



Kurt Hahn and the Aims of Education

by Thomas James

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BIOGRAPHY OFFERS TWO VISIONS OF HUMAN GREATNESS. THE FIRST MOVES ALONG a line from youth to old age, the chronicle of events and entanglements through which people weave their lives into the collective history around them. The other springs from the invisible center within a life; it moves outward from a moment of self-discovery, which knows no beginning and no end, suffusing one's whole existence, and others beyond it, with the meaning of experience.

In the first, the chronicle of a life, sequence is crucial. Time and place, the context of growth, an ability to capitalize on circumstance - these are the stuff of life histories when seen as linear progression. Victory comes in leaps and bounds of clever adaptation, the string of successes and compromises through which one creates for oneself a place in the world.



"The center of a life comes all at once, as a gift. When it emerges, the center arranges everything else around it."

The second vision cares little for growth and adaptation. The center of a life comes all at once, as a gift. When it emerges, the center arranges everything else around it. Linear development tells little; a unifying understanding chafes against all contingencies. It is difficult to say exactly what happened, except that perhaps it was in dark times, when the hero transforms the uncertainties of a crisis into deeply felt opportunities, that something from within one's own life center ignites others to believe and act. These two visions complement each other to shed light on the life and work of Kurt Hahn.

The Chronicle of A Life

The chronicle of Kurt Hahn's life is well known. He was a public man whose career moved along strikingly visible lines of power and controversy. Born in 1886, Hahn was the second of four sons in a Jewish family in Berlin. Schooled with conventional German rigor at the Wilhelms gymnasium, he graduated in 1904, the year in which he experienced a sunstroke that left him with a recurring disability for the rest of his life. Hahn went to Oxford from 1904 to 1906 to read classics, with the support of his father, Oskar Hahn, industrialist and anglophile. From 1906 to 1910, he studied at various German universities - without, however, completing any degree. Returning to England in 1910, he continued to study at Oxford and convalesced during the summers at Moray in northeastern Scotland, until the beginning of the Great War in 1914 called him home to Germany. Kurt Hahn never achieved a degree beyond his secondary schooling. During the war, Hahn served as a reader for the German Foreign Office and then the Supreme Command, reviewing English-language newspapers to gauge popular opinion. Politically, he allied himself with those inside the German government who were seeking a negotiated peace in Western Europe instead of protracted war. Perceived as a liberal within the political spectrum of his day, Hahn advocated greater restraint in pursuing German war aims. He espoused a code of responsibility that would be equally binding in war and peace; he used his influence behind the scenes to remind those in power about conciliatory factions at work within the governments of enemy nations.

At the end of the war, Prince Max von Baden asked Hahn to become his personal secretary. An articulate and enterprising young man, Hahn helped Prince Max, Germany's last imperial chancellor, to complete his memoirs, probably writing as much as editing. Whatever the form of their collaboration, the two men left a record of tough-minded idealism and political vigilance. When Prince Max returned to spend his last years at the ancestral castle of his family at Schloss Salem, by Lake Constance, he took Kurt Hahn with him and they discussed projects to renew the ethical traditions of German social life, traditions they believed were threatened not only by extremism on the right and left, but by incomprehension, moral failings, and lack of will in the middle. In 1920, with Prince Max as benefactor, Hahn opened Salem School in part of the castle.

Salem School, which still operates today, was influenced by the educational ideas of Plato, Cecil Reddie's Abbotsholme and other English schools, and the example of country schools started by German educators under the leadership of Hermann Lietz. Salem represented an attempt to create a healthy environment in which young people could learn habits that would protect them against what Hahn saw as the deteriorating values of modern life. He identified the worst declines as those in fitness, skill and care, self-discipline, initiative and enterprise, memory and imagination, and compassion. Directing the school from 1920 until 1933, Hahn placed greater emphasis on noncompetitive physical activities and democratic forms of social cooperation than was the case in conventional German schools. At the urging of Prince Max, he incorporated egalitarian aims into the design of the school; while Salem naturally attracted the children of the wealthy, it also made space for, and actively sought, less privileged students. Emulating the Cistercian monks who had inhabited the castle for many centuries, the students and teachers at Salem School helped the surrounding communities through various forms of service, including a fire brigade.

The curriculum at Salem prepared young people for higher education, but not without laying the groundwork for a life of moral and civic virtue, the chief aims of the school. Among the unusual assumptions underlying all forms of instruction at Salem was Hahn's conviction that students should experience failure as well as success. They should learn to overcome negative inclinations within themselves and prevail against adversity. He believed, moreover, that students should learn to discipline their own needs and desires for the good of the community. They should realize, through their own experience, the connection between self-discovery and service. He also insisted that true learning required periods of silence and solitude as well as directed activity.

Each day, the students took a silent walk to commune with nature and revitalize their powers of reflection. To keep mental and physical growth in balance, Hahn developed the notion of a training plan for his students, each of whom committed himself to an individually designed, gradually more challenging regimen of physical exercise and personal hygiene. Unlike the physical education program of other schools, the aim of the training plan was simply to establish good living habits, not to produce high levels of performance in competitive games.

An assassin failed to end Hahn's life in 1923. Still in his early thirties, the schoolmaster was controversial, a target because he was a moral leader far beyond the lives of his students and teachers. The director of Salem - the school's name means "peace" - refused to back down from the moral aims that he believed should animate every aspect of education. In a nation frighteningly polarized by the right and left in political debate, Hahn forced educational issues into the larger discussion of how society should be organized, and what people must do to maintain human decency in a world of conflict. No idyllic schoolmaster's life awaited him.

As the Nazis rose to power, the director of Salem School became an outspoken opponent. In 1932, a group of fascist storm troopers kicked a leftist activist to death before the eyes of his mother. Adolph Hitler immediately praised the action of his followers. Kurt Hahn wrote to the alumni of Salem, telling them to choose between Salem and Hitler. A man who knew Hahn at the time called it "the bravest deed in cold blood that I have ever witnessed." When he became the chief of state in 1933, Hitler imprisoned Hahn. Fortunately for the embattled educator, he still had friends in Britain who remembered his idealism and his hopes for friendship between the two nations. Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald and others helped to arrange for Hahn's release and timely emigration to England in 1933.

*Ramsay Macdonald (1866-1937), Scottish politician,
first Labour Prime Minister of England, 1910.*



Within a year of his arrival, Kurt Hahn started another institution, Gordonstoun, which became one of Britain's most distinguished progressive schools and served as a model for similar schools in other countries. In the following decades, Hahn's educational vision served as the moving spirit for new institutions and programs of world-wide renown: the Moray Badge and County Badge Schemes, and their successor, the Duke of Edinburgh Awards, Outward Bound, the Trevelyan Scholarships and the United World Colleges.

Judging from the chronology, the sequence of accomplishments in the career of a prominent educator, one might be inclined to notice only the power and success of the man. A biography pursued along this vein would find no shortage of material to

demonstrate the pattern of growth. Nor would it be difficult to show the man's brilliant capabilities of creative adaptation throughout his career. Hahn always had the resounding quote - often still quotable to this day - when the occasion demanded or seemed likely to respond to eloquence. He was, it could be argued, a discerning idealist; his dreams were driven as much by political acumen as by educational wisdom. Given his penchant for currying the favor of powerful men, it would even be tempting for the biographer to caricature Hahn's ponderous moralism as a relic of the last century, and expose the ambition behind his charisma as he operated in high places during some of the most anguished moments of a troubled century.

Such a chronicle would leave out something essential, an element without which Hahn's philosophy of education makes no sense at all. To imagine what might have been inside the schoolman, what drove his dreams, another kind of biography is needed. Where was Kurt Hahn's life center? When, and under what circumstances, did it emerge in recognizable form? How did its imperatives widen to become his whole life, then to drive others' dreams over the years? Without answers to these questions, the rest of the story virtually writes itself and can be told in a few insipid pages. To seek Hahn's center requires beginning the story all over again.

The Center of A Life

Kurt Hahn understood weakness better than strength. The goal of learning, in his view, was compensatory: to purify the destructive inclinations of the human personality, to redress the imbalances in modern ways of living, to develop each person's disabilities to their maximum potential, and to place new-found strength in service of those in need. Kurt Hahn was suspicious of presumed excellence; he paid scant attention to the glories of unsurpassed individual performance, whether it be on the playing fields at Eton or the examination ordeal of the German gymnasium. He understood, as few educators have so well, the tender fears of young people, their alienation before the rigors and rituals of adult power. He understood how wrong it was to vanquish them with that power to make them learn. This strategy would only deepen their confusion about the meaning of their lives, making them cynical, lacking in humanity, even if it strengthened them.

Where did Hahn learn this, and if he once felt it himself, how did he convert his own weakness into an enduring vision of education? We must look, I believe, to that most tumultuous time of life to see the emerging center. In late adolescence, on the threshold of higher education and adult life, Hahn felt the impact of three events that changed his life.



"Hahn's favorite story was the Good Samaritan, wherein the strong, those clearly in a position to help the most, failed to act. It was the outsider, the weak, the despised who taught what it means to be a civilized human being."

The first was an expedition, some days of fresh air and majestic surroundings on a walking tour of the Dolomite Alps. One can well imagine the exhilaration of a boy in his teens on such a rite of passage. Famed for their bold, other-worldly shapes, their awe-inspiring hues of light and shadow from sunrise to sunset, the Dolomites imprinted on Hahn an inextinguishable love of natural beauty. As an educator, he would always be devising ways to turn his classrooms out of doors, putting his students into motion and forcing his teachers to come to grips with the healing powers of direct experience.

Something else happened on this expedition. A second event added a specific passion to these other feelings, strong enough to organize his self-discovery into a lifelong vocation. Two English schoolboys who accompanied Hahn gave him a gift, a book called *Emlohstobba* by the German educator Hermann Lietz. The title of the book was the name of their school, Abbotsholme, spelled backwards. Lietz wrote rapturously of life inside that school, where he served as master of studies for a sabbatical year under the innovative headmaster, Cecil Reddie. When Lietz returned to Germany, he fathered the country school movement there, inspiring others to begin schools more healthful for young people than the prevailing system of the time.

Dolomite Alps, Italy



For Hahn this book was a momentous gift. Along with the living example of the two students from Abbotsholme, who impressed him with their healthy love of life, and the sheer beauty of their alpine journey together, young Hahn must have felt in himself a new

conviction of life's possibilities. Coming at a time when his own formal education was marching lockstep through the authoritarian, rigidly academic curriculum of the gymnasium, the alternative vision of a more humane and democratic school, capable of fostering more perfect human beings, seized his imagination with a force that can be judged only by abandoning strict chronology and looking ahead to the seventy indefatigable years of institution-building that lay in front of him.

It was not on that trip, however, that Hahn imagined the school he hoped to build. Two years later, the year of his graduation from the gymnasium, a third event completed his initiation. He suffered a life-threatening sunstroke that permanently changed his life. Never again would he have the freedom to trek or sail long, pleasurable distances out-of-doors. Nor was it certain, in the weeks following the accident, whether he would recover enough even to participate in normal functions of life. Depression set in, squelching his hopes. One would not be surprised if his boyhood dreams became cruel reminders of all that was not possible now. His life was a wash-out, a failure before it had really begun.



Here, and not in his later life of so many memorable accomplishments, the educational genius of the man is to be found. The center emerged as a discovery of who he really was inside, the gift of suddenly knowing what he had to do, and would do, when he bumped up against his own limitations. It was the scale of values, the plan of life, the desired future he asserted as his response to adversity.

Adversity came to Hahn in several forms, all of which must have seemed insuperable from his perspective in a darkened room as he recovered from his accident. The physical disability would always be present in his life. It would be necessary for him to wear a broad-brimmed hat to protect his head from the sunlight. Frail in the heat, he would have to flee northward to a cooler climate in the summers. Periodically, he would need to undergo major operations to relieve the fluid pressure within his head. All this he knew, or could well imagine, in those months of convalescence, but he also could not help but be conscious of other adversities that would dog his every effort to improve himself for the rest of his life. In his family, the other sons received encouragement to go into business, while Kurt appeared to be gravitating toward a less prestigious role, possibly that of a teacher. He loved the classics and pushed himself hard in his attempts to master them, but alas, he did not shine as a student. Although he revered tradition, he would never know the life of a scholar. Even if he had been a much better student, his Jewish

background would always limit his opportunities in a nation whose anti-semitism was becoming increasingly strident with each passing decade.

In his darkened room, Kurt Hahn regenerated his spirit with a vision of what he could do with his life. He decided that he would someday start a school modeled on principles drawn from Plato's Republic, a school that would expand the wholesome influence he identified with Hermann Lietz and Cecil Reddie's Abbotsholme. How much of the vision came to him at that time and how much came later is not clear, but he grasped the essential outline. The school would harmonize the social and intellectual differences between its students by operating as a community of participation and active service. It would seek out the natural qualities of leadership, skill, and responsibility possessed by all in different ways when they see that they are truly needed. His school of the future would harmonize the wild and discordant personality of the adolescent by demonstrating this true need.

How could his vision be made believable to the alienated young? Closer to home, how could Kurt Hahn himself, in his debility and depression, bring himself to believe in a better life? Forced by the accident to reflect upon his own childhood, to seek out some deeper matrix of meaning to keep his spirits up, Hahn came face to face with his own youthful passion. He came to see that there exists in everyone a grand passion, an outlandish thirst for adventure, a desire to live boldly and vividly in the journey through life. This vision sprang forth as the most salient lesson of his lifelong pedagogy.



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That was not all, however, and it was not enough. For now the Dolomites and the classics flowed together to become Hahn's vision of the good. Passion must not be treated lightly. Its deep springs in human nature must not be poisoned. Above all, it must not be misdirected and turned to inhumane ends. The grand passion of the young must be embraced in wholesome ways by adult power. It must be nurtured instead of deformed or punished. Its creative force must be harnessed to the quest for a good society, the aim of Plato's educational designs. To accomplish this purpose would require more than a school in the traditional sense. Hahn believed that some separation from the existing human world, into the intensity of a journey-quest, confronting challenges and transforming opportunities for service, could change the balance of power in young people. Then they would be more inclined to use their lives, back in the world from which they came, to bring the good society into being.



Ice climbing, Colorado Outward Bound School, USA

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With the center in view, the chronology of Kurt Hahn's life takes on greater meaning. Expelled from the land of his birth, the schoolmaster continued his career in Britain, which became a second homeland for him. When he opened Gordonstoun in 1934, Hahn carried the Salem tradition to the new setting, and he brought staff and students with him. New features appeared, such as the addition of rescue training to the service program.

And some of the old practices changed, or were presented differently, in response to the cultural milieu of the British Isles. All this, of course, is to be expected in transplanting the design of an institution from one place and time to another. Certainly the transition was made easier by the strong affinity of Hahn's thinking with the traditions of Abbotsholme and the English public schools. What stands out, nonetheless, is the fact that Hahn was able in so short a time to create a new institution which, like his first school, would become known around the world for its distinctive educational practices. If Hahn had not been restless, if he had not felt driven toward wider applications of his principles beyond any school he might ever create, he would perhaps have settled down to a long career as the eccentric headmaster of a school favored by the English

aristocracy. But he was not satisfied. He began to organize a constellation of other educational forms around Gordonstoun, using the school as a staging ground for programs through which he hoped to instruct the whole society around him in the first lessons of sound living and civic responsibility. The Moray Badge Scheme took form in 1936, followed quickly by the larger and better known County Badge a year later. Hahn and the allies he gathered around his educational vision experimented with short courses. They hoped to discover the combination of challenging experiences that might help young people discover new ways of organizing their lives and working with other people. In 1941, with Laurence Holt, Hahn started Outward Bound as a short course. Initially, the goal was to strengthen the will of young men so that they could prevail against adversity as Great Britain faced staggering losses at sea during World War II. After the program had demonstrated its effectiveness, it continued to expand during the post-war years, furnishing opportunities for personal and social growth to many people beyond the original clientele of boys and young men.

Chronology alone cannot account for Hahn's widening sphere of educational activity. Only by grasping how he continued to draw both from a sense of weakness and from the strong idealism at the center of his being, can we understand his intuitive leaps as he created new programs over the years. Hahn perceived clearly that schools as we know them are not equal to the urgent problems of social life in this century. Even the best schools probably damage as much as develop the volatile inner lives of young people. One reason for this unintended consequence is that schools represent only a partial solution to a much more pervasive problem. The problem of how to educate the whole person cannot be solved without learning how to civilize human communities, which in turn cannot be done without preparing the entire world society in the arts of living harmoniously at the highest levels of potential activity and understanding. Hahn's debt to Plato was his conviction that education must embrace all these aspects of human life. Exiled to England, Kurt Hahn was restless at the center of his being. Carrying with him an unflinching impression of the expanding Third Reich and its effects on European civilization, he could never be satisfied with the auspicious beginning of a single school. Soon after his arrival, he began to write and speak in public, deploring the general lack of fitness among the British people. He urged his hosts to recognize the need for programs on a large scale that would combine individual training plans with group projects to build stronger civic consciousness.

Out of such concerns he initiated the Moray and County Badge Schemes. The latter quickly expanded and became further elaborated in many counties across the British Isles, spreading even to other countries in the British Commonwealth. The County Badge granted public recognition to young people who completed a planned course of challenges. They first adopted a training plan of physical conditioning and personal health habits. Then they undertook an arduous expedition requiring group decision making as well as individual effort. They also completed a project demanding new skills and craftsmanship. Finally, they engaged in service activities, experiencing the value of compassion through direct action on behalf of the community or specific people in need.



Kurt Hahn, 1955

At the beginning of the war, the County Badge contained most of the essential features of the Outward Bound program as it would develop in future years. Indeed the secretary and key promoter of the County Badge Experimental Committee, James Hogan, became the first warden of the first Outward Bound School at Aberdovy in Wales. Yet there was a difference, and it was more than the residential setting and month-long sustained program of Outward Bound. Although both programs offered models for changing how individuals organize their lives, there was something more universal and enduring about Outward Bound.

Hahn had realized how close weakness and strength are in the most powerful forms of education. In his own day, he perceived clearly, while others did not, the subtle line that distinguishes compassionate service from destructive egotism. On the one hand, he feared the lack of will among those whose lives stood in the path of the advancing Third Reich. Hence his call for programs like the County Badge to build fitness and commit young people to civic ideals. But on the other hand, he recognized the affinity between his methods and those of the Nazis, one used for the good, the other for deadly ends.

There is an irony in this affinity, since Hahn was criticized by some in England for importing the paramilitary methods of the Hitler Youth. The irony is that the Hitler Youth movement did not discover the intensive methods of socialization they used to unleash the energies of the young. Rather, they borrowed from the leading educators of the day and applied the methods to their own goals. Hahn knew this well, for he had seen the Hitler Youth before he left Germany. Their leaders had adapted and twisted to demonic purposes the training plan of Salem.

Hahn had witnessed, therefore, the effects of reaching the whole person with the fascist plan of life instead of a Samaritan ethic. Hitler and his followers were reinforcing the passion of the young, giving them a spirit of adventure, introducing them to self-development and cooperation in the outdoors, then giving them meaningful opportunities to serve. Hahn recognized that there was no time for complacency. The weakness of the

status quo must be acknowledged. All education must be made activist, or else the humane values upon which Western democracies were built would succumb to a determined usurper.

Not even in its desperate beginnings before the onslaught of the Third Reich did Outward Bound ever train young people for war, but it arose fully conscious of the challenge presented by the Hitler Youth, that nationwide mobilization of young people to serve the cause of world conquest and genocide. Never did anyone press Outward Bound toward becoming a preparation for violence. In this respect, it would always remain distinct from youth mobilizations under totalitarian regimes. Yet it is difficult to imagine how Outward Bound would ever have come into being if it had not been for Hahn's recognition of the weakness of democratic cultures before well-organized forms of authoritarian education that were appallingly efficient at stirring up the passions of the young for collective violence.

Through Outward Bound, Hahn hoped to foster a deeper intensity of commitment in the rite of passage from youth to adult life. He was intent on creating more dramatic challenges and victories for the young than were available in conventional forms of schooling. Advocating a more arduous quest than was present in the institutions around him, Hahn was working from a disability greater than his own, a collective predicament verging on catastrophe. In England during the German Blitzkrieg, it was by no means apocalyptic to argue that there would need to be a new education, reconstructed on a massive scale, to produce the compassionate army needed to preserve what was left of civilization at home. Hahn believed that an intensive program of training, expedition, reflection, and service could make a difference.

That belief survived beyond the exigencies of war, but Hahn's own direct role quickly receded once the philosophical values were in place to launch Outward Bound. While Hahn continued to influence Outward Bound, it soon took on a life of its own under the vigorous leadership of many people drawn to its idealism and hardy lifestyle over the years. Taking an image from Plato, Hahn likened himself to a midwife of educational projects as he sparked ideas for new endeavors and then left much of the development and maintenance to others. Outward Bound sea and mountain schools proliferated across several continents in the following decades. As it adapted itself to different cultures in later years, Outward Bound lost some of its wartime urgency, but it maintained a zest for adventure and Hahn's legacy of moral purpose.

Outward Bound has come to mean many things in different places and for the great variety of people who are drawn to it. But at its heart, in every time and place, is Hahn's own center, his conviction that it is possible, even in a relatively short time, to introduce greater balance and compassion into human lives by impelling people into experiences which show them they can rise above adversity and overcome their own defeatism. They can make more of their lives than they thought they could, and learn to serve others with their strength.

Hahn's post-war contributions include several other projects of which he considered himself more midwife than instigator. It would be most accurate to characterize him as the moving spirit, since his arts of persuasion were decisive in each case. The Trevelyan Scholarships, for example, provided funds for young people to attend Oxford and Cambridge, based on experiential as well as academic criteria: applicants were asked to complete a project of their own design, which would be reviewed by a selection panel. Shortly after a recurrence of his sunstroke in the early 1950s, Hahn helped to launch the Duke of Edinburgh Award, a program similar to the County Badge but more widely developed throughout the British Commonwealth.



Climber, Hurricane Island Outward Bound School, USA



Teenage girls rock climbing on an Outward Bound course, Wales, United Kingdom, 1955

His crowning achievement after the war was the United World Colleges, which began with the founding of Atlantic College in 1962. If Outward Bound's origins are to be found in the war, those of the United World Colleges appear in the desire to build institutions that will offer a living example of what it means to be at peace. Taking students from ages sixteen to nineteen, equivalent to the sixth form in England or the last two years before postsecondary education in the United States, these colleges bring together boys and girls from all over the world, from competing social and economic systems, from rival cultures and religions.

The program fosters world citizenship, an interconnected leadership of people who have experienced a collective life of active dialogue and peacemaking service. The curriculum, like that of Gordonstoun, combines both academic and experiential challenges, but the institutions have developed in new directions under their diverse leadership, leaving some

of Hahn's educational practices behind while preserving others. Kurt Hahn's original insight that such institutions were possible stands as perhaps the greatest legacy of his influence.



Kurt Hahn, on his 80th birthday

Returning to Germany for his last days, Kurt Hahn died near Salem, in Hermannsburg, on December 14, 1974. The entry in Britain's Dictionary of National Biography calls him "headmaster and citizen of humanity." Hahn's educational influence persists under such organizations as the Round Square Conference, which comprises schools modeled on Salem and Gordonstoun. His genius in devising short-term, educational experiences has not stopped infusing energy and inspiration into the Outward Bound Trust, which oversees Outward Bound schools throughout the world. His love of peace flourishes in the United World Colleges, not to mention the many other institutions and individuals who continue to embody his ideals. The man's center remains, beckoning like an adventure. Arise from weakness to teach about strength. Turn self-discovery into acts of compassion. Everywhere defend human decency.

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