

PERSPECTIVES ON SUDBURY EDUCATION

VOLUME 1

NUMBER 3

OCTOBER 2001

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A note from the editors . . .

The time was 1967. A small group of parents living in the Greater Framingham area had been hunting all over the country for a school that met our requirements. We had travelled far and wide, visited and read about all sorts of places — and had come up empty-handed.

The main thing we all had in common was a deep conviction that the existing educational system would do our children irreparable harm. We felt we had to do whatever was necessary to provide the kind of environment we wished our children to have.

So it was the Sudbury Valley School was founded in 1968.

The starting point for all our thinking was the apparently revolutionary idea that a child is a person, worthy of full respect as a human being. These are simple words with devastatingly complex consequences, chief of which is that the child's agenda for its own life is as important as anyone else's agenda — parents, family, friends, or even the community. In the school we wanted for our children, their inner needs would have to be given priority in their education at every point.

*The Sudbury Valley School Press, *The Sudbury Valley School Experience*, (The Sudbury Valley School Press, 1992)*

The Sudbury Valley School has been the inspiration for the founding of over a dozen schools, both in the U.S.A. and internationally. Some schools, already up and running, have adopted the Sudbury philosophy. The Sudbury Education Resource Network's mission and the intent of *Perspectives on Sudbury Education* is to support the Sudbury model schools and to expand the understanding of the Sudbury model of education. Articles that contribute to that end are accepted, with gratitude, for consideration in this publication. The deadline for the next issue is November 15, 2001. Please send them to the editors:

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The Sudbury Education Resource Network is an independent organization that is neither sponsored by nor under the auspices of any Sudbury model school. *Perspectives* is dedicated to the people who make this extraordinary experience available for the students enrolled in these schools. Thank you.

Only the Hopeful Start Schools

by Nan Narboe, Cascade Valley School

With a show of hands, a dozen parents and teachers voted to start a school where children could work and play without interruption — the way they do at Massachusetts’ Sudbury Valley School. Daniel Greenberg’s *Free at Last* and John Holt’s *Schooling Without Coercion* had convinced us. Students should learn what they want to learn, and learn it in a democratic setting.

“Most educational philosophies are either too permissive or too controlling,” said one woman, like me a mother who ended up working at the school. “I could see where they went wrong, but I couldn’t see a way to combine freedom with responsibility, until I read about SVS.”

We wanted what Sudbury Valley School had and we wanted it in Portland, Oregon. We set to work. We brought Greenberg to town to give a speech — a speech so rousing that one man who heard it stayed up all night, then showed up the next day to work on the school. We adopted Sudbury Valley School’s by-laws as our own, then met weekly, Sundays at 3:00, to compare notes and make decisions. We studied state law. We borrowed money, found a site, set tuition and chose staff, all by majority rule. We held events to attract potential students. Obstacle after obstacle gave way. Proudly we set the date for our school to open, Cascade Valley School, the school we all wanted.

Then the students arrived — and our troubles began. The previously unified group fissured into difference after difference. The language we shared (“self-initiated learning,” “students pursuing their interests without interruption,” phrases appropriated from Sudbury Valley founder Daniel Greenberg) had camouflaged our differences. We had rallied around concepts that we now enacted in amazingly varied, and eventually opposing, ways. Action revealed differences that language had slip-covered. “Initiative” and “interruption” are ideas, interpretations. They exist in the eye of the beholder, not in the external world. They are not real, not in the way that students approaching the door on the first day of school are real. Not in the way that actions are real.

Before the students arrived, I thought everyone at CVS shared my values. I thought everyone wanted what I wanted: students doing whatever interested them (building forts, making music, complaining that they had nothing to do). I thought everyone scorned what I scorned: training children to replace their experience with someone else’s judgment - teachers enthusing “Good jumping!” when young children do what young children naturally do. Or principals determining who “wins” student body elections.

At our school, what to learn would be up to each student. Voting would be real — that is, each student and each member of the staff would have a vote, an equal say, with the majority determining everything from the school’s rules to its staff. There was no clearer way to demonstrate that Cascade Valley School trusted its students’ decisions, trusted its students. Nor could any curriculum be more demanding.

Preview: The summer before the school opened, I got a glimpse of how I thought Cascade Valley would work: The doorbell rang and my four-year-old rushed to the door, excited that people were meeting at our house. Then Julia saw someone she didn’t expect — another committee member had brought along her daughter, also four years old.

“She can’t come in,” said my daughter, pushing the door shut. “She can’t play with my toys. I don’t want Veda in my house. Why is she here?”

“They’re here for my meeting,” I told her, and opened the door. Julia retreated to her room, insisting the other child stay out.

Both Veda’s mother and I took short breaks to comfort our distraught children. Neither of us suggested ways they could solve their dilemma: we hadn’t been asked.

That meeting introduced me to the first parent I had ever met whose commitment to treating children as competent equaled my own, a stance I came to characterize as *The Real*. She did not think

of her daughter as helpless — she saw her as someone with a problem, a problem the child had the resources to solve. (Eventually Veda asked me if I had any toys she could play with. I brought her a stack of my picture books and a wire whisk.)

As the hopeful will, I generalized. I imagined that our meeting depicted values held by everyone starting the school. In fact, it described one of two competing dreams that people had for the school.

Two Dreams: Two dreams draw people to Sudbury Valley’s version of democratic schooling. I call one dream and its proponents The Kind, and I call the other dream and its proponents The Real. The contrasting perspectives, minus each side’s inflammatory language, boil down to this:

The Kind want a school where children are happy and involved, where they are treated well — a kind place. They theorize that the school’s tolerance and understanding will produce students who behave in tolerant and understanding ways.

The Real want a school where students can do something about feeling sad, bored or mistreated — something concrete, something real. They theorize that such a school will produce students who can identify what they want and devise ways to get it.

The Kind emphasize students being, or becoming, kind or happy or good. Proponents of this dream focus on aspects of the Sudbury Valley model like “students pursuing their own interests.” Self-initiated learning fits their anti-authoritarian values and meets their prerequisite that students enjoy themselves. As they see it, developing individuals who feel good about themselves (and whose behavior will then serve the greater good) is the school’s purpose.

The Real believe in self-initiated learning as well, but their definition focuses on what students learn by struggling with problems that matter to them — the reason I neither forced my daughter to share her toys nor suggested ways the other girl could entertain herself. They want the school to promote effectiveness, the capacity to move skillfully from wish to idea to follow-through. In line with their beliefs, The Real champion structures that assure students access to power, structures like the School Meeting, where each student and each member of the staff have a vote. (The School Meeting — pioneered by England’s Summerhill and democratized by Sudbury Valley — determines the school’s rules and expenditures: whether to mend or replace a broken basketball hoop, whether to expel an unruly student, standards for using the school’s computers, cleaning procedures, and so on.)

The Kind, on the other hand, argue that people of different ages have such different skills that it hardly matters whether everyone is entitled to vote at the School Meeting. They see the students as disadvantaged, despite their numerical capacity to outvote the staff. The Kind therefore try to soften outcomes they see as cruel and The Real see as consequential: outcomes that derive from reality and not the age or the verbal skill of the miscreant. The students running a snack bar included a sticky-fingered pal in their operation — and lost their money. A student threw a bike in the school’s pond — and got suspended: not for getting angry (that was his business) but for doing something that endangered the school’s lease. Divisions like The Kind and The Real are artificial, of course, but labeling our differences helps me parse Cascade Valley’s tumultuous first year. The Kind and The Real provide an overview, an orientation. I need one. I’m still startled by the year’s vehemence, by differences so extreme they split the school. I’m still stunned that a group of people who succeeded, against long odds, in opening a school ended up drawing a line in the dirt and slugging it out.

Differences: Differences between The Kind and The Real surfaced as soon as the school opened. Interventions that seemed reasonable to The Kind, with their focus on happiness — “redirecting” a bored child, for instance, by suggesting something fun to do — horrified The Real. Boredom is instructive, they insisted. Some choices lead to tedium, others to fascination. Disengaged students need time, not rescue: time to discover which choices lead where. Hands off!

But The Real also maintained that staff who withheld their opinions and their votes, to “see what the students wanted” were patronizing them. Students would not become more adept, per The Kind’s intention, as a result of the adults around them deskilling. Besides, they urged, democracy requires

everybody's best efforts: a ten-year-old student's best efforts, a forty-year-old staff member's best efforts. The Kind countered that the school's unfamiliar structure overwhelmed students; unless adults took a back seat, students would not speak. Over and over, the staff debated the difference between responsiveness and rescue, between clarity and rigidity — debates that did more to develop positions than to resolve questions.

Parents did more than debate. The Kind among them attacked the hands-off members of the staff, those who most treasured students working things out for themselves. Why were they ignoring children who needed their help? Should a school even *expose* children to adults who don't care about them?

One parent made the Orwellian suggestion that we require attendance at School Meeting "so students will realize they're free to decide what goes on at the school."

More than philosophy was at stake. The amount of adult intervention advocated by The Kind was anathema to those who most valued student initiative. The Real's belief that unhappy students would, eventually, do something about their discontent required The Kind to tolerate levels of distress they considered inhumane. Neither side, in good conscience, could go along with the other. From the day it first opened, September 7, 1991, Cascade Valley School was on a collision course.

Factions: People on both sides hoped the school could find a middle ground. People on both sides hoped we were fighting about tone and not content.

The Kind thought those on the other side talked tougher than was called for, "But maybe that's how they sound under stress" — a kindly assumption.

The Real questioned whether they weren't being too hard on their counterparts. "It's not as though we know how to implement these unfamiliar ideas any better" — a realistic consideration.

We could have used two columns, one labeled *Kind*, and the other *Real*, to tally most first-year votes. We debated everything from these competing perspectives — hours, salaries, scholarships, the authority of the School Meeting itself. Like the oil and vinegar in a homemade vinaigrette, our positions separated out over time, becoming distinct and visible.

Even if the entire group had been of like mind, we would still have had problems. The line between freedom and license is hard to find. Finding it while learning a new paradigm is even harder. Adding to the difficulties inherent in starting a school was the tendency of the dominant culture to either indulge children or control them. We wanted a third option: genuine choice and with it, genuine responsibility. We frequently slid past it. We did what beginners do, we lurched our way toward consistency.

"When students mess up, there should be repercussions."

"No, not 'repercussions.' There should be 'learning experiences.'"

"Wait a minute, the entire incident is none of our business."

"As soon as something affects the rest of the school, it becomes our business."

Our meetings looked like tennis matches, with heads (and positions) swiveling from side to side. Everyone took a while to find the target zone. This was highlighted by the message another member of the first year staff left on my answering machine: "Driving home, I understood why you got so annoyed with the position I took in today's School Meeting. You were right. I should have confronted the students involved. Thanks."

My face flushed as I listened. She had left me the message I had intended to leave her the week before, when we had landed on opposite sides of a different issue. On the way home, I had realized that she was right.

Flip-flopping between positions is typical of beginners. It takes a long time to practice any methodology consistently or well, and even longer to feel it in your bones. Starting a democratic school is a doozie of a training program, the steepest learning curve I know. None of us had grown up with what we wanted our students to have. We had to create a democratic school inside ourselves as well as

externally: in the office, in the cubby room, beside the pond. In conversations with students, with parents, with one another. It took us the better part of a year. It took that long to begin to distinguish between supporting students and indulging them, to recognize the difference between predictability and inflexibility. Not that we were skilled, but we had begun to think in ways we did not — and could not — think in September, when we opened the school.

Mistakes: Cascade Valley School made an impressive number of mistakes its first year. We recovered from enough of them that the school is still standing. A mistake that will have consequences past the year 2000 was assuming that our first-year enrollment would top 32 students. All our finances were based on that goal, one we didn't meet until our fourth year. As a result, we're considerably in the hole. It's a mistake I find endearing, a memento of the ignorant enthusiasm it takes to start a school. We fully expected parents to flock to the school, eager to enroll their children. After all, we were in love with the idea, we were turning our lives inside out to start a radical, democratic, initiative-based school. My dismay over the battles of our first year has receded. So has the chagrin I feel about certain of my contributions to them. What I feel instead is calm conviction. Starting a school is so sizable a task, and democratic values so little practiced, that no SVS-inspired group could possibly stay out of trouble. Maybe no group with democratic ambitions can, whether the group is the local food co-op or the U.S. Senate.

Happiness: Some adults seem drawn to democratic schooling by visions of kindly, contented, justice-loving children. As soon as our first-year students found meetings boring, elections difficult or the school's requirements demanding, The Kind got frantic. In their version of a well-run school, nothing would make anyone unhappy. Unhappiness proved that something was wrong. The clearer their position came, the greater my amazement. I thought democracy assured everyone's occasional unhappiness — its virtue lay in spreading it around.

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I thought the purpose of the school's Judicial Committee was, in a sense, unhappiness. The J.C. had the job of communicating the larger group's unhappiness with certain behaviors. It had the job of protecting individual rights while upholding the school's rules — partly by figuring out, case by case, what would make rule-breakers unhappy enough to change their behavior. Sentenced to replace the 35-cent pencils they had appropriated, two of our younger students "forgot" to satisfy their sentence for days on end. They made new excuses daily: they didn't have their allowances, their mothers hadn't taken them to the store. The Judicial Committee extended the date for completing their sentence, and again they delayed, coming up with still more excuses. The J.C. discussed their non-compliance, and someone proposed yet another extension. Then one of those serving on J.C. (a pre-teen who had himself resisted J.C.'s authority when he first came to the school) exclaimed, "Wait a minute! They're ignoring us and that's not right. Let's come up with a sentence that matters to them." So the Judicial Committee excluded the students from the sandbox until they replaced the pencils, which they did that very afternoon. Those testing how much they can get away with are engaged in important learning; so are those — 3 or 4 students and a member of the staff — whose job it is to hold the line.

Politics: Proponents of The Kind elected students to school offices because "they need the experience," not because they would get the job done. The Kind seemed to find politics distasteful and politicking contemptible, whereas The Real — well, The Real thought politicking got things done. When The Real voted to suspend students for conduct they thought jeopardized the school, The Kind worried that the students would then view the school as "uncaring." Proponents of The Real expected people of all ages to learn from their mistakes, lobby for what they wanted, and go along with what the majority decided. Students who argued that the Judicial Committee should not charge them with violating a rule, for example, generally pleaded "guilty" if they were charged anyway. The majority had spoken. One man remained calm while the group passed proposals he utterly opposed. He thought

sorry outcomes would follow, but he also thought that the outcomes he predicted would change future votes. Either that, or he'd discover that his predictions were off. The Real's commitment was to a specific way of doing things — democratic governance, majority rule — and not to the results of a given vote or to a psychological outcome like “happiness” or “empowerment” or “harmony.”

Assessment: The Real supported initiative-based learning because they had never seen anything else work. They told stories about no longer remembering subjects they had been forced to learn, and still remembering ones they had chosen for themselves. For The Real, students who complained of boredom were detoxifying, recovering from years of forced feeding. Next they would figure out what interested them; eventually they would do something about it. The same way that members of the staff, equally new to democratic schooling, would eventually discover how to do their jobs.

It took everyone a long time to realize that those assessing the school were coming up with different evaluations because they — we — were using different criteria. And different memories: The Kind's schooling stories focused on subjects they didn't value at the time, but now were glad that someone had insisted they learn. The Kind saw suffering where others saw struggle. They then invented schemes to entertain students they thought were bored, arguing that before students could make choices, they had to “be exposed to what's out there.” Doubtful that student inertia would recede, they demanded proof that it had. In the meantime, they argued, staff should keep students occupied. Over time, it became apparent that The Kind and The Real used words like “initiative” and “self-selection” to mean different things:

One mother screamed that the CVS staff had refused to teach her six-year-old to read. The staff thought the boy had plenty of moxie. He had asked for our help with other projects. Since he hadn't asked anyone on the staff to help him learn to read, we figured that reading was the mother's agenda. She thought the staff was tangled in derivative theory, and short on simple common sense. After all, whenever she asked her son, “Don't you want to learn to read?” the boy always answered, “Yes.”

The mother's reasoning struck me as goofy at the time. Now ours seems equally suspect. The boy could have been learning to read on his own, or from other students. Our reasoning illustrates the power of cultural assumptions, especially those so widely held that they are rarely named, like “children learn to read from adults.” Although Sudbury Valley's literature specifically states that few of their students have ever used adult assistance in learning to read, our habits of mind had not yet shifted. More importantly, we did not know that they had not yet shifted.

This phenomenon underlies my wariness when people with brief exposure to the SVS model — a couple of years, say — want to “improve” on it. Ideas that are out of the ordinary take a long time to understand, and even longer to apply intelligently. I therefore assume that “reformers” are trying to make the SVS model familiar, more compatible with their personal values and/or the values of the larger culture. I also assume that such reformers do not recognize that familiarity is what motivates them.

Those of us who spent the year “holding the line,” insisting that we do things the ways they're done at Sudbury Valley, did not claim that using Sudbury's methods would assure literacy, for example. We just knew that other methods — whatever their claims — wouldn't either. As pragmatists, we rejected them. Besides, The Real's passion was not for students acquiring specific skills. Our passion was for students running their lives.

Accusations: What The Real lacked in rhetoric they made up in obstinance, repeatedly insisting that some principles were central to the school and not to be tinkered with. Charges that they were inflexible or “just copying Sudbury Valley” did not shake them, although accusations that they were damaging children did. Some of the bruises each faction inflicted on one another came from the crucially different ways they evaluated the school. The Kind saw children who were happy, or not, and used that assessment to form their opinions. They were for the people and procedures they believed made children happy; they were against those they believed made children unhappy. For them, what to

do was clear and the time for change long past.

The Real saw things differently. They saw vibrant children (sometimes happy and sometimes unhappy) who were doing well despite the school's first-year fumbles. Moreover, The Kind and The Real handled their concerns in diametrically different ways. When The Kind perceived that something was wrong, they urged change, the sooner the better. The Real responded to similar situations by taking a deep breath and trying to do, more skillfully, what they had been doing all along. They believed that applying Sudbury Valley's procedures (even if ineptly) would prove, at a future date, to have been the right thing to do. The Real had no interest in starting a school per se, only in starting a school like Sudbury Valley School. And for them, it was too soon to tell whether Cascade Valley would succeed.

Anxiety: People who found resistance where they had expected cooperation, and anxiety where they had imagined contentment were understandably upset. Worse, they felt tricked. The Kind had anticipated a school where happy children achieved conventional goals without coercion. That's what they'd signed on for.

"My child isn't learning to read" — apprenticing somewhere exciting, going on enough field trips — "and you don't even care!" such parents fumed. Their expectations had been thwarted, and they were too upset to consider the possibility that their expectations — and not the school — needed to change. They had no patience for theories that children who spent as much time as they wanted building forts in the blackberry bushes, the year's favorite activity, were increasing their capacity to focus, a capacity that would serve them whatever they decided to learn next. How to read, for instance. What they saw (kids spending all their time playing, staff refusing to require even a single course) upset them.

The Real had their bad moments too — the first year was hard on everyone but the students — but they tended to read anxiety, including their own, as a sign the school was on track. Allowing young people to take charge of their lives spooks most people. So does choice, if the choices include students "wasting time" or getting into trouble. "Anxiety," pleaded The Real, "is the cost of living outside generally-held assumptions. For the school's offer of freedom to be genuine, we have to tolerate our own discomfort."

"Discomfort is supposed to spur change. Greenberg says so right here," replied parents who believed that their distress signaled general wrack and ruin. Since they were uncomfortable, the school should change. People like me, reading the same literature, had envisioned student discomfort motivating students to change. It was the "divided by a common language" issue yet again. Each reader had pictured the school that fit that reader's history and politics and parenting practices, which is the danger of starting a school from books. Anxiety fills the gap between what people imagine will happen and what actually happens. Reading Greenberg, people got the idea that students at Sudbury Valley School are busy all the time. Students at Sudbury Valley School *are* busy all the time, but they are busy doing whatever interests them: playing guitar, dozing in the sun, turning cartwheels, hanging out. Greenberg describes them as busy because, in his eyes, they are. He describes them as learning prodigiously for the same reason.

The parents who read Greenberg or attended one of our Open Houses formed more conventional images. If science was their Johnny's favorite subject, they pictured Johnny spending all his time at CVS doing science. They formed images that assumed limited alternatives: science *or* English, reading *or* math. But at Cascade Valley School, Johnny had a different set of alternatives. He could wander off by himself if he felt like it, read to a little kid, organize a game of tag or a change in the school's rules. He could pursue whatever interested him, including topics generally thought of as "science." When the school didn't match people's internal images — images that none of us knew were images but believed were uniformly-held goals — we became anxious.

"Why not post a list of the classes that staff members know how to teach? Then students would know what's available."

“Don’t you see? A list like that would define learning as something that teachers organize; it would label specific activities as the useful ones.”

Something was wrong, our nervous systems thrummed. Wrong! Unaware that part of what felt so wrong came from inside us, we looked to our surroundings. Something was wrong out there — wrong with the school, wrong with the model, wrong with the people on the other side. Specific things were wrong, of course: CVS was a start-up operation. But much of everyone’s distress, I now believe, came

She would have a haven, protected from the “more is better and earliest is best” thinking that dominates contemporary education.

from the difference between what people expected and what they got. Only the hopeful start schools. We were all hopeful: the parents who had enrolled their children, the students themselves, those who signed on as first-year staff. We had promised ourselves a wonderful new school — forgetting that voracious anxiety accompanies anything new. Some who came to Cascade Valley School delighted by the idea that students would choose their own activities, couldn’t handle the rest of the package: votes that didn’t go the way they thought they should go, students not getting what they wanted on the first

try. They had signed on for kind and happy.

Lifetime Applicability: I had signed on for Sudbury Valley School’s tough-mindedness, for its emphasis on students’ rights and its equal emphasis on their responsibilities. I had signed on for adults who respected play, who appreciated independence, who didn’t need to be needed. I had signed on for annually elected staff in place of tenured teachers and entrenched bureaucracies. At last, education reform that amounted to something.

It wasn’t that I had some perverse attachment to difficulty for its own sake. I just couldn’t see much difference between what others claimed were Good Schools and Bad Schools. True, conventional schools were meaninglessly rigid but progressive schools were just as meaninglessly flexible. In neither case could students use the schools as practice for the rest of their lives. Adults don’t have to raise their hands to go to the bathroom, as Bad Schools force their students to do. But they’re not coaxed into playing nicely or given stickers for following the rules either, as in schools that call themselves Good. For me, the hope that Cascade Valley School would guarantee my four-year-old a childhood was sufficient reason to start a school. She would have a haven, protected from the “more is better and earliest is best” thinking that dominates contemporary education. She would have a variety of people, including adults, to study. She would learn that rules are to be obeyed and rules are to be changed, that individuals have rights and so do groups. That is, she would learn the perspective and skills American citizens need.

The First Year: I had expected students to be on edge most of the first year, incredulous they had so much freedom, worried there was some catch. I had expected adults to sympathize while holding the line. Wrong. Most students quickly found ways to feel comfortable. Four- and five-year-olds who began their school careers at Cascade Valley were busy and happy from the beginning. School-savvy older students manipulated as many of the staff as they could, and looked after themselves the rest of the time. Even the students who daily pleaded for rides to the deli seemed okay with “Are you kidding?” as the standard reply. They were taking a sounding as much as finagling a ride.

Adults, on the other hand, lost it. Staff and parents had — and caused — far more trouble than students. Adults of the kindness persuasion raged when their discontent didn’t spur reform. I raged too. We had agreed, I kept insisting, we had agreed — on philosophy, on procedure. The Real mistook their passions for the group’s desires. The Kind mistook their anxieties for the school’s deficiencies. Everyone felt betrayed. Each faction had imagined that everyone supported whichever was their version of the school: The Kind, The Real. Each tried to convince the other. Each found their own data compelling and their own suggestions sensible.

“Students are suffering,” declared The Kind, “they need more structure, more encouragement, more opportunities.”

“Students are struggling,” countered The Real, “they need more time, more trust, fewer interruptions.”

Conflict dominated Cascade Valley School’s first year. Not only did the two versions of the school differ (each, of course, claiming Sudbury-derived authority) but neither felt they could live with what the other wanted. Finally, the faction I’ve called The Kind withdrew their children, reducing the school’s enrollment by a third. The school clicked into place the next day. Students whose parents believed that children required constant supervision (and whose behavior proved their point) were gone. What remained, by and large, were students who had been reared to behave responsibly.

Second Ascent: The year was brutal — I have never been through anything like it. But then, I had a long way to fall: I had the idealistic belief that I had found a group of adults whose passion for democratic education and self-initiated learning matched my own. In fact, people ran for staff because they needed a job. In fact, parents enrolled their children because the school they preferred had a waiting list or charged higher tuition.

I kept notes from the very beginning, hoping to help others start SVS-inspired schools. I pictured a how-to book, with chapters on public relations, on fund-raising, on hiring first-year staff. I played with *Second Ascent* as a title. “Second ascent” is the mountaineering term for climbing a mountain that’s been scaled once before. Second ascents are easier, experienced climbers say, because you know the mountain can be climbed. As our first year got harder and meaner, my hopes for the book constricted. Finally, all that remained was the title.

Then I learned there was another book entitled *Second Ascent*. Its author was a man mutilated in a climbing accident. He kept trying to scale world-class mountains with what remained of his arms and legs.

“That pretty much describes us and what we’re trying to do,” I muttered, mouth set in a grim line. This, six months after we opened — that’s how embattled I felt. That’s how hard it is to start a school. How hard, at any rate, for people with hopes and illusions, and who but the hopeful ever start anything?

Long Distance: Phone conversations with Sudbury Valley School’s founders helped me survive our contentious first year. The day after the school split, I telephoned my mentors. I told them that I had always assumed that starting a school would be hard.

“But if you had tried to tell me how hard, I wouldn’t have believed you — I simply did not know that anything got this hard. Luckily, my positive expectations were off too. Everything about the school, both bad and good, has been far more intense than anything I could have imagined.”

They knew what I meant, they said. That’s how they had spent the past twenty-some years. “You mean,” I squeaked, “it’s always like this? This combination of worse-than-I-could-have-imagined and better-than-I-could-have-hoped, and sometimes I’m wrong and sometimes the other person’s wrong but after a while, it doesn’t matter and you keep going because the school has to be there for your child?”

They started to laugh. “We knew you had no idea what you were getting yourself into. But we didn’t think you would have understood, if we had tried to tell you.”

Could they have told me? Would I have understood? What if they had warned me that concerns about “kindness” frequently mask condescending views of children? What if they had predicted that I was so accustomed to adult privilege that I wouldn’t know how to proceed in its absence? What if they had cautioned me that few of the people who claim to support a radical concept have the conviction it takes to follow through? What if they had warned me: once parents see what student choice looks like in operation, all hell will break loose?

Would their admonitions have alarmed me? Absolutely.

Would they have stopped me? I hope not.

Looking Back: The image that stays with me is this one: students rushing outside to dance on the school lawn in the first hard rain. The rain, mixed with hail, came down at a slant. The rain looked like the drawings of rain in children's books. It hit the ground so hard it bounced back up. First a few of the older boys, then several girls, then a mix of the younger students ran out into the rain, to whirl and slide and dance. Looking up, getting soaked, they laughed as the rain pelted them. The students paused to catch hailstones, marveling at their size, then went back to twirling. Dancing. Then and there, I stopped weighing the hardships of our first year. I was where I wanted to be, on the porch at Cascade Valley School — giddy, exhausted, grateful for my good fortune.

Five years later, I finally understand why the image stays with me: You get drenched starting a school. Pelted. Stung. But the rain that comes down harder than you ever thought rain could come down, bounces back up. Dance.

A note from the editor:

Sadly, ten years later, Cascade Valley School did not reopen in the fall of 2001.
