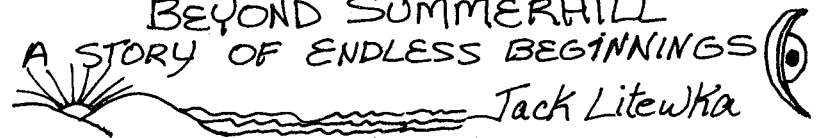




BEYOND SUMMERHILL
A STORY OF ENDLESS BEGINNINGS 
Jack Litewka

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction:

A family I knew told me that a number of people were getting together with the intention of setting up a free-alternate-street school in Manhattan's Upper West Side. The idea for the school began when Sema Salit was walking out of a depressing meeting at a supposedly liberal private school her daughter attended. She decided that if she and her daughter couldn't find a school capable of meeting the needs of her daughter, she would create one. And that's what was happening.

The family I knew invited me to attend an "organizational" meeting, thinking that I might want to teach at this new school. And if not, that I might be interested anyway. And perhaps helpful.

So I went.

I went with excitement. I went with hope. The little I had heard had made me think that this might, just might, be the kind of school I'd been dreaming of, fighting for on the two campuses I had been causing trouble at over the last six years.

But I also went with thick clots of scar tissue. Meetings, strategy sessions, strike-committee gatherings and all their brothers and sisters were too often a drag—the breeding ground for ulcers and ennui.

But I went anyway, having always been a sucker for a poker game in an overcrowded, smoke-filled room. I was just praying it wasn't going to be a long night at the theater.

Setting:

A spacious Upper West Side apartment. Obviously not a poor home, but not gaudy rich either. Thirty people—students covering all the teens, their parents, interested parties—sitting,

standing, spread on the floor, munching pretzels and chips, rinsing with soda or beer. Almost entirely white middle class. Not stodgy types. The kids were wild and woolly, quick in movement and speech, excited. The parents appeared unembalmed by adulthood, intelligent, creative, self-possessed. The potential teachers were, eh, um . . . well, groovy.

All were hopeful, some desperate (for reasons I didn't know yet), and all bewildered at the very reality of their being here to do something none of them had ever done, ever even thought of doing before.

Action:

Late arrivals. Lots of chatter. Friends saying hello. Doorbell rings. Charlie, the obese poodle, skidding across the wood floor to scare the people off. Introductions, formal and individual.

And when everybody who should have been there, could have been expected to be there, was there, the meeting began. For the benefit of newcomers (and this is when I realized there had been other meetings), a briefing was given.

How had this all started? Some children, some parents, sometimes both in the same household, were disenchanted with public and private schools. What was being taught. How was it being taught, if it was being taught. Some threatened suspensions of students because they were "problematic," which translates into being perceptive, alive, "difficult" in class, or political.

What had been discussed/done? Many things had been discussed, played with, considered. Nothing done.

During the early part of the meeting I observed. Who said what? Who reacted to it and how? Was the group unified? Committed? Willing to take risks?

I crushed pretzels and digested it all. And got upset. And put in my two bits when my brain couldn't stand any more. I heard all the old sad songs. Admissions policy. Ethnic tensions. Racial/cultural percentages. Control of curriculum. Realities of finance. Hiring and firing of teachers. Children versus parents. Youth versus adult. Political distrust.

My yoga friends would have said "bad karma." But I was

hoping (the uninnocent fool for the *n*th time?) that these worms creeping under the skin would be pulled out, dissected, examined, understood.

Halfway through the meeting I realized I was listening to the same record that had been played at previous meetings. And no one seemed able to change it. Disagreements erupted among parents as to what was good and proper for their children. The kids snuck in an occasional left jab. The adults began to dominate the conversation more and more. The kids became silent, bored, abject, downtrodden—the student as nigger all over again, but worse, the student also as offspring.

No hope, me thought. White middle-class people with white middle-class priorities, perspectives, and historical shit in the fan. It was as easy to envision this group of people establishing (good word, no?) a creative, energy-absorbing educational environment as it was to imagine a huge oak tree growing in your footprint.

[But it happened, you see. And it's a good story. It happened, but not once and then forever. It happened all the time, once and again. Must continue to happen each time anew. And the heroes of the story are the students.]

CHAPTER TWO

Setting:

Identical to Chapter One.

Action:

The meeting began with a very brief (thank god) recap of the previous meeting and the agenda for this evening was read. The agenda included all the items that had been dealt with—unresolved—at the last meeting. About now I was damning myself for not having had some warm milk and two Alka-Seltzer before leaving my apartment, but I was emotionally prepared for a long, tedious, unproductive evening.

Somewhere in the heavens I knew the big man in the sky was putting on the same long-playing record. And we were off for another evening of fun and games.

But something was different. At the last meeting the people were clustered in families, hens brooding over their chicks,

and the roosters just brooding (this may sound like male chauvinist observation, but it's what I predominantly saw). At this meeting, the nuclear family had disintegrated (three cheers!). But not just randomly, socially disintegrated. The kids were grouped on the floor. I may not be a sociologist, but I've observed group dynamics long enough to know that the molecules in this room tonight were different substances from the molecules at the previous meeting. And on the strength of one year of college chemistry, I was hoping for a different reaction.

And lo and behold, for once my education didn't fail me. The kids had obviously been frustrated by the adults at the first meeting I had gone to. Perhaps they had just gathered together in despair and for consolation. But it became evident that they had talked among themselves and had decided they weren't going to tolerate another adult chauvinist meeting like the last one.

Early in the meeting, one of the students spoke up. Interestingly, it was one of the younger ones.* And what she said silenced the adult world (no mean feat) and made them shudder a bit. An accurate but less eloquent paraphrase of her statement would be:

"This school is supposed to be for us. We were all going to work together, but it was going to be, supposed to be, *our* school. Not our school the way *you* (adults) imagined it, but *our* school. And every time we say something, you interrupt us, or shout us, or condescendingly switch the subject to what you think is important. And if that's the kind of shit you're going to pull, we don't want any part of it."

(Implied was the knowledge that if the kids weren't going to be in this school, *their* school, they weren't going to be in any school, and that wasn't something these parents were ready to deal with. And this is a cause of some of the desperation I had noticed earlier.)

*This was the first time, but not the last, that this group of kids contradicted many of the standard generalizations of how kids get along, significance of age, etc.

Silence. The kind two people on a first date sitting at a table over coffee can't stand. A few throat-clearing sounds. One parent muttering, "they're right." Adult eyes, sad like bad dogs caught in mischief, apologizing. A suggestion to the chairman that the speaking order be one kid, one adult, one kids, one adult. A few kids saying, wisely, that that's not natural nor the point. A few hems and haws. And the meeting continued. At first, the parents controlled themselves, polite, considerate (though they never meant to be otherwise), listening to the kids. Later, the new habit wearing off, going back to their old ways, dominating, out-talking, making the kids' school their school again.

Disheartening, but still a vast improvement over the first meeting. The kids had made their stand, and were capable of making it again. Next time, probably, with greater strength.

This meeting was also a step forward in other respects. Everyone knew each other better. First names were heard all the time. We all knew more about each other's backgrounds and could put that knowledge into whatever equation was needed at a given time. And, by and large, we all liked each other as people.

A more significant development was the emergence of a few issues, among the many, as crucial. Disturbing, difficult to deal with, friction-causing issues. Two in particular: the racial/cultural composition of the school and the degree to which the school would be "experimental."

Given the history of America, it's no surprise that the racial/cultural question was the most volatile. Following is a list of a priori assumptions that a number of people had made about the nature of the school-to-be.

1. The school would be a community school, located in the ethnically mixed community of Manhattan's Upper West Side.
2. The school would be relevant to the needs of this community and be beneficial to both the students and to the community as a whole.
3. That the admissions policy of a free elementary school in this neighborhood would serve as a model—

viz., a one-third, one-third, one-third ethnic breakdown of black, Puerto Rican, and white students.

For a while it seemed to me that everyone agreed with these ground rules. It became apparent, as the meeting progressed, that there were many people who had doubts about these assumptions and a few who were out and out against them. But everyone was reluctant to bring up the subject. Danger Zone. Nothing less than a festering sore. And when these touchy areas were mentioned, a lot of nervous, heated, defensive, apologetic, and political comments were generated. So the issue was raised and dropped, raised and dropped, like hail forming, and the meeting turned to other matters.

When it became obvious that nothing could be accomplished until racial/cultural questions were resolved, a few brave people said just that. That we were going nowhere. That we had to confront this issue in all its blood and gore. And the sooner, the better.

First some hedging. Then the storm was unleashed. The positions came fast and furious, attached to complex questions. What does it mean to be relevant? What are the kids' needs? What are the needs of the community? How can we talk about ethnic balance if there were no black people and only one Puerto Rican in this room of white middle-class people? Can the kids be expected to deal with the social, political, philosophical questions-situations brought on by attempting ethnic balance?

No simple answers. And it wasn't going to be resolved tonight. But it wasn't going to be avoided any longer.

And as for discussing the degree to which this school was going to be "experimental"—maybe next time.

CHAPTER THREE

Setting:

Largely identical to Chapter Two. The group had settled down to a number of people who consistently attended. A few parents had dropped out. The defining quality of their nonparticipation was a difference in style and flexibility. The dropout parents wanted to be "reasonable," "sensible," dependent on

old models, cautious—the kind of approach that was untenable to the kids and to a growing number of adults. They wanted an old-type liberal school, with a few new streamlined methods, specially adapted to their "peculiar" or "special" children.

The kids of the dropout parents continued to come, if not with the blessing, at least with the resignation of their parents. Most likely, the parents didn't know what else to do. If their kids didn't go to this school, if this school didn't materialize, they (as parents) were in big trouble.

So spring training was over. And the ball club was ready for the start of the season. A long season. Where every game is a new beginning.

Action:

Not long after the warm hellos and happy chatter, the lava spewed again. Rising like Moby Dick. Chartable, dependable, insistent. The Ethnic Question. The Great American Question. Mankind's Question. And I was getting depressed, thinking how pitifully understaffed (a classic establishment view) we were to tackle this leviathan. How we thirty people—decent, thoughtful, well-meaning, with inevitable prejudices—how we thirty people, who under the surface were, like all people, a quivering mass of jelly, how we thirty people were going to lay this question to rest.

So other matters were talked about. Like a warm-up. The toughie would come later.

Again, the discussions were predominantly among the adults. It wasn't long before one of the kids spoke up. The same story, he told them. You're cutting the kids out, being overbearing, not listening sincerely. Again, a silence in the adult world. Discussion. The question: how to overcome an ingrained pattern of adults being masters over youth? A suggestion, by no means a solution to the problem, was made. Let there be a separate "Children's Caucus" and a separate "Adult's Caucus." An agenda would be agreed on. Then the groups would meet separately. Reconvene when the topics had been covered. And a spokesman from each group would relate the progress of their meeting to the united body. Everyone agreed it was worth a try. So the adults stayed in the civilized living room, furnished with

comfortable couches and chairs, beer, and ashtrays. The kids trooped off into a bedroom in the rear part of the house.

The adult meeting, sadly enough, was much the same as when the kids had been present. Which was disturbing. And I was sure that the kid's caucus was a whole new world for them. Not being a student, I stayed in the living room, feeling cheated. I knew the tenor in this room. And thought the other meeting just had to be more interesting. But such is the fate of one's age. So . . . the Ethnic Question. The general feeling was: it would be great to have an ethnic balance. But, and these were significant buts:

1. Could we (notice the "we," as if we all alone would do it), with limited staff and limited or nonexistent funding, meet the varied educational and emotional needs of three very different community bodies?
2. How would we go about getting black and Puerto Rican families interested and involved in what we were doing? And would the school already be so white-middle-class in orientation by the time this involvement was sought after, that it would discourage the black and Puerto Rican families from becoming interested and participating?

There was much discussion. Countless examples. Agonizing soul-searching. And finally a few generally shared sentiments emerged. Always with exceptions.

Answer to question number one: No, we couldn't meet the needs of all the participants adequately. Yes, anyone from any racial, cultural, or religious group was welcome. But we weren't capable of undertaking the conscious planning of it.

Answer to question number two: This was largely supplied by a very perceptive Puerto Rican man, a leader in his community, who was friendly with a few of the participating families. He said it would be very difficult to convince Puerto Ricans to enroll their children in an experimental school. A school that might not be accredited. That might not teach college-required courses. That wasn't geared to college entrance. That would undermine their children's chances of climbing out of the ghetto.

A number of adults had held this view before it was stated this directly. More agreed now, both because of who had said it, how he had said it, and the logic of its substance. It was agreed that pretty much the same argument would hold true for black parents. And there was no question that the school, as it was being envisioned, was going in the direction of meeting the needs of the white middle-class kids gathered here.

So, with some parents breathing more easily, with some unhappy with the way the issue was resolved, and with some caught between ideals and realities in a difficult world, one major problem had been confronted, dealt with, and resolved.

Oh yes, the kids. Had the adults decided again for them? About two hours had passed since the two separate meetings had begun. And now the kids came back in the living room. They walked in with authority. Sat down. Exchanged confident and reassuring glances. And said they were ready to discuss their discussions.

The adults, feeling good about having gotten through a difficult time, asked the kids how they had done. They responded: we've covered the agenda, though a few ideas need more spelling out. A lot of adult jaws dropped. A good three inches. And then they caught themselves, regained their composure, probably telling themselves the kids did a whitewash job of things.

A spokeswoman from the children's caucus gave a report. Item number one, said simply and straight out, was identical to the parents conclusion on the racial/cultural question. The report continued. Well-thought-out and in surprising detail for such a brief meeting. And the bubble had burst on the adult world. It was now absolutely clear that the kids were completely capable of handling much more than they were ever given credit for. Except by a very few parents. And I was ecstatic.

Of course, I was also prejudiced. I had just completed nineteen continuous years of schooling and had spent the last half-dozen of them confronting presidents, governors, regents, trustees, and faculty committees. I had heard said or implied, over and again, that we students weren't really capable of making decisions in our own interests, for our own benefit. I

knew it was bullshit. I knew it was the rationale of the oppressor. And therefore, even though I liked this group of parents immensely, trusted them, considered a few as friends, my sentiments and experience had emotionally thrown me in with the kids from the beginning.

In a weird way, the adults were also joyful. Apart from sheer amazement, it was (by god) their kids, *their* offspring, who had just performed so responsibly, so perceptively, so wisely, so . . . well, so adult-like! And to boot, it lifted some of the self-imposed burden for the school's success (or failure) off their shoulders.

So, in one fell swoop, the kids had done it. In the adults' ballpark they had outplayed the adults. It was a turning point. It was the point at which the adults *really* understood something that the kids knew all along—it *was* going to be *their* school, the children's school: of, by, and for the children. And nothing less.

And after this, nothing—no meeting, no work project—was ever the same. It was people working together. Not male or female, not old or young, but people. No, it wasn't a rose garden. There were many pressing problems, and others waiting in line. But the *process* of dealing with them was as good as any I'd ever seen.

And so the meeting ended with good momentum. It was agreed that things had to get moving fast now, that months had been wasted. And September was coming fast. And lots had to be done. Fact-finding work, detail work, follow-up work, shit work. Everyone immediately turned to that saving bastard child of all organizations—the committee.

And there were committees. Oh, there were committees. Accreditation and affiliation. Hiring of teachers. Nature of curriculum. Finance. Obtaining of site. Individuals volunteered. Mini-meetings were set up. And the committees were to report back their findings and recommendations at the next general meeting.

Things seemed real. I walked home through a freshening drizzle thinking, for the first time (to my amazement), that this school might actually get off the ground, might really be.

CHAPTER FOUR

Setting:

The same as Chapter Three. Except that everyone talked about the school as if it already existed.

Backstage, the committees were working. As always, the adrenaline came in waves—furious work, sitting on haunches, furious work, sitting on haunches. As always, some people carried more than their share of the load. But it was getting done.

And now, back in the living room with the whole group convened.

Action:

The new Excedrin headache number one concerned the matter of finance. How would we pay for rent, teachers' salaries, supplies, and other institutional paraphernalia? To make this drudgery short, a summary.

1. Tuition: No one liked the idea of mandatory tuition.

And since we might have students from families who couldn't afford tuition, this manner of obtaining funds was out. It was agreed that people should donate what they could. And since many of the parents had been paying hefty tuitions to private schools and were well out of poverty-level incomes, a reasonable cash flow could be expected from the parents.²

2. Grants: Raids on foundations were going to be researched, but we had problems. First, it was already clear that the school's final form and methodology were going to be a bit unconventional.³ Second, we

²This arrangement turned out to be problematic because only a few parents were conscientious about donations. Rent you can cheat on. But not on paying dedicated teachers who, like other living things, must eat.

³How do you tell a foundation, with a straight face, that the school is run by, controlled by, kids? (which is the way things turned out.)

were applying on short notice. And finally, it was a fiscally tight time in America, and foundations were feeling the pinch.

3. Tax-exempt status: This was being worked on. And the chances of obtaining the status seemed good. (But this is just a cash-protective, not a cash-generating, proposition.)
4. Fund-raising events: Social functions, concerts, film showings, booth sales at block parties and festivals, were all mentioned and discussed. None of these would make us rich, unless we decided to sell our souls and nurture and con the fertile checkbooks of the wealthy (which we did not do, though one of the parents said we could pull it off). But it meant a few extra bucks. And when you start at zero, a few smackers is one whole lot of money. Plus it was good for morale, having everyone working on projects throughout the year.

Some readers may be wondering what the kids were doing during all this heavy financial talk, laden at times with specialized vocabulary from the world of financial guile and artistry. They may be beginning to wonder if these kids are super-children.

To relieve such anxiety: no, these teens aren't experienced financial wizards (though they do know more than a thing or two). But almost any fund-raising process involves moral and political considerations, if one is sensitive. And in this area the kids had plenty to contribute. When they weren't familiar with a financial phrase, they asked about it. They tested out their own theories. And they didn't resent the adults doing most of the talking. Like all people, they dislike authoritarianism, be it by adult, parent, teacher, older sibling, governments. They respect knowledge. They don't have any beef with experience. As long as it doesn't condone or create an oppressor and an oppressed. It's that simple. And it's what they should be teaching in universities and aren't.

On other topics, it was back to the old free-for-all. Kids arguing against adults, with adults, against their peers, with their peers.

And about now, everyone was becoming more concerned with what the school was actually going to look like, feel like, be like when it opened in September. And no one knew. Although it was a good bet there would be a strong split along children/adult lines.

And naturally, there was. When some parents started pushing their concepts too strongly, the kids gently and not so gently fought back and let the adults know that they were happy to discuss the matter with anyone, get ideas from everywhere, but it was going to be their choice in the end. So the parents, some taken a bit aback, and some just curious as to what these kids were thinking, asked (and it's a sneaky, aggressive question): what do you envision as a typical day or typical week in your school?

The kids sensed this was a toughie and a potential trap. They might not say exactly what they meant. They might not have thought through a particular aspect or two sufficiently. But their instincts were brilliant because they were honest. They said: they couldn't answer because there had never been a school like the one they envisioned. (Note that—it's an astounding statement because it's true.) They said: we're not pure creatures because a lot has been done to our heads and we'll have a lot of damage to undo. But based on their collectively similar experiences, they were willing to say what the school was not going to be.

1. A room would not be the classroom. The city, New York City, would be the classroom.
2. Teachers wouldn't orate from the mount, stuff heads full of facts. Teachers would be learning too, or they wouldn't be teachers. (This was the first hint that the kids would fight for, and win, control over the hiring and firing of teachers.)
3. No individual would have decision-making powers over the educational environment.
4. Attendance would not be mandatory.
5. Subjects to be studied would have to be meaningful to and desired by the students. (This was the first hint that the kids would fight for, and win, control over curriculum.)

6. That nothing would be structured in a way that might limit alternatives and variations, that would be incapable of dealing with changing adrenaline levels, attitudes, or preferences.
7. Social, visual, personal, political understandings were exactly that. And could not be tampered with by the "institution." If these understandings changed as a result of normal human interaction and learning, that was another story.

For some adults, this was rather strong stuff. It was saying to them: stay out of our way, it's my life, don't mess with my head, my freedom's mine to use.

But by now, many of the parents were ready to deal with what an entirely revolutionary view of an educational environment might be. Others weren't ready for it. And resisted. And the dialogue ensued. Not argument, but dialogue. And the students explained themselves with intelligence, subtlety, and fire. The parents came to understand (how many times would they have to be taught this lesson?) how perceptive and sensitive these kids, all kids, were to how their lives have always been manipulated. How their needs were always being fulfilled by people who didn't comprehend their needs.

So there was going to be a new order. It required of everyone to take risks. There were no models to follow. We would all—students, teachers, parents—be learning new ways of doing things, thinking things through, reacting to and dealing with unpredictable situations. It would take trust, guts, lucidity, and love. It probably wouldn't be easy. Certain events might unfold in undesired ways. But it had to be tried.

Had to be tried. And I realized that it had been tried. That although we had no site for the school, that although September wasn't here yet, that although teachers hadn't yet been interviewed and hired, the school had begun. Had been going on through all these meetings. That we all had learned a helluva lot during the hot and agonizing months of long evening meetings. We knew ourselves better. Knew each other better. We were listening, being more honest. And we had already begun to take risks and were glad we had.

By this time other decisions had been, were being, made. We would not be affiliated with another school because of the many problems that presented to our autonomy. We couldn't hassle becoming accredited. We weren't digging a tunnel to the portals of college.

Other realizations too. That finances were going to be a royal pain-in-the-ass. That certain things about the school couldn't be known until they were discovered in the process of the functioning school.

More committee meetings were set. More work to be done. Details. Details. Details began to haunt, sneaking up and grabbing hold like barnacles.

And things dragged at times. But the idea had taken hold so the continued process was inevitable. And everyone was nervous, committed, and eager about seeing it through.

CHAPTER FIVE

Setting:

Again, the same, except that the following covers a time span of more than one meeting. And the momentum had recently been waning.

Action:

Sometime recently the possibility of obtaining a rent-free site for the school had been mentioned. This might be done through an Upper West Side squatter organization that had been moving poor families in need of housing into vacated and/or abandoned apartment buildings. This organization was also helping various kinds of community action organizations to find abandoned storefronts. If we could get a storefront and not have to pay rent, it would remove a tremendous financial burden.

So the committee in charge of site location, and especially one person who personally knew someone at the squatter headquarters, were going to look into the possibilities of finding a storefront for us to squat in.

Inertia was a growing enemy. There was now more work to do on an individual basis than there was to accomplish at

meetings. And writing position papers, hassling money problems, and finding a site were not exactly Broadway.

A number of people felt this strongly and were hoping that finding a location for the school, and moving into it, was the impetus we needed.

CHAPTER SIX

Setting:

Think hard now.

Action:

Hurray! A wind in the horse latitudes. The squatter organization had a storefront we could move into. But as I should have known by now, such an announcement often means the creation of new crises rather than the solution of old ones.

Problem: squatting is illegal. Which means a lack of security in the school location. A danger of police interference. Arrests and their ramifications. And other questions of politic, politics, citizenship, etc.

None of the kids had any qualms about squatting. Nor did most of the parents. But a few did. And this was an important enough issue that I think, though it was never stated, that everyone desired unanimous agreement rather than majority rule.

So we discussed it. The benefits were obvious: financial and psychological. But we had to achieve a common understanding of who abandons buildings, why they are abandoned, who benefits from it—a very involved story which needs a book of its own. And we reached an agreement: squatters we would be.

And it seemed metaphysically right. If we were really talking about a revolutionary educational environment, what could be better than an abandoned and illegally occupied storefront? Just another risk, and probably the least significant of many we would have to take.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Setting:

Yup, you guessed it.

Action:

All the other tidbits discussed were secondary. What mattered was the oasis, that holy ground of storefront. A date and time were set. A strategy of inconspicuousness was designed. Needed provisions were determined. The invasion was planned.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Setting:

Invaders. Storefront.

Action:

D-Day. Rather morning. And this really is a story for someone else to tell. But I did want to get to this point, where the first class in the actual school occurred.

A handyman, who knows his pipes, gave a course in plumbing repair. And a whole group of kids, up to their elbows in shit and grime, cleaned the bathroom. And with his guidance, learned how to fix a toilet.

If there had been any lingering question about this school being relevant to the world, to people's lives, this first class answered it.

It seemed as if everyone had by now finished a "semester." And I realized, as I had many times before, that education isn't a matter of facts. That life isn't a matter of goals. What is essential, educational, is the process. Going through, living in, comprehending, the experience.

And we'd all done that. As people, as friends, as peers. Yeah, we'd really done it.