

## THE LIFE OF JOHN HOLT

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There is hardly a teacher in America who would not know John Holt's name. His first book *How Children Fail* sounded an alarm for the modern school system and helped launch the educational reform movement.

John Holt talked little about his own education. He wrote a dozen books on education which honed the sensitivities of two generations of teachers and parents. He was a very keen observer of children and whatever he saw happen in the classroom he would write in his diary. It is the collation of these memos which constituted his first book *How Children Fail*. He wrote:

Most children in school fail.

They fail because they are Afraid (A), Bored (B) and Confused (C).

They are afraid above all else of failing, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them, whose limitless hopes and aspirations for them hang over their heads like a cloud.

They are bored because the things they are told to do in school are so trivial, so dull and make limited demands on the wide spectrum of their intelligence, capabilities and talents.

They are confused because most of the torrent of words that pour over them in school makes little or no sense. It often flatly contradicts other things they have been told, and hardly ever has any relation to what they really know – to the tough model of reality that they carry in their minds.

*How Children Fail* became an educational best seller. Twenty years back it was translated and published in Hindi by Eklavya – a group based in Madhya Pradesh and working for educational reforms. The success of this book in Hindi prompted Eklavya to publish three more Hindi translations of books by John Holt namely *Instead of Education, Freedom and Beyond* and *The Underachieving School*.

People would often wonder how Holt who never married, had no children could write with such deep insights about children's learning. Holt was unusual in many ways. He wrote from the heart. Like all great writers he avoided educational mumbo-jumbo. His lucid writings went straight to the readers' heart.

He graduated from college in 1943 and was commissioned an officer on the submarine *Barbero*, which he calls, "the best learning community I have ever known. I was 21 and this was the first real job I'd ever done. It became my job to keep the boat in underwater balance to prepare it to dive everyday."

"Once when I was officer of the deck the captain came on deck. He said, "You know, Jack, you're not a passenger up here. You can turn this thing in a big circle if you want to." But what he was really saying to me was. 'If you have to turn it in a circle in order to feel that you really have the power to do it – then do it.' And that ten-second sermon had a great effect on me."

The submarine sank two enemy ships in the Java Sea before it was damaged by a bomb. On the way to Pearl Harbour after repairs word came that Hiroshima had been destroyed by an atomic bomb. The bomb had a devastating effect on Holt. He saw a solution in world government, and when he was discharged he began working for the World Federalists in New York City. He wanted to become a farmer but at the insistence of his sister he visited the Rocky Mountain School near Aspen, which had just opened. They would grow their own food he could learn farming there.

He liked the school and stayed without pay in exchange for room and board until a regular teacher quit and he was hired.

Four years later he moved east to Boston. He was then 34 years old.

The school hired Holt but within a year grew disenchanted by, among other things, his insistence that testing was probably harmful to learning, and fired him. He taught in two other private schools, but his beliefs about learning met with little favour there either, and again he was fired.

Though a pioneer, Holt soon realised the limitations of the school reform movement.

“It’s not that I feel that school is a good idea gone wrong,” he says, “but a wrong idea from the word go. It’s a nutty notion that we can have a place where nothing but learning happens, cut off from the rest of life.”

Holt had deep convictions. He realised that a supportive atmosphere at home was much better for a child’s growth than the alienating, authoritarian milieu of the school. By the mid-seventies Holt had decided that for him, meaningful school reform was impossible. Four years ago he began his own magazine *Growing Without Schooling*. Many passionate parents wrote their experiences of home-schooling their children in this magazine which were later collated by Holt in his book *Teach Your Own*. This book still remains a bible for home-schoolers.

Holt was not given to mouthing political slogans. Like Gandhi he lived his convictions. For him pious platitudes had no meaning unless one made some change in one’s own personal life. When going for a walk in his dear city of New York he would always carry with him a large plastic bag. He would keep collecting thrown away beer cans and coke bottles from the roadside and then deposit them in the nearby trash recycling bin. This he did without any malice or complaints. While taking a bath he stood in a small plastic tub and scrubbed his body with a wet sponge. The water from the tub was later put into a vermin-compost bin along with dried leaves and other organic waste. Holt lived in an apartment where he could never set up a garden. The organic compost produced in his home was filled in a plastic bag and gently strewn near flowering plants in the public garden. Holt was honest and lived the change he wanted to see.

He was deeply pained when many wonderful books went out of print. So, whenever he came across a good book he bought several copies of it to share it with his friends. This is how John Holt’s Book and Music Shop came into being. John Holt personally reviewed these select books and shared them with his friends. All these passionate reviews were later collated into a book titled *Sharing Treasures*. Holt was responsible for getting several out-of-print books reprinted. Two such remarkable books were *The Autobiography of a Baby* by Shinn and *My Country School Diary* by Julia Weber Gordon.

Holt came from a non-musical family. At the age of 50 he fell into love with the cello and after intense practise mastered it. Later he would perform in concerts. He wrote his insightful musical experiences in a book titled *Never too late*.

Holt died in 1985 of cancer. His remarkable legacy continues to live in the books he wrote and inspires millions of teachers and parents across the world.