

# ESSAY

## LEARNING THE HARD WAY

---

Andrew Crompton

**T**ake a class of schoolchildren sitting quietly at their desks. Now leave the room, close the door and wait. What will happen next? In a process of spontaneous combustion they will begin to buzz and fidget, then chatter and shout. Soon the furniture will start to move and a riot will be underway.

Education is founded upon a power relation and knowing how long it takes to break down is something every teacher has to learn. Surprisingly teaching, of a sort, can still take place even when those who need to learn have absolute control over the syllabus, the timetable and the teacher. Such in fact is the position of a police interrogator unrestrained by the law extracting information from prisoners. This vice-versa world was described in the *Gulag Archipelago*, a good book to read on a cold day with a cup of strong tea if you are feeling sorry for yourself. One reads in amazement how the Soviet secret police, organised along Fordist lines, forced millions of citizens to confess to imaginary crimes before dispatching them to Arctic death camps.

Like a virus which changes its genetic code the organisation behind this calamity kept changing its name: Cheka; OGPU; MGB; NKVD; MVD; KGB. Solzhenitsyn simply called them 'the

Organs', and concluded that the appropriate attitude for those falling into their hands was this: Give yourself up for dead. No one was safe. Those members of the Organs who fell foul of their own employer signed anything that was asked of them in

*"The horrid thing was that the truth would not do"*

a spirit of friendly co-operation, but amongst those new to the process the first topics of any conversation in the camps were the beatings, the fingers in doors, the broken teeth and the rubber aprons.

The horrid thing was that the truth would not do. You could not simply confess to nothing. You had to make something up. These learning outcomes, as we would call them today, were referred to as novels. In them victims incriminated their colleagues who were consumed in their turn at a rate controlled by decree to prevent the whole affair collapsing like a Ponzi scheme. All this took time and imagination. The skill of the interrogator lay in making his victim do the work, putting him in the position of a pupil who can make his teacher do his homework.

A procedure was developed that reduced strong men and women to limp obedience to their interrogator's fantasies. It was based on sleep deprivation seasoned with a little violence; though not too much in case it interfered with the creative process.

Interrogations could take place at any time, but it was most often at night that the victim was summoned. Now threatening, now helpful, the questioners were quite amoral and their purposes dark. Time was suspended during the interview, you had to stay awake and pay attention, there was no way of guessing how long it would go on. Over many years and millions of cases this was found to be the most efficient way of getting people to talk.

\*

Even after being cleaned and fed some babies will exercise their lungs for what seems to be no reason. They start crying and will not stop. This usually happens after dark at unpredictable times.

The advice of experience is to ignore it, but this can be very hard to do. A battle of wills follows. They may flail their arms and wet themselves with fury, there may be slobbering and scratching. To shut them up seems a supernatural skill. St. Augustine lists his tantrums as his first sins, offered as evidence that from the very beginning there is something wrong with us. 'Where or when Lord was I ever innocent?', he asks, before adding complacently: 'But I will say no more about that time, for since no trace of it

*"Babies, so it appears, use the proven techniques of the secret police"*

remains in my memory, it need no longer concern me.' Today few would argue that infants are little limbs of Satan. Could there be a reasonable explanation for their unreasonable behaviour?

Babies, so it appears, use the proven techniques of the secret police. The problem is that nothing seems to satisfy them and to care for one can be to fall victim to what Alan Bennett described as his secret fear; to be tortured for information he did not possess. Look afresh at P.C. Plod with his baby face, sucking his pencil, his stilted speech and difficulty writing. Guns, handcuffs, flashing lights, bells, whistles and rattles can all be adapted for play. The wail of a police siren on an empty street is not the howl of a wolf but the whooping cry of a child.

Some people fight back. In Britain about one child per week is killed by a minder. Numberless others are beaten and neglected. Perhaps it is has ever been like this. You would, however, be foolish to attempt a political defence in court because the state always sticks up for the interrogator. Of course it is more likely to be step-parents rather than biological parents who turn nasty, but how are infants to know if the person they are provoking is a blood relation or not? Interestingly one of the first things children are told when they are old enough to understand is that step-parents can be dangerous, along with a warning not to play with the Gypsies in the wood. Sadly that news arrives too late for some.

The fact that it is step-parents who are most likely to buy

silence with violence suggests that genes are involved in this behaviour. Look at it from an evolutionary game theory point of view and ask: What benefit do these superbly evolved creatures get from their reckless screaming? Are they perhaps trying to learn something? What could that something be? It is not philosophy they are after and the facts of life such as grown-ups suppose them to be are uninteresting to babies and children alike. The information extracted by these methods is poetic. We rock in our chair like the possessed, speak to the void as if in prayer then sing like criminals; this little piggy; each peach pear plum. And this seems to be enough. Older children can be calmed by fairy tales. It hardly matters if they are true or not. This is a late-stage interrogation where the imagination flows; the end is in sight, the novel almost complete. Sign here, the game is over.

\*

Many cognitive linguists believe that we are genetically pre-adapted to receive language in whatever form it appears to us. If so then children's instinctive behaviour must have evolved to cover a wide range of circumstances including getting the attention of exhausted or drunken parents. The fact that until early adulthood latent violence emerges when education is interrupted is suggestive. One is tempted to say that children are adapted to acquire language and culture and are quite unscrupulous about how they go about getting what they need. Babies are born brave and need to be so. What it is death to be without, it is worth risking your life to acquire.