence of illness (Hahn, 1962a). On several occasions Hahn made reference to "underexercise" contributing to coronary thrombosis. He believed that middle-aged men and women could not be expected to take part in regular exercise when the joy of movement has already been extinguished in puberty (Hahn, 1962b).

It is quite easy to see the similarity with the lack of fitness in young people in the 1990s. Also the more recent interest in holistic wellness bears some resemblance to Hahn's notion of vital health. It may be worth rejustifying the physical activity programs in modern schools with the principle that it may contribute to lifelong wellness and healthy lifestyles.

The Decline of Initiative and Enterprise

The decline arose from the inactivity and passive pursuits of young people. Hahn felt that it was akin to a disease which he called *spectatoritis* and credited its origin to the "Americans." He claimed that when a boy sat in a movie theater or listened to the radio, he experienced the thrill of a great adventure and the associated stirring events with unconscious movements of his body and without leaving his seat. He felt part of the action, but Hahn claimed that "the sensation was bogus and transitory but was always hotly desired" (Hahn, 1962b, p. 4). This conclusion has been corroborated in contemporary research on the effect of television on children and youth (Mander, 1978).

The solution to this decline was the introduction of the "expedition" to the curriculum. The expedition into the mountains or the ocean nourished the spirit of adventure. George Trevelyan in a 1943 speech at the christening of the boat *Garibaldi*, at Aberdovey Outward Bound School, said, "without the instinct for adventure in the young men any civilization, however enlightened, must wilt and wither." Hahn was fond of this quote because it illustrated the importance he placed on expeditions that generated opportunities for adventure. He felt that the rigor of expeditions could stretch young boys beyond the track and field activity program. As the training for track and field would help the boy defeat his own defeatism, so the expedition gives the boy the power to overcome (Hahn, 1960). It also revealed the inner worth of the man, the edge of his temper, the fiber of his stuff, the quality of his resistance, the secret truth of his pretenses, not only to himself but to others (Hahn, 1961b).

The expeditions were not always popular with the students despite their value. Hahn relates a story of a boy who had just completed a sailing expedition around the Orkneys. After encountering three gales, he was asked how

he enjoyed the adventure. The boy replied: "Magnificently, but not at the time!" This story was used in nearly every speech where Hahn was explaining the virtues of expeditions and adventure as an integral part of the school curriculum.

The Decline of Memory and Imagination

This occurred, according to Hahn, because of an increased pace of life and the rapidly changing political climate of the time. Boys did not have enough opportunity to stop and reflect. There was a need for periods of aloneness. Hahn (1961a) stated that "neither the love of man nor the love of God can take deep root except in aloneness" (p. 15). These times alone were the opportunity to look to the future as well as to reflect.

At Gordonstoun the silent walk to chapel became an important feature for each boy to use to develop his memory and imagination. There were also other activities such as journal writing which would encourage reflection. Most of these opportunities were short in duration, unlike the extended solo often used in the North American Outward Bound schools.

In addition to the opportunity to reflect, Hahn believed that these solo experiences helped to develop memory which was vital. He had a story to illustrate the hazards of a poor memory:

There was once a famous banker on the Continent who gathered his five sons round his death bed and gave them this piece of advice, "Never tell lies, my boys, your memory is not good enough." If our audiences have a bad memory, and particularly the audiences of politicians, there is a great temptation for the speaker, I won't say to tell lies, but to operate with an economy of truth. (Hahn, 1962a, p. 4)

The Decline of Skill and Care

Because of an increase in technology there was a reduction in the demand for craftsmen. It is the care and pride associated with artists and craftsmen which was disappearing. One of the reasons the Salem students had to spend time with the artisans in the Cistercian Monastery was that craftsmen were far less likely to accept second rate or unfinished work in the same way as the schoolmaster (Hahn, 1934b).

An indication of the extent of this decline is illustrated in Hahn's story of the boy who produced a very shoddy piece of work. Hahn said to him, "Now this is really awful! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" the boy grinned and said, "It's the genius of the British race to muddle through."

And in his innermost heart he believed that he was contributing to the genius of the race (Hahn, 1961a).

A job of skill often requires a substantial degree of patience. Hahn (1938) referred to the modern boy as having an impetuous lust for quick results. To encourage this patience and pursuit of quality each boy was required to select a project. Extended periods of time were devoted to the project and it was expected that each boy would pursue his task through to excellence. The final product was not necessarily evaluated on its finite level of excellence, but rather the tenacity of the pursuit.

These projects were referred to as "the grande passion" and the idea came about as a result of Hahn's concern about the problems which arise in boys during puberty:

The discovery of sources of passionate interest can protect the growing young against what have been called the "deforming influences of puberty," resulting in irritability, listlessness, the lack of mental and physical coordination; which some psychologists have regarded as unavoidable symptoms of adolescence. (Hahn, 1965, p. 7)

Hahn believed the psychologists to be wrong. He contended that if a substitute passion could be found, then there was no reason a boy could not pass from childhood to adulthood without being contaminated by an unnatural sex drive (Hahn, 1934):

If you look around the professions, who would you say has preserved the strength—you might also say the beauty—of childhood? The hunter from the hill, the sailor from the sea. Why? Because their adolescence was guarded by health giving passions. (Hahn, 1938, p. 5)

The Decline of Self-Discipline

In order to overcome this decline, Hahn devised a system of daily exercise and healthy habits known as the "Training Plan." Each student was only permitted to participate in the Training Plan provided that he had proved to the faculty that he could be trusted to complete the daily ritual unsupervised. Each day the students were required to complete all of the following: one warm wash, two cold showers, 30 skips, high jump, running, throwing, no eating between meals, report all illness, account book, and a duty.

The concern by Hahn that self-discipline was declining was spirited by his opinion that the availability of stimulants and tranquilizers was so easy that without self-discipline young people would be "swallowed up" in such things as smoking, drinking, reading undesirable books, indiscriminate listening to the radio, too frequent visits to the cinema, and staying out late (Hahn, 1934).

The Training Plan was created at Salem. When Hahn introduced it to Gordonstoun many people warned him that British children would not respond to the regime. However, the Gordonstoun boys accepted the principle with enthusiasm, and many of the subsequent alumni agreed that it was useful to them in later life. To have experienced a sensible precedent of self-denial proved to be of value to those alumni who were influenced by Hahn. It is interesting to note that when Hahn left Gordonstoun his successors did not understand the rationale for the Training Plan, and it soon became used more as a punishment than a privilege.

The Decline of Compassion

This was considered to be the worst decline of all. The haste with which life was conducted did not allow the time for people to be compassionate. An illustration of the decline is reflected in the story about the time Hahn was driven through Lehrter Station in Berlin in 1945. At this time, there were refugees arriving in cattle trucks, many of them were close to death. The driver of the car was an American sergeant with a kindly, friendly face. While they were driving through the scenes of misery and death he listened to jazz on the radio. He was asked by Hahn's host to turn it off. When Hahn was questioned as to what had happened to the young sergeant, he responded, "He has a dispersed soul which he could not assemble even before the majesty of death" (Hahn, 1947). Hahn therefore looked for deliberate ways of including activities which developed compassion.

The antidote Hahn introduced to counter the decline of compassion was the element of *service*. He was very fond of using the parable of the Samaritan. This provided a metaphor for the service-oriented activities which became an outstanding feature of Hahn's educational programs. At Gordonstoun it was the coast guard service and the volunteer fire brigade; at the Outward Bound Schools it was the mountain rescue teams; and at Atlantic College it was the adoption of the surf rescue service. Kurt Hahn (1962b) believed it to be the supreme task of education to help the young to achieve a balance of power in their inner lives so that the love of man can take charge. The saving of life contributed to this objective.

A cliché which Hahn and many of his supporters used is the concept of an "aristocracy of service." This evolved from an article by William James on the *Moral Equivalent of War*. The title seemed to catch their imagination and was still used many years later in the promotion of American Outward Bound Schools. Whereas James deplored war, he did admit that war satisfied a primitive longing which will never be extinguished: the longing to lose oneself in a common cause that claimed the whole man. Everyone needed a Holy Grail, but it was unreasonable to expect that a war be arranged every time society or an individual

needed to realize himself (Hahn, 1962b). Therefore, a moral equivalent was needed. Hahn maintained that not only was his Samaritan ethic an equivalent, but it was capable of releasing the highest dynamics of the human soul. In every article and speech delivered by Hahn after 1949, the rescue service or Samaritan ethic was always considered to be more than the moral equivalent of war.

These six declines formed the core of all of Kurt Hahn's educational ideas and achievements. Over the past 50 years they have undergone many interpretations but generally are as applicable today as they were in 1933. The fact that most of Hahn's programs and schools are still operating today is testimony to the robustness of his ideas. What was an issue and a need for young people in the 1930s is still current today. In some sense Hahn was ahead of his time in creating a delivery system in education which is pervasive throughout experiential educators today. Of all the sayings that Hahn used, the most famous was the following:

We believe that it is the sin of the soul to force the young into opinions, but we consider it culpable neglect not to impel every youngster into health-giving experiences, regardless of their inclinations. (Hahn, 1935)

The essence of this statement lies in nonindoctrination yet at the same time nudging the child into action. The most recent clarification by Hahn was in 1967 when he responded to the original manuscript of a book by Robert Skidelsky. He expands the original statement:

You and I would agree that indoctrination is of the devil and that it is a crime to force anybody into opinions but I, unlike you, consider it culpable neglect not to guide and even plunge the young into experiences which are likely to present opportunities for self-discovery. If you spare the young such experiences, in deference to their wishes, you stunt their natural growth of basic human qualities which they will need for their own happiness and for service to their fellow men. (1967, p. 2)

It seems that most adventure-based experiential education programs, whether they have their roots in Outward Bound or not, all have program goals and objectives that are consistent with Hahn's sentiments expressed in this classic quotation.

In summary it would be fair to say that Kurt Hahn's philosophy of education was somewhat limited in range as compared with some of the "greats." However, he was a master of capturing some profound ideas and presenting them as simple notions. He had a unique talent of being

able to rework many statements to suit the needs of the occasion. When he was embarking on a new project which required funding and support, he could present a rationale which was not only inoffensive, but was immediately compelling.

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