

Excerpt from 'The Getting of Wisdom'

An essay by Linda Jaivin

In the foreword to his 1986 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the American academic Neil Postman wrote of the authors of the classic prophetic novels *1984* and *Brave New World*: 'What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. This book,' Postman wrote about his own, startling tract, 'is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right.'

Just over fifteen years later, Postman's possibility is our reality. How else could someone like George Dubya become president of the most powerful country on earth with hardly anyone except Michael Moore noticing that he never even won the election? How else could our own government have got away with 'children overboard' and other lethal furbies if the rest of us weren't drowning in irrelevance? Is it that we really don't know what's going on, or that we don't care, or simply that we are as citizens and individuals too poorly educated to ask the right questions?

In 1984, George Orwell gave us the idea of Big Brother, an omnipresent authority in every citizen's life. In 2001, Channel Ten gave us the reality show of Big Brother, an omnipresent ad vehicle in every consumer's lounge. Thanks to a popular media almost comatose with devotion to this show, we know an awful lot about Sarah Marie and its other micro-celebrities, which is to say, we know nothing.

Television is not exactly education, but it's worth mentioning since for better or worse many Australians view it as their main source of information about the world. To be fair, it's not all crap, either, and a number of thought-provoking and truly educational programs do make it onto especially SBS and the ABC (the surfeit of Britcoms notwithstanding). An education in any case is hardly limited to schools and universities or book learning in general. Some of the most educated people I know, and some of the smartest, had hardly any formal schooling at all.

Thinking of some of my own top educational experiences outside school, I'd list a summer job in the U.S. pumping petrol alongside an ex-Hell's Angel and a redneck cop; growing up among Holocaust survivors; working as a journalist in China; listening to Aboriginal people talk about their land and culture; and befriending asylum seekers here in detention. In each case, I've had to confront hard truths about the way the world works and have learned about different strategies for survival and the search for meaning. At the same time, I know that my ability to learn from experiences like this is aided by what was, on the whole, a pretty good formal education. I'm particularly grateful to my university in the U.S., Brown, where we were encouraged to study ideas and subjects for their own sake, regardless of practical application: I studied Chinese history and language at a time when they seemed completely esoteric (Mao had closed China's doors to the West); I certainly never imagined they'd be of any help in my career.

Earlier this year, Federal Minister for Education Brendan Nelson addressed the Sydney Institute on the subject of 'The Vision of Education – Higher Education Reform'. He said he'd established a 'reference group' to advise him on educational policy and reform. 'In that group,' he said, 'will also be one or two people who know nothing about universities, but who carry the confidence of the everyday, average Australian who's struggling to feed their kids, who's reading often what are described as "tabloids", and looking at Channel 10 news. Consequently, when people know that

we're discussing higher education and how to spend \$6.1 billion of their hard-earned money this year on universities, perhaps there will be some wider perspective other than that of the sector itself.'

Leaving aside the question, what the hell is an 'average Australian', I want to know why Mr Nelson is so keen to be guided in his approach to university reform by people who (by his own description) would have little concern for the nature, purpose or philosophies of higher education and may actually be carrying a burden of resentment against it? The fact is, you cannot achieve vision without wrenching your gaze away from the bottom line. And there is no necessary conflict between the 'average Australian' and the idea of a splendid, well-funded system of tertiary education – quite the opposite.

The point is, education of any kind is too important to leave to bean counters and politicians. The Latin word *educare* means to draw into the light. Just as there are plenty of people who've managed to nap through every lesson they've ever had in the Classroom of Life, there will always be some people who pass through school like bran through the digestive tract: keeping the system functioning, but failing to emerge with anything of value. Yet if it's true that you can lead a student to the light but you can't make him glow, the system has to keep trying or we will be stuck in darkness. Is the real problem that this government, with its constant attacks on educated 'elites', believes that people who think are trouble? As Lord Brougham observed almost two hundred years ago, 'Education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave.'

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