Schooling Myself

Ethics and autodidacticism

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The first thing I remember learning was the distinction between short and long vowel sounds. A page in a book, *Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons*, and a grown-up's hand, my mother's, shepherding oversized letters: an "a" with a horizontal line lying heavy across it and an "a" with a piquant dot balanced on top. Like hats. I was four and a half, and had recently informed my mother that I needed to learn to read by my fifth birthday.

The deadline nagged at me; I nagged at my mother to make up missed lessons. I remember a sense of time slipping away, a problem it seemed no one else was trying to remedy. I also remember realizing that between myself and books lay a conduit, my mother, who by virtue of her mother-ness was sometimes unavailable. I was the oldest of three—soon to be four—girls, and time, for my mother, was also rushing ahead, or blowing apart, or both. Though adulthood's dizzyingly fragmented temporality was unknown to me, I understood that she couldn't be relied on to sit and read aloud whenever and however long I wished her to.

Still, my memories of these lessons—usually after lunch, while the other children napped—coalesce in a golden haze, as if every afternoon had been midsummer, when time floats like dandelion fluff, here and there, going nowhere in particular, and only I progressed, swift, undeterred by silent letters, diphthongs, schwas, into a wintry future—my birthday is in January—of which two things could be said for sure: I would be five years old; I would be able to rely on myself.

Most children start learning at home; few of them keep learning there. Yet homeschooling is becoming more popular in the United States, especially since the beginning of the pandemic. In 2019, the National Center for Education Statistics reported 1.5 million homeschooled students; in late 2023, the *Washington Post* estimated that number as between 1.9 and 2.7 million. (Many regions lack reliable data, so a more precise count is difficult.)

Perhaps because it is, in the era of compulsory schooling, always reactionary, homeschooling is hard to qualify as a movement. In the 1960s, the evangelical Christian right incubated the modern American version, and although the same group today composes only about a third of contemporary homeschoolers, without their decades of fierce advocacy for "school choice," homeschooling as it is, in all its forms, would not exist. The rhetoric of Christian homeschooling responds to the specificities of cultural debates, but the essence is preservation. Children are precious and corruptible. The family is the sovereign entity, under threat from outside.

In the 1970s, a variant known as "unschooling" arose. John Holt, a former private-school teacher who had attended Phillips Exeter Academy and Yale University, conceived and popularized unschooling in several books and a long-running newsletter. He argued for allowing children the freedom to explore and learn what they wanted, when they wanted. In May, an influencer posted a video about "free schooling" intended to

prove the efficacy of the approach she outlines in a voiceover: "We don't teach our children anything. Everything that they learn is in response to either their interests or their questions." It went viral, and not with approval. Hers is an unschooling incarnation updated for the 2020s, one that jives with opposing vaccinations, signing on to conspiracy theories, reflexively distrusting establishment wisdom.

My own homeschooling fused religious and institutional anxieties to produce a Christian-right unschooling. Before I was born, my mother had worked at a Christian school as a liaison with homeschooling families, and their children's freedom to pursue their own interests had beguiled her. She didn't want her own children to "get beaten down by school" like others she'd seen, she told me recently. Homeschooling, she believed, could keep us safe and set us free.

Our family of four girls grew to five girls and three boys. Until I was fourteen, when my parents separated, my mother stayed at home while my father worked. Many homeschooling families on the Christian right are similar: with an abundance of children and a mother who is mother, housekeeper and teacher. No matter what its adherents claim, it does not work as a model if the goal is to educate children well. If it succeeds, it succeeds by accident and lightning-strike luck. The mothers may not be well educated themselves. (Mine was unusual in having pedagogical training and experience.) There is, of course, a thriving industry in all manner of textbooks, how-to manuals, podcasts, websites, conferences and more, but if one person is supposed to run a household, clean and cook, care for children and also teach them, then when schooling conflicts with dinner, exhaustion or a child's resistance, it's the schooling that gives. But the goal is not to ensure mastery of different subjects; it's to shape a being whose moral, ethical and political views reproduce, exactly, those of their parents.

Early on, I did receive more structured tutelage from my mother. I finished the assignments she gave showily fast, and then went back to reading books I chose myself. My math and science textbooks were designed for Christian homeschoolers, which didn't affect math much, but did mean that biology began with the Genesis story and omitted evolution except as a discredited "theory." My dictatorial insistence on learning to read and my bratty disregard of anyone else's pace presaged the rest of my education. After I was eight, I operated almost entirely unsupervised.

In an interview last year, I called myself "an autodidact." A cleaned-up version of what I said at sixteen when an outsider—a professor—had asked about my education: "I was homeschooled, but mostly I schooled myself."

That was six weeks into my first semester at a university, and my first semester of formal education. The professor had just returned our first essays, mine the first I'd ever written (so many firsts!). In discussions about the *Odyssey* or *The Stranger*, I could forget myself. But I resented practicing the components of essay writing, which felt far too public and potentially damning: learning in front of an audience who would react

according to how well I performed my learning. At least the actual writing happened alone, at home. I pretended that my thoughts would remain secret so that I could set down on paper a version of a familiar activity: carrying a book over untrustworthy ground, testing with one foot, then the other, where it would hold.

The professor was probing some ambient strangeness. I knew it existed—knew, too, that it was a type of eccentricity, like wearing the wrong clothes, that I couldn't correct through self-examination. By the time I graduated, however, I thought I'd at least catalogued the major incongruities. My scientific knowledge was poor, my knowledge of everything else inconsistent. One professor praised my ability to make surprising connections. Another criticized the looseness of my logic. Yet another said I would rather "walk around a subject" than make an argument. The praise and censure pointed to a single originating condition: "Mostly I schooled myself." It verged on apology—for irregularity, scattershot knowledge, a mental waywardness.

The professor's question felt like someone digging a finger into a bruise, but it is common, I learned, to ask for or offer an account of the inner self by talking about education and its conditions. The facts are important because they can explain what you're like, not what you know. Public school, private school, Dalton, Andover, Sidwell Friends, Yale, Harvard, University of Chicago... Even in the quasi-rural community in Ohio where I spent my adolescence, whether you attended high school at "North" or "Central" revealed something about how rich you were and how "quasi" your ruralness was.

Once ensconced in what I'd grown up calling "the secular world," I had to glide over the questionably "religious weirdo" parts of my homeschooling or make them funny. I fine-tuned a tour of poverty's exotica starring the lonely, striving, intelligent child. Charming and quirky, like *Anne of Green Gables*. We had a lot of freedom, I might say, conjuring days spent reading books far beyond my grade, if I'd had one. I might talk about how I drove an hour to take three SAT subject tests, realizing only upon opening an exam that it was designed as the culmination of a specific curriculum, not to reward a dedicated dilettante.

It can be terrifying to be so free, so young. The suspicion emerges that no one is telling you what to do because they do not care—indifference, not hostility—and that you, who know little about what you're supposed to know, are alone in guiding your life forward. Even when you're a little older, accustomed to charting a course through research and breathless improvisation, you might leave the test and cry in your car, because you do want to go to college, and while you balk at authority you consider unearned, what you crave then is someone telling you that it's going to be okay, and how to make it so.

It would have been worse had I been more rigidly policed into a fundamentalist femininity. Though I was only six when I was first branded disobedient and stubborn, my habitual sins, I tolerated many years of teaching that my life's great adventure would be to support my husband's, and submit. Always submit. I revolted elementally, like a body rejecting a transplanted organ, but I didn't see many options, which is

probably why, between about ten and sixteen, I told adults that I felt called to celibacy and researched becoming a Protestant nun. But even that I could make into a good story for a dinner party.

The paradox of my education is that it followed a model that serves almost no one well, and yet has served me perhaps better than any other. For ten years, I read books. Every week, my mother took her children to the library, where I maxed out my library card, obtained as soon as I could print my full name. (The limit was a heavenly fifty books.) At five, I read *Pride and Prejudice*, then the rest of Austen. At eight, *War and Peace*, then *Anna Karenina*. I moved on to Dostoevsky, reading *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* aloud to my mother as she cooked dinner. At ten, I read through all of Shakespeare. At eleven, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. These examples are plucked from an experience of reading more like being swept downstream than picking my way carefully from rock to rock. I'd have liked to drown, I think.

My reading was not universally serious—it included every Nancy Drew mystery the library owned—nor was it especially organized. It progressed by serial obsession: reading everything I could find on a topic until I exhausted the resources or got bored. Such a technique, if it can be called that, does not guard against gaps—my knowledge has so many gaps—but it does teach how to follow a trail from book to book and to see that these trails exist, that a minor character or event is a major character or event if you find the right story, the right teller. Years before I knew the meaning of "works cited," I devoured bibliographies. Some of these titles, typed into the library's search engine, might appear and eventually surrender their own sources or associations, and so on, and so on, and so on.

These days, how *do* I educate myself? I read a lot, still, though it's nothing compared to my child self. There is also conversation: my closest friends are my closest friends in part because we are always talking about what we're learning, refining our ideas together. I always have a private set of curiosities that I'm lazily investigating. Right now: the history of religious movements in Puerto Rico, siblinghood, bisexuality, poems about climate crisis, the work of the art historian T. J. Clark and other things too nascent to mention. When I turn to something in earnest, I do start with a schema of sorts, listing sources to examine. The longer the list, the better. But the pleasure, and most of the process, comes from going astray, even awry.

For this essay, I tried to read as if sifting through a stranger's library. So I read Reddit posts about becoming a self-made polymath, and learned there's a robust industry peddling the tools for universal knowledge, such as *The Science of Self-Learning*, to dissatisfied men. I read James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, John Berger, Annie Dillard. I read Rousseau's *Emile* and Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. I read *The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill* and *The Education of Henry Adams*. I read a few hundred of the thousands of pages in Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks. I read *Educated*, by Tara Westover. I read *Self-Taught*, by Heather Williams, a history of African American education before and immediately after emancipation. I read autobiographies by formerly enslaved people, including, of course, Frederick Douglass, but also—following

a path marked by Williams—Elijah Marrs. I read *Robinson Crusoe*, which I found as dull as when I first read it as a child, and discovered *Hayy Ibn Yaqzān*, a philosophical novel by the Andalusian Muslim philosopher Abu Bakr Ibn Tufayl that is Crusoe's twelfth-century antecedent. What I'm hunting is insight, not information, and that requires reckless consumption. It's a truism to say that books are "in conversation" with one another. But the conversation doesn't happen without the reader as vessel and participant. Learning is not only mastery of facts. It is patient listening, committed attention and a willingness to waste time, or to see no time as wasted.

Self-education is an act of love. The love that spurs it is not for the self's improvement or advancement, though ambition often contributes to dedicated study. Nor is it only a love of knowledge. The love is for the act itself, a recursion rather than a tautology: you must love *coming to know*. The return, over and over, to a state of not-knowing must excite even as it daunts. It always daunts. In this, of course, it resembles falling in love with a person.

After I called myself an autodidact, I wondered if I'd told a lie. I do have two degrees from accredited institutions, after all. Further, it seemed obvious that no one could actually educate themselves entirely alone, nor did I believe I had. But there was also all that time in self-directed solitude, and that determined four-year-old dictating the terms of her liberation. And then again, there were many benevolent interventions. The librarians who talked to me about books as if my thoughts and the books both mattered; a creative-writing teacher in a class for homeschoolers; that professor, who heard the embarrassment in my answer and encouraged me to keep schooling myself with all the resources of a rich institution. My mother, who drove to the library every week. Who, day after day, for a hundred days, taught me to read.

This dichotomy, or problem of citation, is present in stories of self-education from the start. *Hayy Ibn Yaqzān*, perhaps the earliest fable of the autodidact, imagines a self taught *only* by the self. We meet the protagonist as an infant on an unpeopled island in the Indian Ocean, which seafarers from North Africa and Andalusia were then exploring. A gazelle nurses him, saving his life, and Hayy grows up among the animals. He learns to clothe himself by imitating their feathers and fur. When he is seven, the mother-gazelle dies, and Hayy dissects the body, taking his empiricist learning beyond observation and into experiment. Thus he ascends the ladder of knowledge, deriving truths of natural sciences, physics, astronomy and cosmology. Eventually, he retreats from the observable world and, in a cave, experiences a mystic union with God. When two men arrive, they're awed by Hayy and take him back to their homeland, which does not impress him: the people repeat platitudes and fail to question what they're told. Bored, Hayy returns to the island. A thoughtful solitude is preferable to a mindless society.

If this premise feels familiar (Mowgli, Tarzan, Crusoe), that's because of its influence. Translated into Hebrew, Latin, Dutch and English, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzān* circulated widely

for hundreds of years. It seems likely that Daniel Defoe read it. It definitely seized the imaginations of other utopian-minded fabulists and philosophers, including the author of *Utopia*, Thomas More. The tropes that Ibn Tufayl yokes together—the deserted island, the feral child raised by nature itself—recur in slightly different forms as people try to understand human nature within society by envisioning the human removed from it entirely.

Ibn Tufayl wrote *Hayy Ibn Yaqzān* in response to Sufi challenges to tradition, and the story rebukes the mystic contention that truth can be known without rational, experiential processes. But in its repeated turn to the utmost solitude as a source of wisdom it implies a different kind of mysticism, one that grants access, solely through one's own effort and experience, to a purer, better form of being human. When Hayy achieves his epiphany regarding "the true necessary existent," God, he has "confined himself, in the lowest part of a cave ... turned away from himself and from all sensible things and bodily faculties." In *Emile*, Rousseau forces his imagined wild child into society, but Ibn Tufayl is truer to the genre when he sends Hayy back to the island. The autodidactic fantasy is a fantasy of absolute independence.

When I learned to read, I chased self-reliance. And I did rely on myself during my education, from necessity and desire. Alongside that, and connected to it, there grew a resistance, still present, to rules or ideas unjustified by reasons that made sense to me. My departure from Christian dogma happened alone, and through determined study. I learned to trust my own mind and its interpretations—to some extent, what else could I do?—even when those ran counter to canon or convention. I feel no obligation to respect something just because other people do. I think this bent has helped me, by and large, but it has a dark side. There's a streak of arrogance underlying all self-education—exemplified by people like Sam Altman and Elon Musk, who assume that a grasp of one area of knowledge unlocks all. This can cause us not to notice our intellectual errors. Worse, the *auto* can become paramount, allowing our attachment to personal rationality to outweigh everything else.

Some thinkers who picked up the story of the solitary child recognized this. Anxiety over every aspect of nurture pervades Rousseau and Locke: Should the child be allowed to drink cold water on hot days? Should he be swaddled? These days, such questions might be raised in the context of "parenting," rather than education, and framed in terms of a child's success in life, but the individualist, capitalist formation is a contemporary iteration of the concern that deviled the Enlightenment worriers: how to create a person who functions in society while holding true to some inner beliefs, something called "the self." The fantasy of independence exposes an interdependence that can't be extirpated, no matter how much we might wish it could.

Reality makes this even clearer than fable. As Williams lays out in *Self-Taught*, enslaved people employed many creative—and dangerous—strategies to educate themselves in a society hell-bent on withholding knowledge. Illicit schools, sometimes hidden in the woods, often held at night, always in secret, used whatever materials could be found and drew on any knowledge anyone had to share. The number of anti-literacy

statutes in antebellum America, as well as the harshness of the punishments they mandated, shows the white ruling class's comprehension of the threat that education posed to its brutal oppression. The dedicated circumvention of the bans shows a commensurate understanding on the part of the enslaved. Many who wrote down their life stories, including Douglass, articulate a conception of self-education as essential to both individual and collective freedom. Having learned is both an end and a beginning: one person's hard-won knowledge becomes another's, so that communication of knowledge becomes intrinsic to its acquisition, as if possession is secured in the moment of transfer. "We were linked and interlinked with each other," Douglass writes of fellow slaves on a plantation where he secretly taught others in a "Sabbath school."

So the independent pursuit of knowledge is not necessarily incompatible with, or antithetical to, social participation. In fact, the "linking and interlinking" of people can be crucial; the cave where knowledge arises has other people in it.

My father, fortunately, didn't pay much attention to my education. Occasionally he would contract a frenzy for involvement, instituting some overly rigorous schedule (up at six! at the table by seven!) or forcing some devotional instruction on us (daily reading from Bill Gothard's *Character Sketches*, or William J. Bennett's *The Book of Virtues*). We merely had to wait out these enthusiasms. He sometimes punished me by confining me to my room and restricting me to reading only the Bible; I could earn release by writing long letters of apology larded with Biblical citations. But he didn't see the mind as a threat as long as the mouth didn't speak rebellion. For that, as I grew older, I pitied him. He couldn't perceive that the rest of his family had another, hidden life, and that everything he saw was performed for his benefit. Violence does exact obedience—but only to a point.

One night when I was fourteen, I called the police, and after that my father no longer lived with us. Several weeks earlier, he had beaten my mother severely. Even now I can see the arc of his arm in the air as he bashed her head against a wall. I ran upstairs to the landline phone in his office and picked up the receiver. I wanted to dial 911. I couldn't picture what would happen if I did. The blank frightened me, as did what he might do to me, easier to imagine. I stood there, phone in hand, looking out at the view that belonged to my father until a silence fell downstairs. I placed the phone back on the hook.

What does this have to do with education? It would be impossible to write about my own education without including this story, and yet its relation is not, perhaps, immediately obvious. All of the anxiety swirling around education and parenting reveals what the religious right openly acknowledges, what Locke and Rousseau worried over: education is always about how to be a person among other people. Hysteria over what facts are learned bursts forth because the whole person, not just the intellect, is at stake. And the whole person will grow up to participate in a society, a nation. A

secular public-school system can only acknowledge this in terms so generic as to make the words "moral" or "ethical" look ridiculous, while universities tend to disavow any moral aim at all, regardless of how much rhetoric about changing the world is deployed in their marketing materials.

For my moral and ethical self-education, this scene with the phone is crucial. It represents a terrible failure and a hard-won epiphany. I replayed it over and over: the dial tone, the frozen fear, the inaction. That my mother had survived was irrelevant: I'd stared at someone else's suffering and done nothing to stop it. I promised myself that would never happen again, even if intervening did put me in danger. It would, I thought, be better to die than to feel again what I felt as I waited for the screams to stop. This is the beginning of a moral insight. It clarified and crystallized into a commitment that would govern many of my choices, including the one I made some weeks later, confronting a similar dilemma. By then it did not feel like a choice at all.

I've told this story a few times, though never before in writing. People respond with compassion, horror, assurances that I should not have had to face that reckoning. That's true. It's also true that my father's violence was neither my fault nor my responsibility. But I am impatient with the urge to soften my past feelings of guilt. And I am angry when people deny the force of the knowledge that this guilt bestowed, which informed the conviction that it was necessary to act. If no one else could help, then did I, perceiving a wrong, not bear some responsibility to do so? It doesn't erase the injustice of the whole situation to allow me to see myself as a moral actor, however young.

My objection to my father's recurring violence was naïve, instinctive, something that requires no learning or sophistication to reach. The desire to protect another person, especially someone you love, also strikes me as instinctive. But when that instinct conflicts with others—self-preservation, or fear—the easiest action is often inaction. The decision to intervene, and how to do so, requires thought, and before that, a habit of ethical evaluation. We go through life learning all kinds of things, sometimes passively, sometimes deliberately, but the most persistent form of self-education is ethical because of that inescapable interdependence in society, which is entangled with the acquisition of other kinds of knowledge and continues long after any formal education ends.

I can't say whether my version of autodidacticism had anything to do with how I acted or how I arrived at my epiphany. Certainly I was prepared to think of myself as someone with moral and ethical responsibilities; I did have a grounding in Christian teachings and a nearly decade-long habit, then, of paying attention to texts. I'd already begun to read the Bible with an eye for inconsistencies between what I was taught in church and what I saw glowing on the page.

It does seem important that I'd been practicing interpretation by myself and for myself. I was used to turning things over in my mind and trying out conclusions. Without realizing, I'd learned to trust my judgments while also holding them suspiciously, because they could change, given new information or a new gloss, and yet still for a

while had to be respected, perhaps acted upon or argued for. The habit of uncertainty does not preclude conviction. Books do not make us better people automatically, but being a thoughtful reader does open the possibility of conceiving of the self as *like a character*. It's not that everyone's a celebrity, nor that you have Main Character Energy. It's that characters interact with other characters, and plots, and the world around them; they make decisions, they fail, and they sometimes struggle toward some greater knowledge or perhaps even a great deed. I have been unaccountably lucky, and it feels like a piece of that luck to have early on seen the potential to shape myself as a person among other people, to understand myself as a moral and ethical autodidact. That I spent so much time imagining the lives within a story and evaluating those stories from without—I can't help thinking that this practice did help me when I was very young and very scared.

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Deep down, I admit, I do disdain the classroom and distrust the promise of school itself. (The autodidact's arrogance rears up!) Few teachers are as honest as the philosophy professor who, during my first semester at Yale, silenced a room of ambitious eighteen-year-olds by saying, "You are being indoctrinated. Yale is indoctrination. Education is indoctrination. So you should choose what you're indoctrinated with." It felt like he had broken a taboo, exposing a secret that the institution went to great lengths to hide. I've clung to this, whatever the subject: I am being indoctrinated, I can choose what I'm indoctrinated with. It helped me not to take the university and its pretensions too seriously. It did not help my happiness, though, to exist in a chronic state of tension with the university. By the time I graduated, I was a little cauldron of hate.

Despite my admiration for some of my teachers, I never wanted to be one. Unfortunately for me, having a degree from Yale has meant that at certain points in my life, the easiest way to earn money was to hire myself out as a tutor. It paid well and didn't require much preparation. Yet I loathed it. I hated that money could be a tonic for mediocrity, hated the creepy-crawly sensation that they felt they'd bought me and the equally icky awareness that what I had to sell was not my knowledge, but my *self*. Why was I putting it in service of rich students whose thinking was at best rudimentary, despite years of expensive education, so that they could maintain their class positions by graduating from the right schools and getting the right jobs? (Money.) But my revulsion was as much spiritual, I admit, as material. My students' uninterruptible incuriosity and preoccupation with grades tainted something that for me verges on the sacred.

I'd been out of the tutoring business for about three years by the time I began teaching a poetry workshop at Barnard College this past spring. I'd never set foot on Barnard's campus before my first class, and had been to its sister institution, Columbia University, only twice, to hear outside speakers. I'd read some articles about the conflicts on campus between Zionists and supporters of Palestinian liberation; about the

universities' joint decision to remove Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace as official student organizations, supposedly to counter anti-Semitism; and about the recently established Task Force on Antisemitism that one Columbia faculty member had notably described as "the Task Force on, Like, Campus Vibes."

The campus vibes, I discovered, were bad. "Have you taught here before?" a student asked as I stood outside my classroom waiting to enter. When I said no, the student said, "Welcome to hell." By the beginning of the spring semester, trust between students, administrators and faculty had shattered, if it had ever existed. I often felt like an eavesdropper; I was, in fact, often eavesdropping, trying to figure out what was happening from sotto voce exchanges between faculty members I didn't know or from the sharp, impassioned, often hilarious discussions of students between classes. As a one-term adjunct with no history at the school, I was an outsider, always aware of my ignorance and lack of influence, and yet I was also, to the students, allied, however uncomfortably, with the institution.

Poetry is not a class that can eschew the political and keep any honesty about what it is, or what poets do. I would never have wanted to teach a class that pretended otherwise, especially not several months into the Israeli assault on Gaza, not when I was constantly questioning myself about how to approach being an American writer during a genocide enabled by America. I knew before I began that I would have to try to teach something I am perpetually trying to learn: how to be a writer *in* the world.

My students were a rebuke to me for anticipating a room of shallow opportunists. I was consistently astonished by their thoughtfulness, intelligence, curiosity and verve. The classroom, I realized, could feel like a space of education for the teacher, not because my students taught me from the great wisdom of youth, or something schlocky like that, but because we were engaged in a difficult—though fun, in the way that real learning is, and often funny too—shared endeavor, as we probed both poetry's capabilities and its limitations. It would breach an ethical boundary, I think, to speak with any specificity about what my students said or wrote or did. Perhaps it is most important, if frustratingly vague, to say that my students made me think, often, that poetry and the classroom were alike in being defined by paradox. They are frivolities that nonetheless matter because people take them out into the world and bring the world back to them, an endless round of translation.

When students at Barnard and Columbia established the first Gaza solidarity encampment, many of them understood themselves to be applying what they had learned in the classroom to that ubiquitous collegiate phrase, "the real world." That was a prominent narrative: they had learned, and now they were acting, attempting to change the world. Less frequently observed is that the protesting students were also self-educating, or conceiving of themselves as doing so, *within* an institution of formal education. They did so even as those institutions increasingly opposed and suppressed them. The students seemed to understand themselves—in a way that the university did not, or could not, if it wished to maintain its sense of independence—as part of the same story as people living, suffering and dying in Palestine. If society is often, as Hayy

thought, mindless, there can also be a mindlessness to isolation, to pretending that one is not implicated simply because one is not interested in certain forms of sociality, or, in this case, to asserting the isolation of the intellectual realm from the political. The student encampments and protests exposed the inevitable intersection of life and education. In attempting to separate them, often through force, the universities only emphasized how impossible it is to keep them apart.

One night in April, I found myself linked arm in arm, between my best friend and a stranger, in a line of faculty standing between a group of students and police marching up with riot shields. A man with a megaphone repeated robotically that we were trespassing and would be arrested if we did not move. I didn't move. It didn't really feel like making a choice, though it was also not much of a risk to me, aside from the usual danger of any interaction with police. It did feel familiar: to place, in any small way, stopping the suffering of others above my own security. Or, as I thought later in that exhausting night, to see myself as insecure while others are suffering. There's no retreat to the mythical island. There never was.

This essay appears in a special section in issue 33, "Education and Society." Click here to read the other three essays in the section, by Agnes Callard, Jennie Lightweis-Goff and Joseph M. Keegin.

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