



*This is an edited transcript of a group discussion held in the storefront on May 22, 1971. It had taken us a long time to get ourselves together and begin the discussion: this is reflected in the opening remarks of the transcript.*

RICHARD A: It's interesting that people get together pretty well for classes, but anything outside of a class, it's shit. We can't get together for the Open House. (We had been trying to hold an Open House, primarily to solicit funds from people who had expressed some prior interest in the school.) We can't get together for any fund-raising, we can't get together for cleaning up. About the only thing that works is classes.

PETER: I think that's because classes are mainly a passive thing. The student comes into a class and all he has to do is participate in the discussions, whereas something like the Open House, or cleaning up, involves taking responsibility. Instead of passively coming in and doing something where the guidelines have already been set out for you, you're initiating things yourself.

JENNY: I think it's because . . . Look at the way a person goes through regular schooling. People are constantly waiting to be told something to do, and when they finally end up doing something, it's because they were told to do it, or because a bell rings, or a clock gongs, or however it's run. And people just aren't used to getting together on their own. You're not accustomed to a group getting together to do something. One person in authority manipulates a whole group of people. That's the way other schools are run, and you get into a rut like that, and you can't just get out of it by being in a free school for a year. It doesn't end that fast.

SANDRA: From what I've seen, you get something happening here that you don't get in a regular school. I see more honesty in your feelings about one another; they're very much on the surface. You don't usually see that in a normal classroom, which is told to remain quiet and still. Hostility and friendliness—both ends of the continuum—are sort of softened down.

ALEX: The thing is, you get a chance to learn to dislike someone here instead of feeling indifferent toward everyone. I think that's better. . . . The teachers here don't play as big a role as in other schools.

JENNY: I think their role is bigger and smaller at the same time. It's smaller because they're not made a big deal of, and it's bigger because it's a person you relate to instead of a person you try to fall asleep on.

JANE: Can a student be a part of the school, and yet decide that she doesn't want to take any part in fund-raising, in the Open House? What do we feel are the group responsibilities to the school?

JENNY: Earlier in the year there was kind of a small split over this issue: when we were talking about the babysitting services, and some people didn't want to do it. And there was disagreement over whether it was your responsibility as a member of this school to help. You know, you're here, this is a free school, there aren't many around, and we're not going to let ourselves drown, because some students would rather do other things with their time one afternoon a week. Some people thought, "No! This is a free school; you do exactly what you want as long as you're not interfering with someone else." It was like a split over that and it was never really resolved.

SANDRA: Do you feel there is something in the group that is worth saving? The important characteristic, the important quality that you're going to pass on next year—what is it?

PETER: I don't think it is anything specific that is "worth saving." I just think the whole fact that we're a free school—and people are learning more and are generally happier in many ways than they ever were in the regular schools is the best guideline for next year.

SANDRA: It's been a detoxification . . .

PETER: It's not anything specific; it's just our general pattern. And we've learned a lot in areas like group responsibility. No doubt we'll have a better time next year simply because we've already learned by experience.

GINA: We're searching for something we haven't found yet. This is a sort of preliminary.

SANDRA: How would you describe what you're searching for?

GINA: More togetherness. More organization.

JENNY: It's like a machine with all these different gears and parts and you want them running so they fit into each other, so

you have a whole, not just a bunch of individuals, but something beyond the individuals—like a group organism, like one organism which functions together, can do things together. I don't mean like a machine. That was a bad analogy, that doesn't sound so good.

PETER: I don't think we've reached that ideal by any means.

GINA: We have to search . . . We haven't found complete happiness within the school . . .

JENNY: We're not necessarily searching for something, but we are growing toward something.

PETER: Oh, of course, but that's just going to come with the times. Maybe growing toward something is a better way of putting it, because I think that as long as we exist, we're going to be growing towards something better; we'll always be better a month later than . . .

MIRIAM: Not necessarily, Peter. It's not just time; there's a lot you have to put into it.

PETER: The time will come, I think the time will come.

MIRIAM: I don't know.

SANDRA: It's a little as though the people in the school get to test something that's a kind of cliché—that people in America have lost totally a sense of community and really want it. In a sense what you're going through is operationally finding out if that's true. I mean—do you really want a sense of community, and if so, how do you go about getting it?

LISA: That's one of the problems we've been talking about: the school means more to some of us than it does to others, and I think that gets very messy. That's where all the conflict is. Some people aren't willing to make sacrifices for the school.

SANDRA: Just by being here everyone has sacrificed something. You may put little value on this, but pretty clearly you've sacrificed the chance to get the proper credentials that are acceptable . . .

PETER: I agree with Lisa: some of us have sacrificed more than others and that has led to a lot of problems and friction.

JENNY: Earlier, David said that everyone sort of establishes their own relationship with the school, and that's true. Some

people are hardly ever here; some people are here all the time and are always doing something.

RICHARD A.: From what I can see, the school means just as much to every regular student here. But what it means is different. That's why there isn't a complete community in the school. The school must mean a lot to the regular students because they're always here.

LISA: I don't think you can say our school is successful because the students are always here. It's more than that. Maybe people are here all the time because they have nothing else to do or because it's a nice place to meet. I'm talking about really wanting a free school, really wanting it to work.

PETER: Just because some people are here all the time doesn't mean that everyone puts the same kind of time and effort and sacrifice into the school.

RICHARD A.: This whole talk about sacrifice is pretty ludicrous. I don't see anybody here sacrificing anything beyond the fact that they gave up the public schools.

DAVID N.: There are small sacrifices we're all called on to make every day, times when it's necessary to compromise our individual desires for the sake of the group. I'll give you a tiny example. In the middle of this discussion—which is in a sense a group function, something we're doing as a school—Buncey got up, jumped on his bicycle, and took off to get something to drink. The sacrifice would have been to wait until we were finished and then go out. It's these little things that happen all the time that get to me.

BUNCEY: I felt the same thing while I was doing it, but I did it anyway because I was thirsty.

DAVID N.: That's the kind of tiny sacrifice I'm talking about. Well, at least you had some consciousness that maybe you shouldn't have been zipping out on the bicycle.

LISA: And it's not important that it's you because we've all done it.

BUNCEY: Let's not start picking on each other . . . everybody . . .

JENNY: But it's not picking. It's got a whole different feeling than picking. We're doing it because we want to find out what the hell is going on with this school anyway.

DAVID N.: We've got to be careful and not allow this sense of group responsibility to totally obscure any feeling for "individual responsibility." When something goes wrong, we can't look at one another and say, "Everyone's responsible; therefore nobody's responsible. And I don't have to correct my behavior, because everyone's at fault."

RICHARD A.: That's a good point, because that's the cop-out, that's always used in this school.

DAVID N.: And it happens every time. If someone brings up a criticism, what's the reaction to that criticism? It's not to look at yourself, it's to criticize the critic.

PETER: This analogy may be rather extreme, but in the Calley case, people are saying that Calley should be excused because he only acted like everyone else did in Vietnam. Herbert Marcuse wrote something brilliant about this in the *New York Times*. He said that people are using the old childish argument that Billy should be excused for what he did, because Jimmy and Charlie and all the other little boys were doing it. It's a ridiculous argument.

JENNY: Well, it's true that everyone is doing it, but in saying everyone is doing it, you also are saying that I'm doing it, so everyone should blame themselves. I guess they don't.

RICHARD A.: What seems to be lacking here is any deep sense of responsibility. I mean about the only responsibility that most students feel is to come to the school. Period.

MIRIAM: I don't think that.

RICHARD: How come nothing gets off the ground then?

MIRIAM: I've been trying to get . . .

RICHARD A.: Right. You have. But what about everyone else?

MIRIAM: Well, a few other people have also. . . . You know a couple of people have been trying to make it work. It can't work unless everyone wants it to.

RICHARD A.: That's exactly what I'm saying. Everyone has to take responsibility and people don't.

JENNY: You know, I think that we really should get together as a school and resolve this thing. Does being a student in this school simply consist of coming here, doing what you want, and

taking what you want; or are you going to have not just a commitment to classes but a commitment to the school, to raising money so the school can go on, that sort of thing? Why should anybody be able to come to the school and not have to help with these fund-raising things, if that's what keeps the school going? I think it should be part of the school that people have to do these things.

ALEX: You're setting laws for someone else. You think it's right so you think that everyone else should think it's right.

ANDY: But there's no other way. You can have a school where you have strict rules and somebody fucks up and you say, "Get out. We don't want you," or you can have a school where there are no rules and people fuck up and you don't know what to do about it.

ALEX: How far can you go and still remain free?

DAVID N.: But the idea of being a "free school"—which is not even that specific a thing anyway—can get in the way. For example, when we wanted to elect a coordinator, a bunch of people jumped up and said, "Oh no. This is supposed to be a free school. We can't have a coordinator." But the important thing is not having the label "free school." It's fulfilling the needs of the people in it. And if that means enforcing and creating rules—if it's necessary, it's necessary.

JENNY: There are expenses, say several thousand dollars a year, to keep this school going. Is it fair if everybody can come and use the school equally, but only half the people are going to do the fund-raising and other work? You may say it's not free if we insist that everybody has to help keep the school alive, but if we don't insist on that, not everyone's going to help—and that sure as hell isn't fair.

ALEX: Agreed. But the only way you're going to have a working free school is if everyone works together without being compelled to.

DAVID N.: Things don't work out that way. Everyone doing their trip doesn't add up to a school.

ALEX: But the majority can't decide what's right and what's wrong and then force their moral judgments on everybody.

DAVID N.: But Alex, everything you've said has been spoken from the viewpoint of the outsider. Can't you also imagine feeling together enough with a group of people so that when most of those people wanted to do something and you didn't—for example, work on the park one afternoon a week—you'd still feel some obligation to work together with them, as a group.

ALEX: I can imagine it.

DAVID N.: Okay, that's the type of community we're talking about—where majorities don't force minorities into something, but . . .

ALEX: My point is that if the majority decided to do something, and an individual didn't want to, then no one should make him feel obligated to do it.

DAVID N.: But as long as you start from a totally individual basis—from what *I* want, what *I* think, restrictions on *my* freedom—you're never going to get to that other place, where everybody works together because they want to—without any sense of obligation. Or it's going to be a long hard trip.

JANE: When you're building your community out of working together, there's never a question of my making a decision and imposing it on an outsider. What you do is welcome the person and explain to her what's happening, and work with her until she feels the necessity inside herself to conform with whatever you call it—a moral standard or a group working together.

SANDRA: We must stop defining the problem in the same old way. What's implied when you talk about a community or a collective is that everybody at some time is going to have to do something that they don't want to do, like raising bread for the school. You've got to have it, right? Everyone agrees you've got to have it. And maybe nobody wants to help raise the money. But, you have to do it. Otherwise there's no survival, and that is the real meaning of a collective goal: everybody does something together, even when the majority doesn't want to. It's not a question of personal desires.

ALEX: The thing is, I don't see how, if you have a free school, if a person doesn't want to . . . Well, how can you just . . .

ANDY: Like . . . he doesn't want to work in the Open House. Okay, okay, if you look at a commune, everybody decides that

they have to start planting shit in the ground because they need food. Right? People who want to do it do it. If the "people" who want to do it is only one person, it's not going to get done, so the commune is going to break up. Everybody realizes that we've got to do some planting to get food to keep the commune going; even though we have to sweat, and say "Shit" and how bad it is, we still have to do it.

JENNY: And if only one person does it, why should everyone else eat it? Or if only ten people out of thirteen do all the shit, and if three people sit back, why should all thirteen eat it?

SANDRA: Why do you see everything in majority terms? Why do you think, Jenny, it's a question of how many people do it? I think it's agreed that when you have a community, everyone shares in the goodies. Ideally, it would also be nice if everyone shared in the work. But you must not deny somebody a goodie because he or she wasn't up to working. That person needs re-education . . .

BUNCEY: What if they just didn't want to because they'd rather fuck off!

SANDRA: But not wanting to is lacking in the kind of attitude you're trying to build. That person needs help, not to be pushed down and say, "Well, fuck you! Because you didn't work, you don't get any goodies."

JENNY: I'm not saying "Fuck you," but what if you spent so much time being sympathetic to and re-educating the people who don't want to work that in the meantime you all starve.

DAVID C.: That's just a hypothesis because that hasn't happened to anybody here.

JENNY: No, wait, wait. What if we sit around being sympathetic to the majority of this school which isn't about to get off their asses to help us out . . .

SANDRA: Not being sympathetic, I wasn't suggesting that . . .

JENNY: . . . re-educate. But what if we were spending all our time saying, "Hmmm now, these people who aren't going to help with the Open House—we've got to reeducate them. They have the wrong attitude:" Meanwhile, the Open House doesn't happen. We don't get any money. What happens then?

SANDRA: Some people aren't able to contribute at this point.

JANE: Some people are still suffering. It takes some people longer to undo the brain damage that they had from their other schools.

PETER: Then where do they belong? Maybe they don't belong here.

RICHARD A.: The situation is not ideal. There are problems in working out a community.

JANE: You struggle. You can't have a non-struggle attitude if you're going to try to become a group.

SANDRA: Everyone needs the money—the school needs it—but some people have not reached a level of consciousness where they are able to contribute to something with an understanding of what the contribution means. That doesn't have to mean that because a person doesn't help in the Open House you're going to deny that person the right to come back to the school next fall, does it? If indeed, by hook or by crook, you do manage to get the money to survive.

PETER: Yes, but Sandra, the school is never going to survive if you have . . .

DAVID N.: One of the most beautiful things that happened this year was the time that we tried to get someone to represent us at a community meeting. Everyone came up with wild excuses, reasons they couldn't do it. Only Peter said, "I'm sorry, but I just can't take that responsibility on myself now." You told us truthfully that you couldn't do what we had asked of you. And that was fine. There are certain reasons why some students who want very much to be a part of this school can't assume as much responsibility as others. We can't just condemn them, saying, "Fuck off. If you want to be a part of our school, you better come every day." We've got to understand each other and work from where people are toward a better sense of community.

SANDRA: I want to know why when Jacob walked in this morning and was asked to go back home to get his tape recorder, he went without saying, "Why do I have to do it? Why does it have to be done right now?"

JENNY: Jacob, tell us about your inner workings, the way you fill up space . . .

DAVID C.: . . . the depth of your soul.

JACOB: I don't know. I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't. But as I got farther and farther away from the school, I started wishing I had said, "But why do I have to do it?"

