

[18] Friedman Conversation 10-28-04

\*\*\*\*\*

From: Gordon Brown  
To: Milton Friedman  
Subject: Step 5 and Closing  
Date: Thursday, October 28, 2004 1:02 PM

## STEP #5 INDIVIDUALISM AND THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

(Along with CLOSING COMMENTS)

### Introduction

There is probably considerable agreement as to what constitutes a basic school curriculum at the primary level—some variation of reading, writing and arithmetic. Where there is less agreement is with respect to the context in which the content is presented. This context is derived from the assumption being made as to the intended end or purpose of the schooling experience—whether consistent with collectivism or individualism (or some blend of the two).

### COLLECTIVISM: CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES

#### Good Teachers Helping Students To Be Loyal and Productive Citizens

#### As They Strive To Achieve Their Maximum Human Potential

A knowable external world of reality would be uncritically assumed, with “science” presented as one method for accessing the truth of that reality. Human experience would be presented as if we were looking outward and discovering an external world as it exists independently of us—that we are literally dis-covering or uncovering the truth about an external world. Teachers would present “facts” as truths to be memorized and relied upon when making decisions. The curriculum would be heavily laden with value judgments. For example, those individuals who are aware of more truths are “better” than those individuals who know fewer truths. Commendation, such as “good work” or a happy-face diagram would be attached to individual achievement. Language and math classes would be replete with phrases such as “that’s correct” and “you got that right.”

Some students would even be described as “excellent” or “superior.” Students would be told that there is a right way and a wrong way to do everything. Categorical imperatives such as “you must...” and “I need you to...” would be common. Sports and music could be used to teach interpersonal values such as subjugating individual expression to the team achievement.

## INDIVIDUALISM: CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES

### A Value-Free Environment Designed to Maximize Individual Freedom and the Opportunity to Mature

The empiricists’ perspective would be the foundation for all learning. That is, we do not look out of our eyes! Rather, the only world anyone can experience is a world of personal perception always acquired after processing by an individual’s sensory system and always somewhat unique to each individual. In as much as this is the perspective upon which modern-day science is built, teaching would include an understanding of this approach to scientific understanding. The objective of learning would be to provide an ever-widening variety of experiences and the encouragement to seek integrity within each learner’s world of perceptual experience. The learning environment would strive to be value free. Care would be taken to distinguish between “what is” and “what ought to be.” Not only would the assessing of values be left to the individual, but so would the determination as to whether or not to use a value approach to living. While free to discuss the topic of values, actual decisions by individuals would be a personal matter and outside the scope of any public school assessment.

Among the primary goals of a curriculum for individualism would be to provide the student with the opportunity to become familiar with the ideas both common and contrary to the culture. While some students may demonstrate understanding of cultural information more than others, it would never follow to say that one student is “good” while another is a “failure.” And again, a student may demonstrate more “intellectual maturity” than another by having demonstrated a wider and deeper (greater theoretical integrity) understanding of the subject matter. However, while grades may verify a student’s choice to focus on particular achievements, the choice to do so is always an

individual choice and not a subject for social review or judgment—whether to focus on gardening or theoretical physics is a choice exclusively within an individual’s domain and gives rise to a concept of individual identity, which in turn provides the basis for a policy of individual freedom.

Degrees and diplomas would reflect the mastery of identified subject matter (science, history, philosophy, etc.) and the ability to communicate with others (language, the arts, physical education, etc.). Mastery of information would be a matter of understanding ideas common to the culture and the ability to convince others that the understanding has, indeed, taken place. A graduate would have two proclamations: First, s/he has demonstrated an ability to see from the perspective of another; which would be of interest to employers seeking managers. And second, s/he would have been exposed to many perspectives about living—and now has an expanded number of alternatives from which to choose h/er own personal world of experience and identity.

#### THIS COMPLETES MY ODYSSEY

For me, this letter provides closure to what was my “two-minute” question. For over 30 years, I have contemplated the concept of individualism. I never really focused on economics, I just always thought of a free-market economy as a logical extension of individualism. However, for the last 6 months, I have struggled to see if I could work backwards—beginning with a free-market concept and arriving at a concept of individualism. I could not. As I see it, a philosophy of individualism can be easily extended to include a free-market concept, while I fail to see how the reverse could occur. Even if government policy were to impose a free-market economy, at best, the result would be to simply attract those individuals who already embrace individualism, and it is they that would energize and provide the compass for implementing the free-market practice. Others would follow (without thinking about it) simply because the combination (a free market guided by a philosophy of individualism) works to bring about material benefits. My point is that individualism is the foundation and essential precursor to a free-market economy.

Dr. Friedman, what I received out of this “conversation” with you was the opportunity to review and analyze my approach to individualism. For this experience and for how I feel now, I am genuinely grateful to you personally. Perhaps my descriptions never raised above an occasionally fleeting moment of curiosity as far as you were concerned; but I was testing my thinking and became even more confident that a philosophy of individualism (or at least the assumption of one) is the essential beginning point for the following: a political system insuring individual freedom, a useful application of democracy, and a free-market economy.

In this regard, a couple of recent quotes in the Wall Street Journal caught my attention. First, there was the quote (WSJ 9-29-04) attributed to Harvard Professor and Hoover Institute associate, Caroline Hoxby: “The goal [of charter reform] is boosting the performance of all schools by fostering competition and innovation.” As I see it, the critical element will be found in the definition of “boosting.” However defined, it seems to me that authoritarian systems would have no problem in achieving high marks, and I would expect it to have an advantage—a beaten horse will run faster, and a subordinate will be more motivated to learn from the experts. As I see it, school achievement has never been the litmus test for embracing a belief in individual freedom. As for vouchers, they could be a desirable alternative approach to education—given the present strangling of our school system by collectivist-type thinking. However, the voucher system would only become the education of choice if it were coupled with individualism. Home schooling would be another intriguing approach for free-market validating.

The other quote, WSJ 9-3-04, was attributed to you: When asked “What do Nobel Prize winners in economics worry about? You reportedly said “holding down the size and scope of government.” It occurred to me, could you have just as easily said “finding a way to increase government’s respect for individual freedom.” As I see it, “smaller” government, however defined, may be a desirable but not sufficient factor to provide the necessary guidance leading to individual freedom.

As per my style, here are my metaphors for describing the problem I see with advocating a free market or vouchers without linking each of them to a specific concept of individual freedom: It would be like taking a domesticated dog and setting it “free” in the wild. It

would be like gathering a group of homeless together and asking them to build homes for themselves without providing either the architectural plans or the required skill training. And, it would be like encouraging people to board a ship during an Irish potato famine for sailing to the land of plenty—without providing them with either a compass or the provisions necessary to make such a journey. As I see it, it is the philosophy of individualism that provides the guidance and inspiration for (a) implementing a free-market economy or (b) a school voucher system that leads to the American vision of individual freedom. What Socrates reportedly said in *The Republic* (about 80% into Book 8) about democracy [without individualism] could also be applied to the introduction of a free market or school voucher program without individualism : “...so tyranny naturally arises out of democracy....” You made a similar argument in *Free to Choose* (when special interests unite).

Looking forward, Claudia and I will now return to the task of completing the final draft of our book titled “God, Sex, and Politics—It’s All Relative.” This is basically a position statement on the philosophy of individualism. Also, we are setting up a web site ([schoolofcommunication.org](http://schoolofcommunication.org)) to serve as a clearing house for writings—past and future—that address the conceptual basis and application of individualism—maybe we could add a note on economics under our politics chapter.

In closing, I would like to say that if I were to pick one attribute of yours that has most impressed me, it would be your compassion for individual freedom; and, I would add that, it is this particular attribute that I believe has moved the hearts and minds of so many people around the world. Perhaps it was extraordinarily perceptive of you when you said to me: “Why don’t you ask Rose—she is standing right beside you.” Perhaps she would be the one person who would best understand that you are fundamentally a person of strong passion and integrity when it comes to the cause of individual freedom.

Both Claudia and I send our best wishes to you and Rose,

Gordon

P.S. FYI—when I first talked with you, Claudia and I were at the Hoover Institute for

the purpose of talking with Don Meyer about the feasibility of setting up an endowment for continuing the web site and related research, when we are no longer able to do so.