



The Learning Project

by Lincoln Stoller

Phyllis Schlafly: Social Activist

Interviewed in St. Louis on Jan. 27th, 2009

Born 1924, in St. Louis, Missouri

Narrator: "You just want me to hit you?"

Tyler Durden: "C'mon, do me this one favor."

Narrator: "Why?"

Tyler Durden: "Why? I don't know why; I don't know. Never been in a fight. You?"

Narrator: "No, but that's a good thing."

Tyler Durden: "No, it is not. How much can you know about yourself if you've never been in a fight? I don't wanna die without any scars. So come on – hit me, before I lose my nerve."

– Fight Club (Film), 1999. From "Fight Club," by Chuck Palahniuk

"If you hide your ignorance, no one will hit you and you'll never learn."

– Faber, in "Fahrenheit 451," by Ray Bradbury

LS:

I got your name from a guy named John Taylor Gatto...

PS:

Oh-ho!

LS:

... I asked him who he thought I should speak to, and you were the first person he said.

PS:

He's a remarkable guy. Are you going to ask me questions?

LS:

As little as I can. There are a couple of approaches that the older people who I interview take. One approach is simply tell me their biography, others tell me about their formative years. You can do whatever you want.

PS:

Learning starts with learning how to read. The scandal of our country today is that our expensive educational establishment has allowed kids to go through school and not learn how to read. English is about 85% a phonetic language and they need to be taught phonics in the 1st grade. And there is no point in moving to the second grade until they know how to read.



The whole story is told in Rudolf Flesch's book, "Why Johnny Can't Read," which came out in 1955. That was the year my first child was ready for the 1st grade. I read the book and believed it. I bought the books that he recommended, taught my child how to read, and then entered him in the 2nd grade, already knowing how to read. I did that with all my six children, and that's why they have done so well. They've all got a couple of degrees and had no problem in school.

In the early 1950's a contrary system came in which was called "Look-Say," and which now is called "Whole Language." Basically, it's teaching the child to memorize a few dozen frequently used words. Now there's a limit to how many words a little child can memorize when he looks at the print on the page; maybe a couple of hundred. This is why, in international tests, you find they score all right in the 1st and 2nd grades, maybe the 3rd grade, but by the time they get to the 4th grade they're falling way behind. They do not know how to put together the sounds and syllables of the English language.

A child of age 5, in a reasonably educated home, will probably know 25,000 words in his oral vocabulary. He'll know words like "grandfather," and "toothbrush," and "upstairs," and "helicopter," and "hippopotamus," and so forth. But if you don't teach him the syllables of the words, then there's a limited number of words that he can memorize. And this is why, as they move along in school and get books with bigger words, they can't read.

I taught my children with a phonics system that was widely used in the Chicago area, and we had no problem. The years went on and, when my grandchildren arrived, I wanted them to learn how to read, too. But by this time there were no phonics books available — they had all been allowed to go out of print. So I ended up writing my own, and here it is. (She presents me with a copy of her "First Reader," also available in a revised edition entitled "Turbo Reader." – LS) It's the best phonics reader available. And it's an authentic phonics system with which you teach a child to read with only a dozen or so words that they have to memorize, like "the." Basically it works by simply putting the sounds and syllables together.

Up until about 1950, the standard book used in public schools was the McGuffey Readers. McGuffey wasn't a real phonics book like mine, but it was phonetic. It taught children the sounds of the words, and it taught the American people how to read. But McGuffey went out of use, and 90% of the schools in this country adopted the "Dick and Jane" readers, or similar "Look-Say" readers.

The "Dick and Jane" publisher, which I think was Scott Foresman, sent salesmen around the country. The McGuffey readers have no color in them, the print is smaller, and it's a little harder for a kid to relate to. Dick and Jane were full color on every page, with big pictures and a little bit of type in big print. You would have to be a semi-moron not to figure out what the print said after you looked at the picture.

For example, you'd have a see-saw and the line underneath would say, "See Dick up, see Jane down." You'd have to be an idiot not to figure that out. And so the child says, "Look mother, I'm reading!" But the children aren't really reading, they're guessing. It's a combination of a little bit of memorization, a lot of guessing, and looking at the pictures. Yet, in the 1st grade, they made the parents and the students think they were reading.



My favorite story about what's wrong with this system happened in the George W. Bush – Al Gore campaign in 2000. There was a big flap about the election in Florida that caused recounting many ballots. They found a significant number of people — it wasn't enough to change the election — had voted for Al Gore for President and had also voted for the Libertarian Party candidate for President. Now, you know if you vote for two people for the same office you cancel your ballot.

The newspaper did an investigation to find out why in the world anybody would vote for Al Gore and also for the Libertarian Party. Well, some people voted for Al Gore. Then they saw "Libertarian" and they thought it was "Lieberman" — Lieberman was the Vice-Presidential candidate with Gore — and they thought they were confirming their vote for Gore and Lieberman!

If you haven't had phonics, you cannot tell the difference between Libertarian and Lieberman. You look at the beginning and end of the word, and the approximate size, and there it is. Those people couldn't read. These were grown up people, they had jobs and so forth, but really they couldn't read.

This is what's happened to learning in this country. About a third of our population is basically illiterate. They get all their information from 20-second sound bytes on television. They don't read anything, and therefore they don't know much about anything. There is no injustice that was ever done to the minority population in this country as great as letting them go through 12 years of school without teaching them how to read.

LS:

There are so many ways you could go with this. Do you want go to the causes or the consequences?

PS:

Well, the consequences are obvious: people can't read. And the causes, well, you can speculate on people's motives. I think one part of it was the marketing plan of the publisher of "Dick and Jane." In those years, when Dick and Jane came in, there was no Federal presence in the public school system. They were all individual school districts, and yet almost overnight, within a couple of years, 80% of the schools had the "Dick and Jane" readers, or the "Alice and Jerry" readers, which was a competitor.

You understand one of the commercial advantages of this: if I sell you my First Reader, then I don't have anything else to sell you. I don't have any second reader. But if you buy "Dick and Jane," or "Alice and Jerry," you've got to go from first to second to third, and the publisher can sell the series. There's a great commercial advantage in *not* teaching children how to read. But that's not the whole story. There have to be plenty of people who know what's happened, but who don't do anything about it, and who maybe like the system. Maybe they want people to be dumb that they can be more easily led around.

LS:

That was John Gatto's thesis: tools for dumbing kids down are not just sold, they are enthusiastically bought.



PS:

Of course. According to John Dewey, the father of modern education, the whole purpose of public schooling is to socialize children, not to educate them. So there may be different motives, but the result is obvious. The latest adult literacy survey is on the internet — I pulled it off just about 2 or 3 weeks ago — and it's depressing, it's devastating. If you can't read, you can't learn.

LS:

Tell me more about what you think learning is.

PS:

I think a lot of it is reading the great books, so you get different ideas, different ways of approaching problems, different experiences. You find out what other people did, find out how they accomplished great things. It enables you to cope with life.

LS:

Phyllis Schlafly is not your average mid-Western woman and she didn't become who she was just by reading the books that were available to everyone. How did you become what you are through a learning process that was available to everyone? How did you leverage it in such a powerful way?

PS:

I grew up in a very hardworking family. I grew up during the Great Depression, and at the end of the day both my mother and my father had other projects they were working on, to finish out the day. My parents worked all the time. I thought that was what I was supposed to do.

I always knew I wanted to go to college; however we didn't have any money for college. Incidentally, college for women did not just start with the feminist movement; my mother got her college degree in 1920, which I enjoy telling college students.

I went to work on my 18th birthday. In St. Louis we had the largest ammunition plant in the world, the St. Louis Ordnance Plant. I went to work as a gunner testing .30 and .50 caliber ammunition, performing all the tests for the government to accept ammunition: accuracy, penetration, hangfire, all the various tests. Half the time I worked 4pm to midnight, and the other half midnight to 8 in the morning, and I went to college in the morning.

I got my B.A. degree from Washington University in St. Louis, and then got a Master's at Harvard. I'd saved up enough money to have a year at Harvard. Political science was a subject that fit into my schedule, and I liked it.

I then went to Washington and I got a job doing various types of tedious research on political subjects, and then I came back to St. Louis and did likewise. Then I got married and started to have a family. My husband practiced law and we so lived in Alton, which is about a 40-minute drive from St. Louis.

Everybody knew 1952 was going to be a big Republican year. We lived in a Democratic district. The Party came around and asked my husband to run for Congress, but he had



no interest. In the course of the conversation, somebody said, “Oh Phyllis, why don’t you do it?” So I did. I ran a kind of an intellectual campaign and won the primary, lost the general election, and have been a volunteer in politics ever since.

My interests and activity grew right along with my children. I was active in Republican women’s clubs, and from 1960 to ‘64 I was president of the Illinois Federation of Republican Women.

One of my hobbies was checking up on Republican National Conventions. I find them quite interesting — I’ve been to every one beginning in 1952, I’ve been a delegate to most of them. Most delegates to a Republican convention are first-timers, and they needed to know what happened before. So I wrote a little book called, “A Choice, Not an Echo,” and published it myself — who would publish a book by some unknown Alton housewife, as they called me — and I sold 3 million copies. That’s what gave me my national following.

You asked about my learning process. I believe that once you know how to read, the way you really learn something is to write about it. It’s not enough just to read about it; it’s only when you write about it that you really have a grasp of what you’re talking about.

LS:

I didn’t learn to write until I had to start writing. Reading and writing are wholly different things. It’s the difference between looking at a painting, and painting!

PS:

Oh yeah. Yeah. Except that most painters enjoy their work, but most people don’t enjoy writing; it’s tedious, it’s hard work. (laughs) But you know the subject after you write about it.

LS:

There is still something that’s not disclosed in how you learned because either you were extremely capable or lucky... there’s a passion thing. It sounds like either you were always passionate in pursuit of something, or you learned to be. How did you go from a normal person to an abnormally capable person? Can other people do it? It’s not just reading.

PS:

No, no it’s not. (Long pause.) I don’t know the answer to your question.

LS:

Well... could restate the question in a way that is meaningful to you?

PS:

How did I become passionate? How did I become an activist? It was one step at a time. I grew up a very shy person. I wasn’t a leader. That’s one of the talks I give: if I can be a leader, then anybody can be a leader. Some leaders are born, and I was not a born social person. I had to learn it all.



LS:

Why?

PS:

Why did I have to learn it? Because I wanted to accomplish certain goals. How did I learn it? Basically by running for office. I tell people they should run for office. (laughs) There are three results of running for office: you win, you lose, or you learn. And I learned a whole lot each time I ran. You learn to relate to people.

LS:

You didn't read about it, so there's another kind of learning going on there. Why did you choose to emphasize reading first?

PS:

Well, you've got to have something to talk about if you're going to talk to people. You need to read in order to have something intelligent to say! (laughs)

LS:

Two things that seem to be the most formative in peoples' backgrounds are their parents, or some supportive mentor, or reading, as you can appreciate. But not reading in a structured way, rather they just fall into reading for a lack of anything else to do, which is pretty valid if you're a kid as most of what you're subjected to is pretty trivial.

Tell me a bit more about your parents. Did you have mentors separate from your parents?

PS:

No, no... it would be my parents. As I said, we grew up during the Great Depression and my father lost his job. My mother had prepared herself, not only with a college degree but with a graduate degree in Library Science. When we needed to eat, she got one job after another and ultimately became the librarian at the St. Louis Art Museum, where she was for 25 years. She was the financial mainstay of our family, with some pitiful salary all those years.

My father had a few jobs here and there, but I would say my mother was our main support. The mentoring that I had gave me the idea that I had to be prepared to support myself no matter what. That's why I put so much into going to college.

My classmates could have done it. Some of them had parents who could pay for their college, and some of them didn't care, and didn't go. But I wanted to go, and I didn't have parents who could pay for it. So I did what I had to do. The goal was to get myself prepared to support myself. It was the goal of having a decent life.

LS:

Ultimately, my project is to help people find a reason, or a direction. Tell me how other people can find something to draw on... we've got so many kids who don't know where to



go.

PS:

Don't waste your time. What I tell them is that I was working a 48-hour week, at a manual labor job, and then I was taking a full college course. I cannot understand what college students do with all their time.

This is what I tell the college audiences: "If you're not working a 48 hour week, then I don't understand what do you do with all your time! Why are you wasting your time? These are your most vigorous, healthy, productive years." (laughs) What are they doing?

LS:

What are they doing?

PS:

I don't know. I can't figure it out! Oh, some of them have a few, little part-time jobs I suppose. Maybe they're partying, but most of it is a waste of time. I think what I've done is to simply make use of all my time.

I remember when one of our sons came home from college and I said, "Andy, why don't you go out with your high school pals? They'd be glad to see you." "Aw, I don't want to do that." I said, "Why not?" "Well," he said, "all they like to do is go out and drink." "Oh," I said, "how come you don't like to go out and drink?" (laughs) He's pretty funny this kid.

He said, "Well mother, I've thought about this, and I think that when they came home from high school in the afternoon they saw their parents, and what did their parents do? They'd sit down and they'd have a cocktail and then they'd have a leisurely dinner. And when I came home from high school my parents kept right on working. And I thought that's what I was supposed to do."

When I was that age, and I came home, my parents kept right on working. After my mother worked her day job she was writing a social history of St. Louis. Some day I hope to get that manuscript published; it's a wonderful book. And my father worked 18 years sitting at a desk developing a rotary gasoline engine, which he finally did patent, but unhappily never sold it. At any rate, in the evenings, we just kept on working.

LS:

This is interesting. I'm surprised you don't highlight it more. It sounds like your father had a workshop.

PS:

No, it was all done on paper, with drawings.

LS:

Really! Amazing. Did you parents encourage you to learn, or read to you, or engage you in their pursuits?



PS:

Oh, not particularly. No, they never read to me. I read to myself.

LS:

Really? I read to my kid all the time. I think it's kind of standard these days.

PS:

How old is he?

LS:

I started reading to him, I don't know, when he was 5 maybe.

PS:

My answer to that is: if you want your kid to be a baseball player do you sit him down and read him stories about baseball players, or do you go out in the back yard and play ball with him?

LS:

I don't know. Tell me.

PS:

I think you teach him how to throw and catch a ball. Teach him how to read so that he can read himself. But you've got to give him things he likes to read.

One set of my grandchildren are twin girls, and a boy who's a year younger. The girls adapted fine to reading, but the boy saw no utility in learning how to read whatsoever. The girls liked to read about fairies and princesses... and he saw no point in that at all, it was a waste of time. But when he found he could read about *adventures* and *battles*, then there was a utility to learning how to read! (laughs)

LS:

Can you give me a personal story that's not pedagogy and not philosophy, something illustrative about how you learned?

PS:

Something that would illustrate learning? Hmm... I don't know.

LS:

How about one of your greatest failures. One learns a lot from them. Or successes.

PS:

I don't know what would make a good story. My fight to defeat the equal rights amendment was a very exciting battle.



LS:

Preface this by explaining the equal rights amendment. We're talking to kids here, and they won't know what it is.

PS:

The feminist movement came in to this country and captivated the media in the late 1960's. There are a lot of things wrong with the feminist movement, but the number one thing that's wrong with it is that they teach women to believe they're victims of an oppressive, discriminatory society. That is so false because American women are the most privileged class of people who ever lived on the face of the earth. Feminists told women that the solution to their victimhood was a new constitutional amendment, called The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

It's a long story, and we'd be here the rest of the afternoon if I tried to tell you all about it. But they put it through Congress and then it went out to the states, and I took on the battle. It turned out to be a 10-year battle.

Nobody thought we could stick with it for 10 years, but we did and we finally beat them. We beat everybody. We had Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter against us. We had 98% of the Congress, all the Governors, all the media, all the money, even Hollywood, and we beat them all.

One of the main reasons they lost was they were never able to show any benefit. You can wrap up a pretty package and maybe sell it to some dumb person, but over a 10-year period, if there's nothing in the package, then you can't sell it. And they were never able to show any benefit.

Illinois was the front line of the battle. The most dramatic day was in 1980 when we had everything against us. All the media and all the networks were there because the feminists had said that this was the day they were going to pass it.

Jimmy Carter, who was then President, was calling the Democrat legislators, promising them public housing projects if they would vote "Yes." The Governor of Illinois, who was a Republican, was calling the Republicans and telling them they would get dams, roads, and bridges in their districts if they would vote "Yes." And the Chicago Mayor, who was then Jane Byrne, was calling the ones who were beholden to the Chicago Machine (the Chicago political establishment – LS) threatening that their relatives would lose their jobs if they didn't vote "Yes." Grown men were weeping on the floor of the legislature that day: especially the Chicago guys who felt they had to vote "Yes" so that their relatives wouldn't lose their jobs.

The pro-ERA feminists had a hunger strike going on in the rotunda of the Illinois capitol, led by an excommunicated Mormon, and they had some experienced hunger strikers left over from the Vietnam War protests. They were lying around on couches on their hunger strike. The lesbian chain gang chained them selves to the door of the Senate chamber, so that the Senators had to step over them to get into their seats. (laughs) Then another bunch of them went to the slaughter house and got some plastic bags of pig's blood, and they wrote on our marble floors the names of the people they hated the most.

We'd counted our votes and we were 2 votes short. They voted electronically, and when the votes went up on the electronic board, and we had won again. God gave us two



votes we never had before. It was a dramatic day. It was really tough (laughs)... and we beat 'em all.

Eleanor Smeal, who was the head of the National Organization for Women, was there. ABC put her before the TV cameras in the gallery of the legislature and asked, "Well, Ms. Smeal, you said you had the votes. Why didn't you win?" And she said, "There was something very powerful against us, and I don't mean people." The feminists fought on for a couple more years, but that was the most dramatic day.

LS:

Was that a personal victory?

PS:

Oh yeah. It was a personal victory, but I had a lot of good people. I get very embarrassed when people say, "Phyllis single-handedly..." they use that word all the time for some unknown reason, and we had lots of people helping our cause. But every movement has to have a leader. I didn't grow up a leader, but I learned how to become a leader. All I did was raise the flag and say, "Let's march!"

The feminists haven't gotten over their defeat. Hillary Clinton is still calling for the Equal Rights Amendment. Yet they were never able to show one benefit! Not one single good thing that it will do. Of course, when they went on television they'd say it was going to give all women a raise. But that is not true because the employment laws are already sex neutral.

LS:

Do you see a social need that the ERA catered to?

PS:

No, but making people believe that they're oppressed and mistreated and not paid what they ought to be paid is an easy thing to do. I mean everybody probably thinks he's worth more than he's being paid.

LS:

One of the people I've interviewed is Native American. He says his parents bore the brunt of a lot of prejudice and ill treatment. Like a lot of people of their generation, his parents identify themselves as victims. But the current generation rejects this victim attitude. They identify it as a weak, stagnant approach.

PS:

Well, they may accomplish something if they get rid of their victimhood attitude. If you wake up in the morning with a chip on your shoulder, you're not going to succeed.

LS:

What would you tell kids who are making that transition from being dependent — who are dependents legally and practically, to independence or self-possession — about how they could make the most of themselves?



PS:

I think attitude is the key part of it. They should be so grateful that they live in the greatest country in the world, where they have the opportunity to do whatever they want, where we have so much freedom, where we have so much prosperity. Make what you want of your life. I think attitude is absolutely key.

There are an awful lot of people who have the attitude that they are mistreated, or unfairly treated. I tell the college students, "Grievances are like flowers: if you water them they will grow." So little grievances grow into big grievances, and it's so unfortunate! Everybody's got problems, and there's sin in the world, but move on and make your life what you want it to be! (laughs)