

AN
ESSAY ON
KURT HAHN
FOUNDER OF OUTWARD BOUND (1941)
1886-1974

“To serve, to strive and not to yield.”

Genius of Experimental Education
in the Twentieth Century
by
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Introduction

My reason for writing this account of Kurt Hahn stems from the fact that there is very little in circulation about Kurt Hahn. The Outward Bound International newsletter of August 2000 reports that “most of the books on Kurt Hahn are long since out of print,” including one of the most authoritative, *Outward Bound USA*, written by Joshua L. Miner and Joe Bolt and published in 1981. When I happen to inquire of a student who has been through a US Outward Bound program if he has heard of Kurt Hahn, the answer invariably is “no” or “vaguely.” That those who have just experienced the life-changing adventure of Outward Bound are unaware of the name of the man who conceived the program and brought it to life seems to me to strain one’s belief. As a result, I have been suggesting for some time, without success, that someone more knowledgeable than I write at least a short biography on Kurt Hahn.

Because Kurt Hahn died in 1974, and I did not become associated with Outward Bound until 1973, I never met the man. I also make no claim to being an author as I was trained to be an engineer, which training, however, has two advantages: engineers are trained to be accurate and to get to the point. Having said that, I take full responsibility for any errors or omissions in the text.

One problem in writing about Kurt Hahn is that he himself wrote very little during his lifetime. Almost everything we know about Hahn has been reported by those who knew him and chose to record facts about him. The lack of availability of primary documents is just another challenge to a biographer. Despite these difficulties, I am motivated by Hahn’s position as a genius of experiential education in the 20th century, whose legacy shines forth through four institutions of renown - the Gordonstoun School in Scotland, the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, the United World Colleges in ten nations, and Outward Bound, found in 35 nations on all five of the major continents.

Some people say that Kurt Hahn was a genius because he developed a new theory of education. Hahn would disclaim that theory on the basis that his ideas were not original but rather a blend of the ideas of many great thinkers. We will see in the text what, as far as I can discern, motivated and molded this man: first, Hahn was fortunate in his start in life as his mother was a woman of great faith who believed in the goodness of man; a second influence was Plato, who in his time (c. 400 BC) was considered a genius in education because he injected the idea that education should consist of more than the transmission of knowledge (the three Rs). More importantly it should consist of character building. Thirdly, Hahn discovering the inscription found on a Belgium church which read, “Plus est en vous” – there is more in you than you think. Finally Hahn encountered the Parable of the Good Samaritan. As his grand niece, Liz Cunningham, said, “It was the passion of his life, his life’s work: to help as many people as possible to fulfill their own promise, to be the best they can be, to live with courage, compassion and love,” following the example of the Good Samaritan.

The documentation of Hahn’s life work and contributions deserves to be revived again. I undertake this work with all humility in the hope that I can do justice to the legacy of this giant of education and his contributions to human-kind.

Kurt Hahn The Man

Kurt Hahn was born in 1886 into a cultured Jewish family in Berlin. His father was a successful industrialist. His mother was a beautiful woman with a powerful faith in the innate goodness of man. He was educated at the Universities of Berlin, Heidelberg, Freiberg and Gottingen, and from 1910 to 1914, Hahn studied at Christ Church, Oxford. On August 1, 1914, he took leave of his English friends to return home to Germany. Two days later, Great Britain declared war on Germany.

On returning to Germany, Hahn was assigned to the German Foreign Office where he had the task of analyzing the Allied Press for the prevailing mood within those countries. He labored continuously for a reasonable ending of the war through negotiation. By the end of the war, Hahn became private secretary to Prince Max of Baden, a German federal prince and heir to the grand Duchy of Baden. He returned with Prince Max to his castle at Salem in Baden and helped him write his memoirs. The Prince was a scholarly, humane man. His strong religious convictions and courage are evident in a statement from a speech he delivered in 1917: “To love your enemy is the sign of those who remain loyal to the Lord even in time of war.”

In Prince Max, Hahn found a solid supporter for some of the educational ideas he had been developing since he left Oxford. Hahn and Prince Max also shared an enthusiasm for the ideas of Plato (c 400 B.C.) one of the most influential thinkers of all time. Plato was not just the world’s greatest philosopher but a genius of education. Plato’s classic dissertation *The Republic* set out his vision of the ideal state. At its heart was his new view of education – not the cultivation of skills nor the communication of certain branches of knowledge (such as the “three Rs”), but the formation of character and the

striving to form one's life so as to fulfill the highest ideals of human existence. Plato once said, when asked why someone should be educated, "We educate them so they become a good person, because a good person behaves nobly."

Plato was considered a genius of education in his time because he brought into education a new element besides knowledge – character building, which in reality is education's most important element.

In 1920, with the Prince's support, the Salem School was founded in one of the wings of the old Cistercian monastery in Salem. Like Prince Max, Hahn was concerned with the moral decline that existed among the Germans at the end of the war and the lack of physical fitness among the youth, most of whom had suffered malnutrition during the war. He set out to train young people to have moral independence, an ability to choose between "right and wrong," and an improvement in their physical health. The school emphasized these aspects in its education.

First established in the goals of the Salem School, these themes persist through all of Hahn's educational thought and are developed in various ways in the programs he started, most notably in *Outward Bound*.

Inevitably, the ideas of Hahn and Salem clashed with the spirit of Nazism. Apprehensive of the growing strength of Hitler's movement, Hahn stepped up his efforts to win the German educational community over to Salem principles. But the Nazi tide continued to rise. In 1932 five storm troopers trampled a young Communist to death with his mother looking on. They were arrested, tried and condemned to death. In his notorious "Beuthen telegram," Hitler hailed them as comrades and demanded their release. "Your freedom," he said, "is our honor." For Hahn, this act defined the hour when men of honor must declare themselves. He sent a letter to all Salem alumni: "Hitler's telegram has brought on a crisis that goes beyond politics. Germany is at stake, her Christian civilization, her good name, her soldiers' honor. Salem cannot remain neutral. I ask the members of the Salem Union who are active in S.A. or S.S. to break with Salem or with Hitler." "It was," said a Briton who was teaching at Salem at the time, "the bravest deed in cold blood that I have witnessed."

Sir Roger Birley, headmaster of Eton and Hahn's contemporary, described his courage in the German crisis. Discussing the Salem education offered under Hahn, Birley wrote:

But there was another element besides courage quite as important. It was impressively expressed in an address Kurt Hahn gave in Hamburg on February 16, 1933. (The significance of the date, seventeen days after the Nazis gained power, is obvious.) It began with a study of the Fascist state and educational ideals, and an account of Fascism which seems to make inevitable the uncomfortable statement which is to be found in the address, that, if one looked at the educational principles of the Italian youth organizations, "you find that you might be quoting the whole Salem Certificate of Maturity with its capacity to endure hardships, to face dangers, a talent for organization, prudence, a fighting spirit, presence of mind, success in dealing with the unexpected

difficulties” – and then come the words, “Only one term is and must be missing: The power of carrying out what is recognized to be just.” A little later, “Sacro egoismo-sacred egoism. There is also sacred lying, sacred killing, sacred perjury, sacred breaking of promises.” To speak in this way of Fascist principles at that moment was indeed courageous, but Kurt Hahn went on to turn to his own country, and it was with continual references to the state of things in Germany that he gave his reasons why Salem rejected Fascist education. Among these reasons was to be found: “We need to be able to feel that as a people we are just and kindly. On this consciousness depends our inner strength.”

Hahn became a marked man. In the mass arrests following the Reichstag fire in February 1933, he was jailed. The shock waves swiftly reached Britain where his friends – some from his Oxford days, others gained as Salem’s fame had spread – took up his cause. When Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald made official representations, Hahn was released. In July he left Germany for England.

In the first months of his exile he was profoundly depressed. At the age of forty-seven he had lost his homeland, his school, the battle for German youth. Once a man of means, he had overnight become a penniless refugee. Worse, his spiritual resources were depleted. When he was asked to found a new school along Salem lines, he lacked the will to do so. When he was offered an established school to head, his response was, “I do not have the time to overcome the inertia of tradition.”

Discouraged and emotionally exhausted, he decided to return to Moray in the north of Scotland, where he had convalesced in the summer after a sunstroke suffered in his Oxford years. He met old friends among the fishermen and crafters in the district. On the wharf in Hopeman Harbor, he listened to fisherman Danny Main tell tales of common men who displayed uncommon courage against forces of the sea. His fortitude began to return. With another friend, Lord Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton, he inspected the partially empty castle at Gordonstoun, badly in need of repair. As a possible site for a school, its vistas seized his spirit and he knew again in his own experience the truth that he would so often summon in guiding others: “Your disability is your opportunity.”

Less than a year later, in April 1934, Gordonstoun opened as a school for boys; by September there were twenty-one students. Among them was a Greek prince of Danish blood, Philip, who would in 1947 marry Elizabeth, later to become queen of England.

In 1938 Hahn became a naturalized British subject. In addition to performing his duties as Headmaster of Gordonstoun, he poured “his energies into national concerns – alerting the British people to the dimensions of the Hitlerian threat.”

In 1941 came his next and perhaps most influential contribution to humanity, the founding of Outward Bound. Outward Bound is the oldest adventure-based educational organization in continuous operation in the world. It was founded in 1941 in Great Britain as a program of increasing physical and mental challenges, designed to give British seamen the inner resources to survive in the Battle of the Atlantic. Lawrence Holt, owner of the Blue Funnel Line, was concerned about the high casualty rate among

younger seamen whose ships were torpedoed in the North Atlantic. While older seamen in the lifeboats survived, many younger men perished unnecessarily, Holt thought. Holt discussed the problem with Kurt Hahn, and Hahn, with Holt's backing, designed a 21-day survival program to address the problem. Thus began Outward Bound, now a respected educational program in 35 nations on five continents.

Today Outward Bound seeks to awaken in people an awareness of their inner strengths and to make people aware of their potential, so they can be the best they can be and to assist others to do the same.

These purposes cannot be achieved by the transmission of knowledge alone. Hahn was concerned with the exclusivity of knowledge, though good in itself, over the inclusiveness of character which is "basic and fundamental." Therefore the Outward Bound experience additionally involves the development of leadership and character. Hahn believed it "a duty to impel youth into value forming experiences." He wanted young people to discover their potential through challenge and achievement. He recognized that bodily fitness augmented mental fitness.

As part of the adventure and excitement of self-discovery, Outward Bound also seeks to develop skills, as well as to instill such inner strengths as self-confidence, responsibility for oneself and concern for others, an awareness of the interdependence of people, and compassion through service. Since Outward Bound courses are most often conducted in the wilderness, the program also acquaints people with the need to care for the environment. Outward Bound seeks to achieve these objectives by offering programs which involve:

- 1) Physical Fitness – One can accomplish more when he is physically fit. Hahn believed bodily fitness augmented mental fitness.
- 2) Outward Bound has been labeled "a school of discovery." Students are challenged to break out of their comfort zones by being placed in situations that stretch them beyond their previous experiences. They respond by rising to meet the challenges and thus discover within themselves abilities well beyond their self-imposed limits. Hahn was inspired by an inscription on a church in Belgium which said, "Plus est en vous," which he interpreted to mean there is more strength, more courage and more compassion in a person than he ever imagined. Hahn was concerned that people learn to live up to their potential.
- 3) Service to others, the most important element of the three. There is good reason for Outward Bound's motto, "To serve, to strive and not to yield." Hahn's role model was the Good Samaritan. The ultimate goal of human kind is to render service to other people.

Squadron leader Lester Davies describes a conversation years ago with Kurt Hahn on his educational philosophy.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan, and the need to inculcate in every human being, particularly the young, an instinctive desire to “do unto others as one would have done unto oneself,” was the foundation on which Mr. Hahn’s whole philosophy was based.

Henry Brereton, Hahn’s colleague at Gordonstoun recalls Hahn’s philosophy:

....He had one hero above all: the compassionate traveler on the road to Jericho. Again and again he called for the Parable of the Good Samaritan to be read to the school. In the years to come, I was to witness the growing power of his ultimate conviction—that through help to those ‘in danger and in need’ youth can strike the deepest chords of the human spirit. It would become a creed: ‘He who drills and labors, accepts hardship, boredom and dangers, all for the sake of helping his brother in peril and distress, discovers God’s purpose in his inner life.’”

As Peter Willauer said back in 1964 and 1965 when the Hurricane Island program was in its early stages, “In an Outward Bound program...the place of honor must be held by the Rescue Services.” He cited as support for his position the heart of Kurt Hahn’s programmatic thinking: ‘The experience of helping a fellow man in danger, or even of training in a realistic way to give this help, tends to change the balance of power in a youth’s inner life, with the result that compassion can become the master motive.’”

Today, Outward Bound seeks to implement these noble objectives. While Salem, Gordonstoun and Outward Bound are monuments to Hahn’s spirit and creative mind, his genius was not limited to these institutions. The Duke of Edinburgh Award was launched in 1956, having its origin in Hahn’s County Badge Scheme, which Hahn first tried to launch early in World War II. The Award was an ambitious national plan for fostering physical fitness, enterprise, tenacity and compassion among British youth.

Another tribute to Hahn’s educational theories is the United World Colleges. In 1962 Hahn pioneered with the help Sir Lawrence Darvall and many others, the opening of the first United World College, The College of the Atlantic at St. Donat’s Castle in Wales.

Wrote Rear Admiral D.J. Hoare, CB, RN:

As an Air Marshal in the Royal Air Forces, Sir Lawrence Darvall had been Commandant of the NATO Staff Training College, where he had experienced, at first hand, the benefits of training people of many nationalities together. It had always been Hahn’s view that education was a means of reducing national barriers and fostering international cooperation. When two men of action meet and find themselves of a common mind, things happen The United World College has a distinctively Hahnian component, referred to as its “humanitarian curriculum” – rescue and community services to those in danger and need.

Throughout the history of the United World Colleges, notable world leaders have been instrumental in furthering Kurt Hahn's goal of promoting goodwill, understanding and world peace among youngsters of an impressionable age.

Lord Montbatten was one of these. He joined the early educators who founded the first World College. Lord Montbatten was hoping to insure that the horrors of World War II, which he had witnessed first hand, would never be repeated. Like Kurt Hahn, he thought this could be accomplished by youngsters from different nations living and working together, learning to respect each other's cultures, and developing a commitment to peace and understanding.

Lord Montbatten became the first president of the International Council of the United World Colleges in 1965. He was succeeded by his great nephew, H.R.H. The Prince of Wales, in 1978. In 1995 Prince Charles passed the title to Nelson Mandela, the President of South Africa.

Today there are ten United World Colleges in Canada, Hong Kong, India, Italy, Norway, Singapore, Swaziland, the United States, Venezuela and Wales. Students from as many as 120 countries attend these schools. Along with Outward Bound, the United World Colleges are two of Kurt Hahn's crowning achievements.

In the same year (1962) that the United World College of the Atlantic was founded, Joshua L. Miner, after a decade of "striving and not yielding," established Outward Bound in the United States. Miner had spent several years with Hahn at Gordonstoun observing and learning Hahn's philosophy.

Throughout the 1960s, Hahn made periodic trips to the United States. He took a keen interest in the US Outward Bound organization. He was delighted that Outward Bound had been drafted to design and conduct one of the final training phases of the Peace Corps. Hahn also liked the concept of "adaptive" programs, other outdoor programs that adopted the Outward Bound principles. "Don't do anything," he once said, "unless it can be imitated."

Josh Miner remarked that "no other human being, perhaps, responded as avidly as Hahn did to William James' call to seek the 'moral equivalent of war.'" Hahn's "moral equivalent of war" was to captivate the young through active Samaritan service, demanding of them care and skill, courage and endurance, discipline and initiative.

Hahn's Jewish background and beliefs were of deep importance to him. (One of his forebears was Jacheskiel Landau, Chief Rabbi of Prague in the Eighteenth Century, whose writings on the Talmud are still taught at academies of Jewish studies.) As Dr. Lancelot Fleming, Dean of Windsor and a friend of Hahn's for many decades, said in his final tribute to Hahn, "Kurt made it very plain that he was proud to be of one hundred percent Jewish origin." Nevertheless, Hahn joined the Anglican Church in 1945, thus embracing the total combination of Judeo-Christian faith and principles.

Despite Hahn's personal faith and adherence to the code of the Good Samaritan, Hahn admonished Josh Miner, founder of Outward Bound in the USA, not to preach. This was consistent with Hahn's theory against preaching and reflected his view that people learn more from example and experience than from sermonizing. In the same vein, Hahn also said to Miner, "There are three ways of trying to win the young. There is persuasion. There is compulsion. There is attraction. You can preach at them; that is a hook without a worm. You can say "You must volunteer; that is the devil. And you can tell them, 'You are needed.' That appeal hardly ever fails."

In 1968, Hahn made his final journey to the United States. He was deeply disturbed about violence and racial conflict. Instead of going to some or all of his five beloved Outward Bound schools, he crisscrossed the continent from Harlem to Watts attempting to find knowledge and new leads to healing forces. In the Watts section of Los Angeles, he listened eagerly for two and a half hours as Ted Watkins, Chairman of the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, talked about his work with ghetto youth.

Following his visit to the United States, Hahn formulated an idea for yet another new institution: one that would convert the destructive energies of youth into positive forces. Marveled one observer, "His dauntless mind worked towards a grand plan under which a Service by Youth Commission would coordinate forces enabling young people to contribute productive energies that otherwise would be involved in violence or drained by frustration."

Hahn was obsessed with the idea that Outward Bounders would be "confronted by the challenge and opportunity to go on active service to help their fellow men in danger and in need. Their resolution to do so will be strengthened if we can build up an aristocracy of service throughout the free world." The goal of the eighty-two year old Hahn was to establish such an "aristocracy of service."

Back in London and Scotland, Hahn worked to make his "Service by Youth Plan" a reality, but he was not able, as he had been, to exert the force of his personal drive in support of that project. Struck by a car on a country road near Gordonstoun, Hahn never fully recovered from the accident. Not surprisingly for Hahn, he turned even that misfortune into opportunity. He wrote to Prince Philip, urging his support for a plan to reduce road deaths by including knowledge of first aid in the driving test. The Prince took up the cause and gave it his earnest backing.

Accepting retirement at last, Hahn lived at his home in Hermannsberg, Germany, the Junior School for Salem. He died there on December 15, 1974. He left an exciting legacy of institutions devoted to the betterment of the individual. Hahn's true genius, however, and perhaps his greatest contribution, was his insight into the root cause of social ills and his clear vision and understanding in seeking solutions that worked.

His Royal Highness Prince Philip said of Hahn, "No one who had any frequent contact with him failed to appreciate his quite remarkable qualities. His active and fertile mind was always plotting, scheming, devising and developing new ideas which seem to bubble

up from his constantly evolving philosophy of education.” Continued Prince Philip, “History will probably judge him on his ideas, but as a Headmaster, I believe it was his absolute certainty about right and wrong, his utter conviction on morality and behavior which made him such a stabilizing influence in developing community.”

Dr. Lancelot Fleming paid this tribute to his long-time friend and colleague, “He leaves a legacy of what needs to be done, what needs to be followed in the years ahead – a perspective which transcends the immediate present and looks into eternity.” Fleming spoke of Hahn’s personal faith and his motivation to service, quoting the words of Christ: “Inasmuch as you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers, you did it unto me.”

The spirit of Kurt Hahn is embodied in the motto of Outward Bound: “To serve, to strive and not to yield.” Certainly, whatever the challenges of our times, Hahn would have us struggle on, combating them with all the strength and creativity we can muster. His message is for us to live so that, like Hahn and like the great evangelist and New Testament author Paul, who penned the following, we can one day say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” (1 Timothy 4:7)