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Bill Ayers

In 1965 I was arrested along with dozens of others for sitting-in and disrupting the operations of the Selective Service—the draft board—in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Convicted of disorderly conduct, I spent ten days in the county jail where I got to know some wonderful people, including folks who'd just founded a small free school affiliated with the Civil Rights Movement. I decided to have a look. I walked out of jail and into my first teaching job. My peculiar and twisty pathway into the classroom made an indelible mark in my mind that forever linked teaching to social justice.

The Children's Community was founded by three energetic young mothers who wanted to both create a space of peace and racial harmony for their own kids and at the same time launch a model that could impact schools more generally. I'd never seen any place like it—every child seemed to be engaged in a project or an activity or a book, the place was fairly buzzing with lively energy, but no adult was giving orders or driving things forward, and no one seemed concerned—or even to notice—that there was no schedule, no timetable, no uniform set of tasks to be accomplished. The atmosphere was calm purposefulness, unlike any school I'd attended.

The school director tutored me in an alternative idea about teaching driven by a belief that in a democracy the aim of every school ought to be the creation of free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality. "In this school," she said, "we teach democratic living by living democratically; we don't want to learn about democracy so much as we want to learn *from* democracy." This theme carried through in every other aspect of school life. We learned from nature rather than about nature, from participating in community life rather than looking at community from a distance. The school credo was this: an experience in freedom, integration, and democracy.

The school stood against racism and segregation, authoritarianism and cynicism, violence and war, irrelevance and fatalism and avoidance. We thought of ourselves as pioneers in a movement to remake the world, and we knew we had to become new men and new woman if we were to succeed. We had to shed as best we could all the baggage from the larger culture—racist baggage, the baggage of capitalist culture—in order to free ourselves to free the nation.

The materials and activities and opportunities in the classroom were supplemented by a stream of trips into the community—to the bakery and the orchard, the fire station and the county jail, the lake and the machine shop, a union hall, a picket line, a music studio—and a parade of community visitors into the school. Learning was taken to be a constantly buzzing dialogue with one another and with the world.