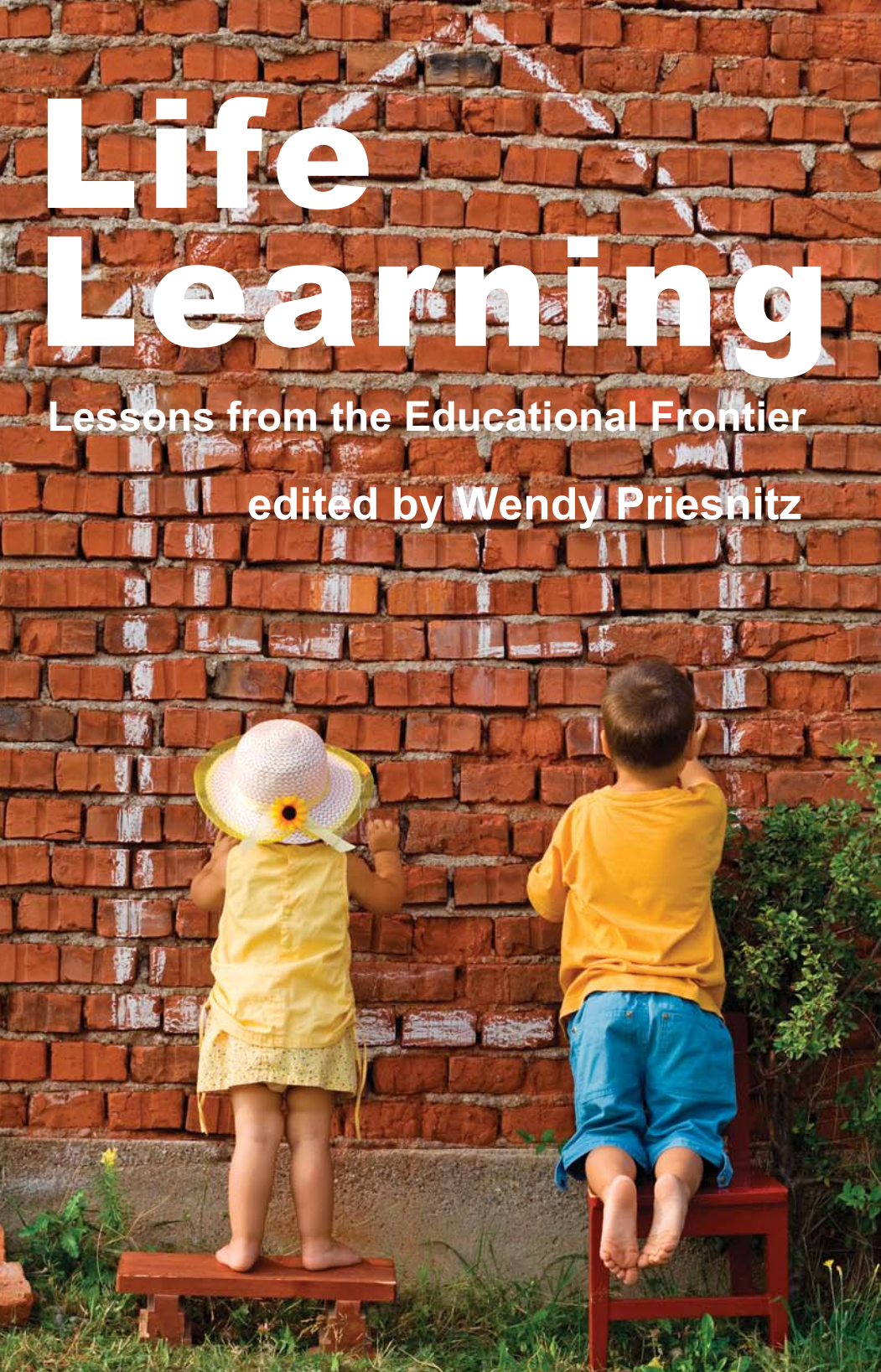
Life Learning

Lessons from the Educational Frontier

edited by Wendy Priesnitz



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This book is dedicated to the children of the contributors,
who have been our best teachers and who, by way of
their unique education, are our best hope for a better world.

Contents

"It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that
the modern methods of instruction have not entirely
strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry." ~ Albert Einstein

Learning in the Real World

A retired school teacher acquaintance recently acquired her first computer. After plugging it in and connecting the components according to the instructions, she called me to ask if I could recommend a course that she could take to learn how to use her new toy. I said I couldn't recommend a course because I've never taken a computer course in my life. Then how in the world, she wondered, had I become such a proficient computer user? Well, I responded, I just began using it!

I hadn't given much thought to it before, but I realized then that I learn most things by just doing them. And I suppose that made me a good role model for our life learning daughters when they were young…or at least it helped me understand that "just doing it" can be an effective way to learn. And that is fundamental to my philosophy of living and learning – and to the essays in this book.

Human beings are learning creatures. Babies come out of the womb curious and ready to learn. They immediately begin to explore and learn about their world, without our persuasion. Later, they learn how to walk and to talk without being artificially motivated. They don't take a course. They don't "goof off" while learning these skills because they're bored or the "work" is too hard. They are not marked, tested, graded or nagged to practice. They just do it. They are motivated by wanting to do these things well, like bigger people.

After all, to someone dependent on being carried or on crawling, walking must seem like a natural, easy and fast way to get around. Their parents, older siblings and the other walkers in their lives have a mobility that they must envy, especially given their high level of curiosity. And curiosity is motivating.

Aside from modeling the behavior, we create a safe environment for our little learners, putting breakables away, toddler-proofing our homes so there are no stairs to fall down, no sharp corners to bang against. And we provide nourishing food so they develop straight bones and strong muscles.

We unconsciously encourage and stimulate them to learn, bouncing them on our knees at first as they try to push their legs straight against our stomachs, then holding them at floor level and pretending they are walking, then holding out our hands just a few

inches in front of them, encouraging them to take those first few tentative steps.

Then, when they finally take those first independent steps, we celebrate the satisfaction of accomplishment with them. We also reassure them when they have a setback, cuddling them when they fall, patching up a scratched knee, encouraging them to try again, reassuring them they can and will eventually walk.

But perhaps most important of all, we do this all in the course of daily life, trusting them to learn to walk. Unless they are severely disabled, we don't think twice about whether or not they will learn to walk. People walk, so we know our children will eventually do it too. We take it for granted. We just let them get on with it, as we do the same.

We don't worry that we might need a teacher training degree to help them learn this important and difficult skill. We know that we're up to the task and so are they. They do it experientially, from real life, motivated by a real need. And they work hard at it. In fact, they relish the challenge to learn and put a lot of self-discipline to work on whatever they choose to learn.

In the same way that a child will teach herself to walk and to speak the language spoken by the adults around her, she can later learn to read it. She will do that as part of her real world experience – reading for real-life reasons. But oddly enough, while we unthinkingly trust children to learn how to walk and talk, most people do not trust them to learn how to read, do math or understand science.

The contributors to this collection of essays know differently. Their essays, which were among those published in *Life Learning* magazine during its six years in print, demonstrate that highly academic and intellectual topics can, indeed, be learned without the trappings of school and that learning happens all the time and in all kinds of places. In fact, they illustrate that self-directed life learning – sometimes known as "unschooling" – is a much more effective way of becoming educated than being taught what someone else thinks you should know, in places that require compulsory attendance, that group age peers together in large numbers and are often more focused on test results than real learning.

The contributors to this book also understand that an education involves more than gaining knowledge of what are traditional academic subjects; it includes self-knowledge, goal-setting abilities, life skills like how to make a living and build a house, thinking for one-

self, interpersonal and communication skills, the retention of curiosity, understanding cultural norms and much more.

These writers – some parents and some learners – illustrate how learning flourishes when the learner is given the space to recognize or formulate a "problem," set about solving it, take it as far as she can go, consult with others about it or observe them doing it, reflect on that and tackle it again – in short, to do what adults do each day.

Life learning is often perceived to be an extension of and therefore similar to homeschooling. However, as you will learn by reading this book, life learning is a lifestyle, even a worldview, a way of looking at the world, at children and at knowledge, rather than a method of education or a place where an education is expected to happen.

This is not a how-to book. Because life learning involves self-direction – about learning from life and throughout life – there are no step-by-step guidelines or rules, no "right way." It allows each child, each family and each community to regain control over their days, their learning, their money, their resources and their ability to direct and manage themselves.

These essays demonstrate, over and over, that learning happens best when we allow the learner to be in control and to follow her interests and curiosity, and when the adults' role is to respect, trust and support the basic human drive to learn and to grow. And they also show that when kids are able to learn in this way, they grow up into well-rounded, community-minded adults who understand themselves and their place in society.

If you are new to the idea of life learning, this book will challenge you to rethink your assumptions about children and about learning. If you are already living the lifestyle, this book will support your choice and your trust in children to learn about the world and how it works, and to prepare to solve some of the problems of that world.

A Word About Terminology

Throughout this book, you will read the terms "homeschooling," "unschooling," "home-based education," "self-directed learning" and "autonomous education" being used somewhat interchangeably, in addition to "life learning." In the 1970s, when my family began this educational journey and I found myself helping to create a movement based on it, I used the term "homeschooling." But that word has since come to describe a parent-driven, curriculum-based, often conservatively religious, school-at-home style of education. The word "unschooling" (sometimes prefaced with adjectives like "radical") was coined by author and early homeschooling advocate John Holt, and some people use it proudly. However, I believe that the term "life learning" is more accurate and more positive; it also helps to uncouple the concepts of learning and schooling and to illustrate what getting an education is really all about.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the wonderfully honest and wise contributors to this collection of essays. It's an honor to share with you the task of helping other families appreciate the joys and potential of life learning.

Finally, thank you to Rolf, my husband, best friend, business partner, admirer, patient listener to my rants and father of our two children. He should also be acknowledged as the person who coined the term "Life Learning" for the magazine that we published from 2002 to 2008 and from which these essays were selected.

Wendy Priesnitz

The Educator's Dilemma and the Two Big Lies

by Daniel Grego

"This is the really great art – to educate without revealing the purpose of the education." Joseph Goebbels

When "educate" was used only as a verb, its meaning was clear. In Latin, the verb *educare* never took a male subject. Men were simply not equipped for the task. According to Ivan Illich (as quoted in the book *A is for Ox* by Barry Sanders) Cicero told us "*nutrix educat*." The wet nurse nourished the growing child. As they grew, children began to walk, to speak, to feed themselves. This was the natural course of events. No adult thought to take credit for these developments, just as no adult thought to take credit for an infant's breathing.

A time might have come in a young man's life when, on his own initiative or at the insistence of his parents, he would submit himself to the instruction of an elder who had mastered some art and who would assume the responsibility of teaching it to the apprentice. Girls were taught the arts of home management (this is what the word "economics" literally means) by their mothers and grandmothers and aunts.

These relationships were customary, not compulsory. They were part of the unique cultural life of each place. Children who were not victims of fatal accidents or diseases grew up to take their places in adult society. They learned from experience, from the example of adults, from participation in rituals and from stories. Learning was embedded in the diurnal activities of the community in which one lived and suffered and died.

Young men of leisure began studying in schools in ancient Greece. (It is from the Greek word for "leisure" that our word "school" derives.) But this was not because they were deficient. They had time to kill and certain arts – rhetoric, for example – were best

taught and practiced in groups.

It was not until the 17th century that John Amos Comenius described schools as a means to "teach everybody everything." (*Omnibus, omnia omnino docendi*.) Something happened. Suddenly, "education" became a noun, a "something" that children were born without and needed to get.

A system of schooling was designed to process children, to ensure that they received the treatments necessary for their maturation. Within two centuries of Comenius, his wish for compulsory schooling was realized in some of the countries of Europe and in the United States. Today, it continues to spread over the entire planet like a plague.

What exactly this schooling is supposed to accomplish has been debated since its inception. It can be assumed that many of the self-certified experts of the thing that became known as "education" would agree in principle with that well-known progeny of the Father of Lies quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The trick, it seems, is to persuade people to endure "education" even if its purpose cannot clearly be defined.

Today, there are several gangs of thugs and thieves struggling to gain control over schooling, so that "education" can be doled out on their terms. I would like to subvert their holy war by exposing two of the lies upon which the religion of schooling rests. The "education" establishment and its critics from both ends of the political spectrum accept these lies. Proposals for "education reform" – from lowering class sizes to vouchers – are predicated on them.

To expose the lies, I will have to take a large risk. Against the advice of several wise friends, I will attempt to define "education" in a way that would be consistent with people reclaiming their lives from the purveyors of treatments and panaceas. This is risky because there may be no way of disassociating "education" from its grimier connotations. Still, I will take the chance in the hope that uncovering the lies will free us to focus our attention on much more crucial concerns.

"Education" should be thought of as a community activity, not as an individual accomplishment. Just as Cicero's wet nurse nourishes an infant (literally "one without language") so that it may be healthy and its natural abilities flower, so each community guides the learning of the young so that the community may remain healthy and so that its conception of "the good" may be realized. "Education" is not some "thing" that one either possesses or does not, but rather is an

activity in which one is inevitably engaged.

When a community educates, it influences the direction of the learning of its members toward the good. I think it is important to note that I am not suggesting that education is an influencing of a person's learning for his or her own good. That would put us back in the box Comenius built. It is the community's good, the understanding of which will change over time, which is the goal of the educative process. (If it is really the concept of the community's good about which "education" reformers are fighting, I wish they would have the courage to stop using children as shields and hostages.)

With this definition in mind, I think the fallacy of the first lie should be obvious. The first Big Lie is that schools educate children. As modern society evolved with its emphasis on the division of labor, we somehow swallowed the idea that it was the "job" of schools to educate children. But for this idea to be plausible, we would have to believe the most ridiculous notion: that learning is something that children can switch on and off. For the first lie to be even barely credible, we would have to accept something like the following description:

> A child rises in the morning in her home with her learning function switched off. She is at home, after all. Her relationship to her family around the breakfast table has no learning in it. She passes through her family life on her way to school where her learning function will be activated if the school is adequately provisioned, if there are enough computers, if the teachers are well paid, appropriately licensed and therefore "highly qualified," if the class size is small enough, if the building is modern enough and in good repair. A good school will keep the student's learning switch on all day and may even persuade her to turn it on herself in the evening for a couple hours of "homework."
>
> In the playground at recess, the learning switch is off. Recess is only recess. There's no learning in play. What the student observes on the bus to and from school, the images on billboards, her interactions with her family and her neighbors, the programs she watches on television (unless it happens to be "educational television,") the movies she sees, the music she listens to, the way she obtains the food she eats, the clothes she wears, the way her room is decorated (whether she even has a room of her own,) whether she has pets or contact

with other animals, the stars in the night sky, the wind through her curtains: all of these have some effect on this child, but the effect is not educative. When she's not in school, her learning function is switched off.

I hope stating the lie this way will reveal its absurdity. Yet, I am continually surprised to find this first Big Lie behind the wars that rage over schooling. When parents complain that schools are failing, when business people insist that their performance improve, when Charles Sykes lampoons the use of "whole language" instruction, when William Bennett rails against the bureaucratic "Blob," when Jonathan Kozol exposes "Savage Inequalities," when Henry Giroux calls for "critical pedagogy," they are all reinforcing the lie that schools educate children. They do not.

Children (and all of us) are learning all the time. A one-word description of the cessation of learning would be "death." If our children are not learning what we say we want them to learn, it is because what we say we want them to learn is not what we (the entire community) are teaching them.

Giving credence to the first Big Lie damages our communities and our children. Natural relationships between the old and young are replaced with artificial distortions. Children's appetites for certain types of learning atrophy because compulsory schooling serves up rancid meals in Styrofoam packages leaving a bad taste in their mouths. Legions of quacks claiming to know what is best for every child and, reaching their conclusions on the flimsiest evidence, peddle snake oil solutions to gullible parents. Greedy corporate and political salespersons play Pontius Pilate before the multitudes, pointing fingers and throwing up freshly washed hands. No wonder a growing number of families are refusing to send their children to school!

So pernicious and pervasive are the effects of the first Big Lie's domination of our consciousness that closing all schools, at least temporarily, might be the only way to awaken us from our dogmatic slumbers. Without the crutch of the schools to lean on, everyone in a community would have to reclaim his or her own responsibility for educating the young. That, I think, would be salubrious. Something to think about.

As harmful as this first lie is, it is innocuous compared to the second. The second Big Lie is that we can escape the necessities of life on this earth and the obligations of living well by "getting an

education." Somehow, we have persuaded ourselves that if we just stay in school long enough to earn a credential of some kind (or a series of them), we will be able to transcend the human condition of suffering and mortality. We tell young people over and over that without such an "education" they will have no "future." All of this is, of course, foolish nonsense. Believing in it, we get trapped in what the young songwriter Bob Dylan referred to as "mixed up confusion."

For example, consider what might be dubbed "The Lake Wobegon Folly." Since performance in school is the criterion used to justify the distribution of all the "good jobs," every parent wants his or her child to score "above average" on standardized tests. But it is only possible for all children to be "above average" on Saturday evening radio shows. Suppose all the poor children in Milwaukee, for example, who tend to score well "below average" miraculously began to do better. Since the tests are "norm referenced," this would mean that someone else comparatively would be doing worse. The sigh of relief coming from the advocates for Milwaukee's children would not be audible above the screams of the newly "disadvantaged" who would be demanding "improved schools" in their districts.

"The Lake Wobegon Folly" pales next to "The Educator's Dilemma." To explain what I mean by this phrase, I will focus on people working in schools in the United States, which is where I live and work. However, "The Educator's Dilemma" has international implications that I think will become apparent.

Most educators would say without embarrassment that their vocation is to "help" their students. However, compulsory schooling – the context of their work – is designed to plug young people into modern, industrial society and to inculcate in them a desire for the endless consumption of goods and services. There is growing evidence that this way of living damages both natural and human communities. Do educators really help their students by increasing their chances "to make it" in such a society?

Let's imagine the schools working perfectly, whatever your definition of that may be. If it means that teachers are intellectuals fostering critical consciousness, you have got it. If you imagine schools of choice competing in a free market in which paragons of virtue transmit the eternal verities, you've got it. The battle is over and your side has won.

The schools are working perfectly and every child is going to make it. But what would that mean in our society? What will these

perfectly "educated" students do? Will they all become doctors or lawyers or insurance executives pursuing their careers and performing their civic duties, but always keeping an eye on their investment portfolios? Or will they all become university professors deconstructing the canon and driving their Jaguars around campus or flying to conferences? In other words, will they all become what American academic, writer and political commentator Robert Reich has called "symbolic analysts"?

Who will sweep the floors once the "education" system finally has the bugs out of it? Who will grow the food? Who will hang the doors, build the cabinets? Who will take care of the young children? Is this the point where we would bring the rest of the world, particularly the Third World, back into the picture? Once our system of schooling is flawless and all of its graduates are wealthy, will we need the people of the Third World to do our "dirty work" for us? But what if "enlightened" citizens in these countries want the same "education" system and the same prestigious careers for their children?

French activist and author Simone Weil wrote in *The Need for Roots*: "There is something woefully wrong with the health of a social system, when a peasant tills the soil with the feeling that, if he is a peasant, it is because he wasn't intelligent enough to become a school teacher..." Or a doctor, or a lawyer, or an insurance executive or a university professor.

The problem with this social system is that it is both unjust, socially and economically, and unhealthy ecologically. Believing in the second Big Lie is part of a long tradition of trying to rise above the human condition, an attempt that only increases human misery and environmental degradation.

British writer Aldous Huxley once said that 25 percent of human suffering is unavoidable, an inescapable part of our lives on this earth. There are natural catastrophes – floods and earthquakes, tornadoes and tsunamis. We get sick. As we get older and our bodies grow feeble, we can no longer do what we were once able to do. (Even professional athletes Wayne Gretzky and Michael Jordan had to retire one day.) Our friends and loved ones experience pain and disappointment. We all will die. However, 75 percent of the suffering in the world is unnecessary and avoidable, or so Huxley thought. It is the result of human vice.

We produce much of this unnecessary pain in a futile attempt to avoid the pain that is unavoidable. The greedy use sophisticated ad-

vertising techniques to seduce the slothful and the envious into a mad quest for "easy street." (Think of how lust is exploited to sell almost everything!) We vainly attempt to insulate ourselves from the negative consequences of our way of living.

This is the "economy" that we prepare our children to enter. However, the economy and the various systems upon which it depends cannot absolve us from the obligations that come with living on this earth. This includes the "system" of schooling over which everyone fusses. Going to school and earning degrees cannot free us from the human condition and from the responsibility each of us has for living a good life. We cannot buy our way to a better, healthier, saner world. Nor can we school our way to it.

I think we would all be better off if we tabled our debates about education and schooling and asked ourselves some more difficult, but also more fundamental questions: How can we live on this earth in ways that are both economically just and ecologically healthy? How can education help us discover and preserve these ways?

This is the true purpose of education. And contrary to Joseph Goebbels, the great art would be to make this explicit and open to every community's scrutiny. The only way that I can see to solve "The Educator's Dilemma" is to find answers to these fundamental questions. The sooner we get to it, the better.

"The aim of public education is not to spread enlightenment at all; it is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed a standard citizenry, to put down dissent and originality." ~ H. L. Mencken

Self Reliance in Life and in Learning

by Gea D'Marea Bassett

"As an unschooled child, I discovered that learning is a part of everyday life. Through every moment of experience something happens to us, adds to our being and incorporates itself into us. We are constantly learning."

I was born in the rural American Midwest in 1978. My summers were spent barefoot, running through the grass, dirt and gravel, basking in the hot sun and splashing around in the shallow water of my blue wading pool. The sun was never interrupted by trees or other houses. The clouds never interfered either. Shade was available, but only under the shadow of an old, cracking maple tree or under the gazebo my grandfather built. Land wasn't lacking as it is in the city. There was plenty of space.

On my grandmother's land were two old barns. The barns contained more tools and gadgets and relics from the past than I was ever able to discover. Inside those dry, paint-flaked walls lived items over a century old, items that were there before my grandmother and grandfather bought the worn down piece of property. When my German Shepherd birthed her puppies – as she did almost every spring – she would settle on a thick blanket of hay in the barn and begin the time immemorial process of bringing life into the world. Sometimes I would stay up with her through the night and watch how naturally she labored and delivered her new babies.

Off to the sides of the barns were an old one-story chicken coop about the size and shape of trailer home; a little doll house that my grandfather built; a big round gazebo; a pond that I constantly monitored for tadpoles, fish, crayfish, frogs and bugs; and the big old white farm house we lived in. On the hottest days, I would divide my time between exploring the outdoors and popping back inside for food, water or a stint of coloring, drawing or reading.

Nothing in my childhood was new or remodeled. It was all lived

in and used. But there was always something homemade to eat and something wonderfully simple for me to do. I still remember the feel of the cold, smooth linoleum floor under my bare feet, the occasional gusts of hot breeze that blew in through the open windows and the smell of canning tomatoes. Some afternoons and evenings would bring stillness and silence, then a rumbling of thunder, then a flash of lightning, followed by a fine sprinkle of rain that led into a booming storm – wind, hail and a heavy downpour. I remember the smell of those days: It was like water poured over the burning sun. It would sizzle, steam and make the air humid. The smell was hot, wet and clean.

I was born into a microculture. I was homeschooled. As a homeschooler, I never experienced the separation of life and learning. It took years before I began to ponder what it all meant, how it all fits together and why life learning is such a special and valuable way to live. It wasn't until the birth of my son that I realized the depth and importance of life learning and the value of being free from the public school system. Now, as I watch my son learn and grow, I remember moments from my own childhood that also embodied the essence of life learning and self-realization. Even after all of those years of experiencing a home education, it took me many more years to begin to see the results of spending an entire childhood and adolescence outside of school buildings. Many years passed before I began to contemplate the vastly different values and assumptions between society and myself. In recent years, I have become aware of how special my education was: As a child entering into the world, I was given the opportunity to grow and develop in my mother's nurturing presence; I was not immediately forced into the school system; I was not placed into a role within mainstream society; I was not expected to become a miniature representation of mainstream beliefs and values. I was given the opportunity to learn about myself and to choose my own path.

Individuals in Society and Education

One of the things I think about now is what it means to be an "individual." Some people say it means selfishness. Others say it means someone who is not a functional or incorporated person within society. But I think that the individual is the micro within the macro. The individual is the color, uniqueness, character, soul, diversity, perspective and awareness that, when added into the bigger entity of "society," becomes a catalyst for change and an affective element within

the larger consciousness. In fact, in my opinion, there is nothing negative about being an individual. There is, however, something challenging about this concept of the individual. An individual might be considered an outsider to the consciousness of society. She might challenge common assumptions more easily than someone who is not an individual. That means that the individual, when allowed self-realization, can be a powerful force in society.

A "non-individual," on the other hand, is the consciousness of society as a whole; the consciousness of society unquestioned. A non-individual is a duplicate of society, society re-represented. He does little to affect the whole of society or society's consciousness. When human beings are not given the opportunity to develop as individuals before they are put into the bigger society, it is unlikely that they will be able to distinguish themselves from the larger consciousness in which they live. When this happens, as it often does, the individual – the soul – gets lost within the collective consciousness and, instead of becoming an element that can change or affect society, becomes a non-individual. She becomes just another clone representative of the dominating consciousness of society.

When I understand the word "individual" like this, within the context of the public school system, I begin to understand what standardization – a concept that colors the public school system – does to individuals. Standardization – the fact that all children of the same age are expected to engage in the same procedures and produce the same results as other children of the same age – is a deadly procedure inflicted on the individual. Standardization tries to (and in many cases does) kill the individual. At a minimum, it weakens the individual, confuses them as to who they are, and does not give them a chance to become a unique form of consciousness before forcing them into the collective consciousness. Our education reinforces and shapes our understanding of others, our culture and ourselves; our education system perpetuates how we, as a society and culture, think, act and perceive the world. Our current standard education system does not promote the individual; it does not inspire students to think they are the leaders of the future; it does not help the individual blossom.

One of the many times I am reminded of this fact is when I hear people talk about the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). Passing the WASL is a requirement to graduate from a public school in the state of Washington, where I now live. The WASL –

and the standardization it represents – has a stronghold on education, values and society. Children (and their parents) literally fear for their future when it comes to this test. No one seems to like it or have anything good to say about it, but everyone is scared to death about not passing it. Users of the WASL are perpetuating the false belief that the only road to success is through passing this test. Yet all this test represents is an acceptance into the mainstream values of society and popular culture.

Passing the test doesn't mean you are smart, wise, aware, reflective or confident, or that you have any idea of where your life is headed. Rather, it means that you have memorized the correct answers to the standardized test that proves you are ready to graduate from high school. Whatever that is worth.

What many people don't realize – and not taught by the school system – is that although our education shapes us, we have the ability to shape our education. The school system was invented by humans. Just as I grew up learning and living, so have many others. Before public schooling was implemented, learning was a part of daily life. Although the public school system was created with several intentions, it hasn't succeeded in creating equality for all. That is, it has never managed to create an environment in which race, class and socioeconomic status no longer hinder the success of the individual; it has never succeeded in giving all individuals an equal chance at living a full and enriching life; it has never succeeded in developing the individual. Public schooling is an experiment that, although now very deeply rooted in our daily lives and perception of education, has never been a liberating or enlightening institution.

We all know the never-ending problems and complaints about the public school system: Teachers don't get paid enough, parents don't agree with how the teachers do their job nor do the teachers agree with how the parents raise their children, there are social and racial discomforts, there is miscommunication between classes and races, there are the never-ending debates about the correct curriculum, there are the implications behind passing versus failing grades, there is violence at school, there are under-distributed funds to certain schools and too much funding to other schools. None of these problems is finding a solution; in fact, the list just keeps getting bigger.

The biggest "successes" of public education are essentially four:

1. public school has taken root as an unquestioned institution of

society;

2. public school inevitably maintains class and socioeconomic barriers;

3. public school offers "free" (tax dollar paid) daycare;

4. public school increasingly distracts us from the idea of the individual that I have presented here.

Given that record, if we continue to perpetuate the current education system, it is unlikely that we will have the time or ability to affect change and create a sustainable and respectable future. If we continue to go along with the current public school model, it is unlikely that we will be able to see alternative systems to the one that is currently dominating society.

A World Without Standardized Education

So what would happen if public school suddenly vanished? I was unschooled in an era right before the technological advances of globalization. "Learning resources" were slim. There was neither Amazon.com nor any Yahoo! Group networks. I was ten years old when I first saw a computer. I found other homeschoolers through the only homeschooling network there was: John Holt's *Growing Without Schooling* newsletter. Things have changed a lot since then. The resources we now have are almost limitless. If we have a question or are looking to find something – a recipe, gardening information, a sports team, a book club, a religious meeting, a travel abroad program – all we have to do is Google it. If the public education system vanished, I believe that we would still have access to everything (and more than) it offers us. But we would have access to one more very important thing: the time and open-space to become self-reliant, capable, thoughtful individuals.

Standardized learning does not respect the individual. In contrast to going along with what everyone else is doing is the ability to be a critical thinker and to observe the world from different angles. In contrast to standardized learning is learning that helps each individual to develop a unique consciousness and to discover a unique place within society. This is the quintessence of diversity and respect. It is what the public school system may claim to want, but it can only be achieved when education and learning are released from the stronghold of the school system.

As an unschooled child, I discovered that learning is a part of everyday life. Through every moment of experience, something happens to us, adds to our being and incorporates itself into us. We are

constantly learning.

There are two basic ways to learn: There is learning that comes from within and learning that comes from without. Learning that comes from within is individual-based self-realization; it is where reflective and positive changes come from. Learning that comes from without is in the form of information that is transmitted into the individual; this is the method of tests and standardization and this method offers little opportunity for reflective and positive change.

Beyond that, there is an enormous amount of research, research material, curricula, theories, styles of pedagogy, schools, methods and "experts" in the realm of education and learning. But only a tiny percentage of this research and these "experts" approach learning and education outside the context of the school system. It amazes me how few people talk about or even perceive learning and education as coming from within an individual or outside the context of the school environment.

How far we have strayed from trusting ourselves and our children! At present, most people in our society assume that school is the epitome of learning and education; learning and education are assumed to exist outside the individual. It is here, I believe, that society must begin to question assumptions about what, why and whom we are benefitting when we learn. And it is here that we must begin to explore the value to the broader society of individuals learning outside the school system.

Educating for Sustainability

So although allowing homeschooling to happen is a good start, we need to think in terms of encouraging networks that support sustainable and respectful relations among people and regarding the Planet. "Sustainability" – as defined by the Wikipedia (a great decentralized learning resource!) – is "an attempt to provide the best outcomes for the human and natural environments both now and into the indefinite future." Many people are coming to realize that the earth does not contain a limitless amount of resources. More and more people are realizing that humans have done more damage to the Earth in the last 100 years than in the previous hundreds of thousands of years. As more people begin to realize that to change the situation our social values and actions need to change, the need for learning and applying sustainable practices becomes even greater.

Sustainability in the environmental sense stresses the need for the decentralization of goods, taking personal responsibility for

where our food comes from, limiting the strain on the natural resources, and so on. But sustainability applies not only to healthy relations with the environment, but to healthy social constructs, institutions and philosophies. For a truly sustainable system to be implemented, we must also begin to apply sustainable practices in our relationships. A shift of practice and consciousness needs to occur.

Grownup life learning individuals are well-positioned to help that shift occur. We need to remember the dynamic and unique educational experiences that have helped to shape who we are and how we perceive the world. By reflecting on our history and finding our unique story, we will better be able to create and implement goals for our future and that of the Earth.

A.S. Neill said that each individual should be allowed to do his own thing, getting help when wanted, so long as his actions do not harm anyone nor force anything on anyone. This is how we can encourage individual development while respecting the larger community.

Neill noted in *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* that until parents value their child's happiness over their child's success, we will not be able to develop the individual. He also said that the goal of life is happiness and happiness always means goodness. To implement a truly sustainable system, we need to put happiness first and let success follow; we need to release education from the chambers of schooling and let self-reliance take the lead.

The individual child I was – and that my own son is – spending carefree barefoot summers learning from living, is a good model.

“Where is the wisdom lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge lost in information?” ~ T. S. Eliot

What is Education?

by Sarabeth Matilsky

"Although I wasn't able to articulate it at the time, it annoyed me that many people seemed to think that they knew what I should know better than I did."

If you're a homeschooler, you know the drill. "Do you know how to read?" strangers and friends inquire curiously. "How do you learn math?" Or "Do you have any friends?" There are the uncles who ask, "So, are you planning to work at McDonald's all your life?!" and the particularly mystified questioners who start with the basics: "How do you learn, anyway?"

When I was younger, I developed stock answers to those questions and told my mom that I thought they were "stupid and annoying." The questions often felt like a personal attack and it was hard to be empathetic with my attackers in any way. But now that I'm 23 and "all grown up," it's easier to sympathize with the confusion that prompts people to ask those questions in the first place.

As far as I can tell, people ask how we learn reading, writing and social skills because those are some of the basic tools that a person needs in order to join our society as a functioning member. The problem is that many people believe that certain basic skills have to be taught to a child in order for the skills to be learned, that it takes a certain number of years in a specialized institution for a child to learn those things and that coercion is generally necessary because otherwise a child wouldn't learn the skills at all. No wonder life learning seems so bewildering.

Growing up, I couldn't understand that confusion. Wasn't it obvious that I could learn math and physics if I wanted to? Couldn't my uncle see that I had no use for chemistry but that if I did, I'd learn it? Why did anyone care, anyway? And why did people ask me if I knew math and English but they didn't ask whether I knew about good nutrition or how to shingle a roof?

Although I wasn't able to articulate it at the time, it annoyed me that many people seemed to think that they knew what I should know better than I did. They seemed to believe that a few people, sometime

in recent history, had consolidated – into twelve years' worth of textbooks and tests – the sum total of information that I would need to become educated.

Consequential Learning

Actually, nobody ever asked about my education. When people asked if I "knew" geometry or physics or how to diagram a sentence, they were asking if I'd acquired a set of learned skills, taught by somebody else. You can learn something to pass a test, because someone tells you to or because you need to know, say, a little bit of chemistry in order to gain a college diploma. But knowledge that is acquired because of something external – as a means to an end that may be arbitrary, like getting a good grade – is not the kind of learning that I consider true education.

When your desire to learn comes from within, to achieve a goal that you have set for yourself, the result is very different – it's this self-motivated learning that I call "education." If you are learning chemistry because it is important to you, the learning is consequential; the skills and knowledge you gain feel inherently useful and applicable, enjoyable and fulfilling in the context of your life. You retain the information, not for a test, but because it helps you learn even more. You start to discover the best ways to find things out. You can seek out one or many teachers. You can specialize in a certain application of chemistry, and you can form new ideas because you are not learning by rote. If you are fascinated by chemistry, you will learn about it without somebody else forcing you to study.

My definition of "education" is a slippery, tricky concept that is adaptable and not finite. It is not testable or measurable except by experience. I think that a person's education is a unique combination of his or her knowledge, ability to ask the right questions and, most importantly, that desire to learn which comes from inside. You can't be educated unless you personally want to be.

Unlike cramming for a test, an education can never be completed. Pioneering homeschool author John Holt wrote, "We must ask how much of the sum of human knowledge anyone can know at the end of his schooling." As Holt notes, it's obviously impossible to learn more than even a tiny fraction of the accumulated knowledge that exists. It seems to me that the great thing about having so much to learn is that there's plenty to go around – every person's "tiny fraction" can be unique at the same time that it overlaps with other people's fractions. Our lives are short, so why learn about anything

unless it's necessary or meaningful? Why should we all have to learn the exact same things as everyone else, anyway? Life would be boring and we wouldn't have new ideas!

"We wanted them to learn how to learn," my parents say patiently, when people ask them why they chose to homeschool their children. Fantastic mathematical ability and great knowledge of the classics are not, then, what I gained from my childhood education. Instead, I developed the ability to learn those things if I needed to.

Looking for Truth

John Holt wrote, "The true test of intelligence is not how much we know, but rather how we behave when we don't know what to do." Education is about looking for the truth of things and being educated is the process of learning how best to search for it.

We are evolutionarily dedicated to the survival of our species; as far as I can tell, that's why we're here, and all of our instincts are hardwired to pass on our genetic material to future generations. But I think that we humans can and should choose to learn certain things that might not only help us survive, but to survive long-term. We could continue our current cycle of war and violence and power-hungriness. Or, we can learn about our place in the universe and the way our actions impact existing natural systems, and perhaps our species can learn to live in a more pleasant balance with other people and other living things. It just makes sense to search out better ways of getting along with one another.

Making Choices

I also think that part of anyone's education includes learning to make informed choices – it's just as important as learning to read and write. Every time we spend money, we choose to support McDonald's or Wal-Mart, our food co-op or our local thrift store. We choose whether to spend our time engaged in meaningful work, and we choose who we spend time with. We choose whether to speak out against unfair authority, governmental and otherwise, we choose whether to flout popularly accepted laws (remember those parents who went to jail to protest their right to homeschool?) and we choose whether to protest injustice in all of its forms. Everything we do supports something, some cause or individual or corporation or political party. Every one of us makes some or all of those choices daily, but I think that many people make those choices without thinking about them.

Also, and especially now that I've been initiated into the world of adulthood, I've discovered some problems that continually complicate anyone's choice-making process:

- There is a huge quantity of trivial and useless information that is sometimes even easier to find than the fantastic and exciting and important stuff. That means that a big part of anyone's education is choosing (consciously or not) what *not* to learn.
- Many people and institutions work tirelessly to take advantage of our human herding instinct, by carefully crafting advertisements and lobbying groups and political agendas to convince us to purchase their products or politics or their points of view.
- Remember "peer pressure?" It's not only a teenage phenomenon. Many adults drink and smoke and do drugs, and many of them push their drug of choice (whether it's a joint or an artery-clogging donut) on other people.
- We are all fallible to some extent when faced with choices we'd much rather not make. Everyone uses the excuse, "But everyone else is doing it!" at some time, regardless of age.

Testing Beliefs

Education is about testing my personal beliefs and ideas, and being able to reevaluate and change those beliefs and ideas if they don't stand up to scrutiny. Unless I want to be duped by unscrupulous entities or swayed by the tendency to go with the flow, I need to cultivate, as Carl Sagan put it, "The Fine Art of Baloney Detection."

Baloney detecting is not the same thing as censoring. Censorship is the decision by one or several people to withhold information from the many. No one should decide for another person what things are worth learning. My Baloney Detection Kit, on the other hand, is a personal set of judgments and decisions that I use to decide how to be in the world, in the context of what is best for myself and society. That sometimes means that I need to censor my own desires, or not do something – drive a gas-guzzling car, or work at a full-time job – which other people think is normal.

Education is a social, political and public health issue that obviously affects everyone, whether they like it or not. Because of my recent interest in history, I'm learning that people who are disadvantaged educationally (the ones who didn't have the chance to learn how to learn) are the ones who are most easily controlled – by governments and individuals. In many ways, it makes sense for those

in power to encourage a less-educated populace. I don't see lack of education as control in a physical, handcuffs-and-shackles sort of sense – it's more like an insidious distraction, so that we can develop a culture where people don't talk back and where they watch carefully constructed television programming instead of questioning the actions of their countries' leaders.

I want to be able to make decisions that are as ethically driven as possible, without allowing myself to succumb to ads and peer pressure and political agendas. My goal, as I continue my education, is to be able to continually confront my own illogicality and make conscious choices.

At the beginning of our relationship, my husband asked me why I was vegetarian. I said, "Because I don't want to kill animals."

"But you kill plants when you eat them," Jeff pointed out.

"Well, that's different! I mean, animals are treated badly in the slaughterhouses."

"How do you know?" Jeff asked. And suddenly I realized that I didn't know – not really, anyway. I was using arguments that I'd heard my parents use and rationalizations made by my vegan friends about why it was okay to kill plants but not animals. During the course of this discussion, which continued over several months, I discovered that I needed to do much more research about ecology, nutrition and slaughterhouses.

As it turned out, I found more than enough evidence to back up my choice to eat a plant-based diet, so I did not end up changing my lifestyle because of our discussion. (Jeff did.) But my rationale was now based on solid research and that was a big difference. The choice not to eat animals, which my parents made before I was born, was now my own. (A pleasant side effect of that research is that I developed a fascination with nutrition and physical health, which continues even now, five years later. I finally have that reason to learn chemistry…)

The important point to me is not that I did or did not change my life because of a conversation about vegetarianism. What is important is that I questioned it at all. I allowed myself to see the weakness of the "evidence" supporting my choice and I changed my beliefs into researched hypotheses, capable of standing up to scientific challenge.

Infinite Enjoyment

While we're here, fulfilling our evolutionary destiny to pass on

our DNA, education makes sense on an individual level because it's fun. Knowing how to learn about the things that interest us means that we don't ever have to be bored.

People still ask me questions about homeschooling, but now they ask in the past tense: "Did you like it? Did it prepare you for Life? How did you learn math?"

I still tell people about my childhood experiences learning math and English and history, and I say that I learned things from friends and parents and strangers, classes and books and libraries, because and when I wanted to. But these days, I have another challenging explanation: My learning and education haven't stopped, and if homeschooling is what I called it at six, then homeschooling is what I do now, as a married adult with a home away from my parents and a desire to learn new things that is stronger than ever.

Education has always been impossible to separate from the rest of my life – I learn something, in some way, from everything I do. I want to be with the people I love, learn new things, pursue my interests, see new places and lessen my negative impact on the planet. I want to become better at piano and dance; I want to continue learning how to keep relationships thriving, how to run a small business and what really happened when Columbus landed in the Americas. I want to get better at learning. The process of discovering the truth of things, as well as I can, is a process that seems infinite.

I guess that's what makes it so much fun.

Taking Risks & Breaking Rules
by Wendy Priesnitz

"The best learning – perhaps the only real learning – is that which results from personal interest and investigation, from following our own passion."

Albert Einstein once said that it is a miracle curiosity survives formal education. Unfortunately, it often doesn't. When my husband Rolf and I decided almost 40 years ago that we wouldn't send our then-unborn daughters to school, we knew that curiosity was one of the precious traits we didn't want to risk them losing. In fact, we knew many things that we wanted to avoid about a school-based education, but nurturing the alternative – ensuring they retained their curiosity and other self-directed learning skills – well, that was another matter. Here are some of the components that, through trial and error, we discovered were central to a successful life learning experience.

Ownership of the Process

When children are born, they want to learn about their world by exploring their surroundings in ever widening circles. And that is where learning should remain for a lifetime – in the learner's hands. Learning is not something that is done to us, or that we can produce in others. An education is not something we "get"…it is something we create for ourselves, on a life-long basis. The best learning – perhaps the only real learning – is that which results from personal interest and investigation, from following our own passion.

Trust

Taking ownership of our own education and allowing our children to own theirs requires trust and respect in individuals and in the learning process. In the case of our children, that means having enough respect for them to expect that they will behave sociably, want to learn how to function in the world and eventually want to learn things of a more academic nature. One of the ways in which formal education often fails is by concentrating on negative expecta-

tions, on teaching people what their incapacities and weaknesses are, rather than their strengths.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't provide assistance, but only when asked (and we will be asked, in direct proportion to the amount of trust we've built up and in inverse relation to the amount of correcting, quizzing and forcing we do). As unschooling advocate and author John Holt pointed out, "Most of us are tactful enough with other adults not to point out their errors, but not many of us are ready to extend this courtesy (or any other courtesy, for that matter) to children."

When we interfere with and try to control the natural learning process, we remove children's pleasure in discovery and inhibit their fearless approach to problem-solving, which can impede self-direction and creativity for a lifetime. We have all seen that sort of interference in action. Here's an example. My three-year-old daughter Heidi wanted to put her own shoes on. She proudly put the left shoe on the right foot, then determinedly spent ten minutes creating a massive knot in the laces. Her grandmother, not being able to watch any longer and elbowing the child out of the way, said, "You're doing it all wrong. Here, let Grandma do it for you!" Heidi burst into tears. Fortunately, I had the courage to intervene because that type of "help" had left me with a lifelong resistance to trying something new for fear of not being able to do it perfectly well the first time.

Our respect for learners should extend to those who opt out of school. Rather than labeling these conscientious objectors as "drop outs," which indicates failure, why not think of them as people with the motivation – or at least the potential – to control their own learning? The author of the *Teenage Liberation Handbook* Grace Llewellyn calls leaving school "rising out" to a more individualized form of education, which is a much more respectful and empowering notion than "dropping out," with its connotation of inability to succeed.

Time to Muddle

Along with ownership, trust and respect, goes time and space for muddling about and experimenting. Learning thrives (as does invention) when there is time and opportunity to explore in a safe, supportive environment, to investigate our theories, ask and answer our own questions, test out our ideas and methods...again, with assistance when it is sought.

Author and deschooling advocate John Taylor Gatto says this was the basis for his winning the New York State Teacher of the Year

award in 1991 (right before he quit teaching because he was no longer willing to hurt children). Here is how he has described his teaching method: "The successes I've achieved in my own teaching practice involve a large component of trust, not the kind of trust conditional on performance, but a kind of categorical trust...a faith in people that believes unless people are allowed to make their own mistakes, early and often, and then are helped to get up on their feet and try again, they will never master themselves. What I do right is simple: I get out of kids' way. I give them space and time and respect and a helping hand if I am asked for it."

Solitary, reflective time often seems rare in our overly programmed society. But what we call "daydreaming" may provide important time for thinking, analyzing, synthesizing and other seemingly passive brain activity that is crucial to the learning process.

Security

The risk- and mistake-making processes are supported by a secure physical, intellectual and emotional environment. Learning something new can sometimes feel like a dangerous adventure, at the same time as it is exciting. You might make mistakes and feel a whole range of emotions from disappointment and anger through to jubilation. Anticipating that, in order to get started on a learning adventure, most people need as much comfort, reassurance and security as they can find.

Take reading, for example. The typical classroom, with other children ready to correct or laugh at every mistake and the teacher all too eagerly "helping" and correcting, is the worst possible place for a child to learn to read. So one of the best ways to support the learning to read adventure is to avoid demanding regular demonstrations of what the learner might prefer to keep private. We'll still notice that the child is making more and more sense out of printed language – that she is reading road signs, for example.

I remember John Holt once describing how he helped his young niece learn to read. He said all he did was let her snuggle up on his lap and read to her, later letting her read to him. She refused to read unless she felt physically secure. He said that later, she moved from his lap to a corner of the room, shrouded in a tent made from a blanket. Eventually, she was confident enough to discard the blanket and read aloud wherever she was.

Authenticity

In the classroom, knowledge is presented in the abstract and people are expected to demonstrate their mastery of that knowledge in abstract ways. But passive, second-hand experiences can lead to second-hand knowledge. On the other hand, real-life discovery leads learners to find out about the world in an authentic way, which leads to concrete knowledge. Self-directed learners develop knowledge from observing and participating in real-life situations and activities. Because a life learner knows that all situations are learning situations, she can adapt and learn swiftly when change occurs.

In order to help their kids learn authentically, parents often become chauffeurs and advocates. Since the world isn't really a friendly place for young people, they might need help making it work for them.

Providing access to the real world includes trusting children with access to the tools of our trades. In our society, children are kept away from most workplaces, on the grounds that they would damage either themselves or their surroundings if given free access to things usually available only to so-called "professionals." Or they are banned because they would slow down the important work of production and consumption.

A true learning society would make the modifications necessary so that a wide variety of learning experiences could be accessible to people of all ages and abilities in community-funded spaces (libraries, museums, theaters, even school buildings)...to be used on people's own initiative and their own timetable. And it might even fund the professionals who could facilitate the learning process – people who would resemble librarians and museum curators more than conventional teachers. Libraries are good examples of this principle and librarians are often great examples of learning facilitators who are able to engage in authentic sharing with learners.

Kids, especially, pick up easily on phoniness or disinterest. And, like adults, they respond to people who are willing to engage in an authentic encounter on a person-to-person basis, without judging or evaluating.

Institutions should exist to be used, rather than to produce something. If they're effective, people will use them willingly without having to be coerced for to use them for what their elders or other types of superiors or experts say is for their own good.

Companionship

While for some people, some of the time, learning can be a solitary pursuit, many of us gain inspiration from talking with others. As parents, we will find many opportunities to talk with our children (as opposed to *at* them). But it is also important to just allow kids to listen to adults talk. I remember many times as a child being discovered sound asleep on the kitchen floor late in the evening after I had snuck out of my bed to sit in the dark and listen to the adult conversation. I have since noticed that it is very hard to keep young children in bed if a group of adults is having a lively conversation not too far away. The children will find a hundred different reasons for coming to check out what the grownups are doing. That can get exasperating, especially when the adults feel they need a break from the kids. But the kids are not being bad; they just want to learn and to participate in family life.

Spending time with our children creates many opportunities for sharing and modeling learning, for acting as both resource people and fellow explorers. My children got me interested in many things I'd previously had no interest in and we learned about them together. Often, they'd see me reading or going to the library or puzzling something out, and they'd want to do the same.

Self-directed learners want to have their questions answered quickly and honestly. Being told to go look it up is terribly frustrating to a child with an immediate need to know something. And is that how you'd answer another adult who asked you a question? Tell what little you know, make an educated guess or say you don't know. Often, I found that my daughters only wanted a short answer anyway and would cut me off with eyes rolling if I launched into a long-winded explanation that began to sound like a lecture or teaching. They often went off on their own and found someone else with a better (shorter, clearer) answer. And sometimes they looked it up.

Technology can help connect learners of all ages and backgrounds who share a passion about a particular topic. I often hear about young people with a passion to learn about some esoteric subject (and a parent who knows nothing about the subject) who have accessed someone knowledgeable on that topic via the Internet. Mentors can also be found closer to home, in the person of grandparents, other senior family members or elderly neighbors.

Learners of all ages will be empowered to move forward by stopping to celebrate accomplishments (and I'm not talking about bribery or gold stars here). And we don't have to wait until "gradua-

tion" to do that…remember how excited everyone was when your child took her first step alone?

Keeping it Whole

Knowledge is an interconnected web of information and insight and doesn't easily submit to subject divisions and grade levels. In my experience, optimum learning occurs when the learner can ignore such arbitrary constraints and venture where her pursuit takes her. Keeping the world whole and not dicing it up into "manageable" pieces extends to boundaries between work and fun, between learning and other activities.

Freedom to Learn

A non-coercive learning environment that supports risk taking, curiosity and exploration, and that encourages the pursuit of new challenges and knowledge in a supportive community of learners will develop a flexible, resourceful self-directed learner able to create a happy, productive life.

What We Should Know
by Nathanael Schildbach

"So what if they decide at sixteen they want to be astrophysicists and up until then they held fast to their dream of being a ninja and you just never pushed them to figure out why one to the zero power is minus one or whatever that is? Well, have you ever had to learn something for a reason and figured it out?"

People ask me what I "teach" my kids in various subjects. What are you doing for science? What about math? We exchange stories. We exchange resources. We exchange other people's stories and URLs and hunches and psychic moments and bad vibes and Sasquatch sightings, all related to what our kids should know and learn and need to function in this world (whatever that means to each of us). So the big question is: Exactly what do these kids need to know? How does a life learning parent prepare his kid for the life that's ahead of her?

An easy out – and I've taken it – is to look to some authority for the answer. I've looked at curriculum frameworks and books and websites on the standard things a kid needs to know by grade. I've read books by other homeschoolers and seen what they did with their kids and by other homeschoolers who talk in generic terms about what kids in general should know.

People with less experience at this will ask me, thinking I know something or, having read something I've written on the topic, think that my ability to write coherent sentences means I have some ability to design curriculum, or the fact that I have a Masters in Education probably should mean I have some ability to design curriculum (and, shhhh, don't tell anyone, but in fact I do…..)

All of us come at this from our own perspectives – not some authoritative, scientific fact that we're operating out of, but what we think is the answer to those two very subjective questions: What do they need to know and how do we prepare them for their futures?

I know, I know, let's not get too cuckoo esoteric and start throwing out references to Paolo Freire and Gramsci, but let's face it, no

matter who figures this out, they are just expressing their own opinion. The major difference is where you fall on the spectrum of deluding yourself into believing you know what you're talking about.

You can even do research to back up your claims or write all the curriculum you want and create the most elaborate educational schemes you can think of but, ultimately, no matter what anyone says, they're basing this work on some sort of perspective/opinion/hunch/roll of the dice.

And that's all good and well but what has this all got to do with what my kids are supposed to learn and how they're going to get into Harvard/Stanford/University of Oregon?

How about a practical example? I like practical examples; I like to learn from real life. So, for example, I like baseball. Okay, I'm obsessed with baseball. I complain about how short the season is. I actually know how to calculate slugging percentage. It's a sickness; someday I may soon find myself sniffing the ink on *The Bill James Handbook*.

So, after seeing the contracts pitchers were getting this year, I started thinking about my eight-year-old son. He plays baseball, got into it because his older brother is obsessed with it, although in reality I don't think he has any long range plans to win the Cy Young Award or anything. But he is left-handed. Left-handed pitchers are, like left-handed people in general, rarer than right-handed pitchers. A good left-handed pitcher is more effective against a left-handed batter than a right-handed one, and a good left-handed pitcher is hard to find. But fie upon me, I was an errant knave and when my eight-year-old started playing, he didn't want to wear a glove on his right hand, he wanted it on his left like his brother and everyone else he knew, so I let him and he trained himself to throw right-handed. This, I realized too late, was something he needed to know, to throw left-handed. I had failed him. His future prospects as a mediocre left-handed pitcher still bringing in $11 million a year and upgrading my house and car in appreciation for denying him his request to throw right-handed were slim to none. Now all he could hope for was either making $11 million a year as a mediocre right-handed pitcher or, say, $17 million a year as an effective one. So that is one example of what the kids are supposed to learn in order for them to get on in life.

But, that's not a realistic example, you're thinking; what kind of a nut really does that? (And Kimberly, the kids spending that time pitching in the backyard in the snow, I had no desire to do it, it was all

their idea and I don't know who told them that Roger Clemens' dad loved him best of all his children.)

So math...let's take math, shall we? We all need math. You can't argue with math – it's like vitamins or voting. I pushed math to the limit in school. I was on the fast track of math courses, all the way from Algebra I up through Calculus. It was good for me, I needed it and, although I never have found a use for that number grid crosshairs thing and those equations that made different shaped curvy lines, it all came in handy when I got to college and took – oh, no wait...I didn't take any math courses in college. Hmmm, well, it comes in handy at work, when, well, when I use those Algebra I skills. And set up those equations in Excel. And use the calculator. So I did learn something I really needed to know and it turned out to be largely superfluous to my life and long-term goals.

Seriously, we all do need math skills. I'm not saying you can get through life without knowing how to add – at least not very easily – and so then the big questions arise again: What do these kids need to know and how do I prepare them for life? In my case, I don't see either of my older sons being mathematicians. (We'll see about the youngest one – he has to get over writing with his right arm immobilized.) They don't really seem interested in it. I've heard of these kids who really think things like Fibonacci numbers and fractals and things are fascinating. My kids know about them; we've even gone out looking for Fibonacci in Nature. They just don't care. In retrospect, neither did I. I never planned on using math in my life beyond the basics of balancing a checkbook and understanding how to solve for a variable and to see if the honey in a jar is cheaper than the honey in bulk. I did it anyway. I'm sure those hours of time spent in tedium were well worth it, especially since I've retained so much of it. I did it because I thought I should do it.

So what do my kids need to know of math? Basics. They pick up things along the way as they need them. Some other kids? You want to be a statistician? Astrophysicist? Go for it. But it needs a context within your life, each one of us as individuals. Not what the generic person should know as of 2007 because you might need to know it and it's on the test and some bureaucrat said so and did we mention it's on the test?

So what if they decide at sixteen they want to be astrophysicists and up until then they held fast to their dream of being a ninja and you just never pushed them to figure out why one to the zero power is mi-

nus one or whatever that is? Well, have you ever had to learn something for a reason and figured it out? My mother, now in her seventies, figured out how to use a computer – not in high school, but later in life. She probably should have learned how to use them in high school, but the entire society failed her by not having invented them yet, so what could she have done? (Granted, there probably was a bit of poor planning on her part in there somewhere.)

My oldest son knows baseball statistics. He gets them. But only in context of what it means about the player and how he can use it to compare them against others…the practical purpose. No math for math's sake here.

So where does this leave us? I haven't given a single answer and have, in fact, insulted mathematics, which is one of the cornerstones of knowledge in our universe. And that's what you get. There are no easy answers to those two questions, but there is a slight tweaking of them that makes sense after all of this.

About all I can offer is the realization that these aren't two questions, but one question with the answer after it: Exactly what do these kids need to know? Whatever will prepare them for the life that's ahead of them.

The big questions are really created by the answer. And those questions can't be answered by looking to the generic, non-existent little graphical representation of a person that is often alluded to. Only each person can answer the question for him or herself. And as parents, it is our job to help.

Restructuring Education So it Works for Kids and Society

by Roland Meighan

"Nobody grew taller by being measured."

Our education system is in disarray. Parents, teachers and pupils are in a state of confusion about the random changes that have been imposed on them over the years. Teachers are leaving in droves and in disgust. Most of our time, effort and money spent on educating the young are wasted by forcing them to learn things they do not want to know or need to know, in places they have not chosen to be and in the unchosen company of fellow conscripts.

The British philosopher, historian and writer Bertrand Russell observed in 1935 that, "We are faced with the paradoxical fact that education has become one of the chief obstacles to intelligence and freedom of thought." But he could easily have been writing today. In this situation, there is an urgent need to try to establish some principles of reconstruction.

Principle One: Schooling and education are not the same thing.

We can go back to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's advice to his Minister for Education Mr. R.A. Butler in 1944: "Schools have not necessarily much to do with education...they are mainly institutions of control where certain basic habits must be inculcated in the young. Education is quite different and has little place in school." The American writer Mark Twain agreed when he wrote, "I never allowed schooling to interfere with my education."

Schools often claim to work with children. In truth, they end up working *on* children. Why are we so easily fooled? What deceives us is indicated by Everett Reimer who worked with Austrian philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich at the Center for Intercultural Studies in Mexico in the early 1970s. Reimer wrote that "some true educational experiences are bound to occur in schools: They occur despite school and not because of it."

In other words, there is some overlap of schooling with education in some situations. This is because lots of teachers try their best to rescue bits from the wreck of the mass, custodial school.

Schooling could become more educational but it needs a new fundamental vision. Until schooling becomes a voluntary part of a flexible education system for everyone, it is always only a bigot's move away from totalitarianism at the best of times. As American author and former school teacher John Taylor Gatto has observed: "When you take the free will out of education, that turns it into schooling."

Making learning an invitational activity is not a romantic notion – after all, the public library system works on just such a principle. And there is nothing to say you can't use encouragement, incentives and persuasion to support voluntary action.

Principle Two: What we want to see is the learner in pursuit of knowledge and not knowledge in pursuit of the learner.

This is a quotation from the Irish writer George Bernard Shaw. It identifies the basic flaw in official thinking about education as something to be done to learners rather than something the learners are encouraged and coached to do better for themselves. This is not a pious hope. This is exactly how parents assist their children in learning to talk, to walk and to begin to make sense of the world around them. Thus, the most successful piece of learning we can find operates on this principle. How stupid of us to forget it, ignore it or lose confidence in it.

MIT mathematician, computer scientist and educator Seymour Papert, in his book *Mindstorms, Children, Computers and Powerful Ideas*, sees computers as another reason why we should remember the success of early childhood learning:

"I believe that the computer presence will enable us to so modify the learning environment outside the classroom, that much, if not all of the knowledge schools presently try to teach with such pains and expense and such limited success will be learned, as the child learns to talk, painlessly, successfully and without organized instruction. This obviously implies that schools, as we know them today, will have no place in the future. But it is an open question whether they will adapt by transforming themselves into something new or wither away and be replaced."

Principle Three: An iron law of education is that rigid systems

produce rigid people and flexible systems produce flexible people.

The key question as regards education is about the kind of people a society is trying to encourage and develop. This basic question is often ignored in favor of mere technical issues. Instead, we need to begin by asking: What are we educating for? What sort of people are we expecting to produce? What kind of society do we envisage?

In a complex and changing society, I propose that flexible people are necessary rather than rigid people. The day prison model of schooling and the uniform models of curriculum are not noted for their success in achieving this. They are most successful at producing the miserable rule-follower mentality. Instead, we need opportunities to change direction, to have second chances, to have diversity that allows real choice rather than pseudo choice, to have rest and reflection periods away from systematic study, in a more flexible system of learning opportunities. Real choice is a rarity. For example, those parents, teachers or pupils who can exercise choice through their purchasing power usually choose small, human scale units; the rest have largeness thrust upon them whatever their wishes.

Principle Four: An information-rich society allows a variety of learning locations.

Given an information-rich and media-rich society, the day prison model of schooling devised in an earlier phase of our history is now educationally defunct because knowledge is now widely available and not limited to the one place called a school, as once was the case. The Custodial School may be thought to be socially functional by providing a mass child-minding and teenager-control service at public expense. But, in reality, it just provides a site for the operation of the tyranny of the peer group and the induction into drink, drugs, bullying and pressure to spend on fashion goods.

Teachers do not need much reflective training to perform the function of custody. Hence government's main policy of producing teachers, which is to more or less do away with reflection and replace it with mechanistic training. John Holt made the point rather bluntly when he said that schools can be in the jail business or the education business, and the extent they are in the one eradicates the possibility of being in the other.

There does not have to be a single location for learning. There can be a variety of locations, including homes, workplaces, muse-

ums, libraries and schools. Resources available at home can be increasingly utilized in educational programs, including television, radio, cassette recorders, video recorders, home computers, CD players, interactive video, special interest magazines, newspapers and books. There is also the know-how and experience of adults with time to spare as the demands of our working lives change and shorten. (About half the adult population is now unemployed because of retirement, the collapse of work or child-care duties.) At the university level, the example and experience of the Open University has made this idea of variety in learning locations and resources commonplace.

Principle Five: With information doubling in quantity about every ten years, we need a different kind of learning.

As regards knowledge, we need to avoid approaches that imply that everyone needs to know the same bank of information and that learners of the same age need to know identical things. Subjects – the staple diet of schools – are only a minor part of the tool kit of knowledge and are declining in importance and, in any case, learning the tool kit does not constitute an education. We do, however, need another kind of knowledge to be effective in the modern world – to know how to find out, to learn, relearn and unlearn, and how to manage our own learning. In other words we need to become competent, capable and confident researchers.

The concept of teacher as walking encyclopedia of one or more subjects is now obsolete. As psychologist Carl Rogers suggested, "When we put together in one scheme such elements as a prescribed curriculum, similar assignments for all students, lecturing as almost the only mode of instruction, standard texts by which all students are externally evaluated and instructor-chosen grades as the measure of learning, then we can almost guarantee that meaningful learning will be at an absolute minimum."

Principle Six: The Custodial School model needs to be replaced by the Invitational Learning Center model.

At the Human Scale Education conference in London on education and the environment, the American writer and scholar of deep ecology Joanna Macy explained that, in 1993, California crossed a watershed. For the first time, the state spent more money on locking up young people than on the education budget. In addition, schools were now in the process of "reform" to become more like day prisons than ever before.

British writer Chris Shute notes in *Compulsory Schooling Disease* that whatever their intentions and claims, schools end up training most young people to be habitually subservient. And there are seductive arguments for keeping children under a sole regime of authoritarian control. It makes them easier to handle and it pleases their parents – whilst society in general feels comfortable, for it appears to make the whole task of taking responsibility for children safer and more predictable. The democratic and autonomous forms of discipline are more demanding to work with and they are, in any case, often outside the experience of the teachers and other adults. The process looks satisfactory in the short term but the long term outcomes are often a disaster, as it produces large cohorts of subservient and inflexible young people and smaller groups of alienated, philistine or aggressive young people.

Various critics of the current model of schooling – me included – hold the view that we can regenerate schools, especially if we redefine them and retitle them as all-age community learning centers, so that they cease to be anti-educational and ageist. Our model is not that of the factory or the day prison, but that of the public library or the user-friendly type of museum. Doing away with compulsion, schools – perhaps renamed Learning Resources Centers – will be used as places where anyone, of any age, who happens to need help with their learning at any time in their lives could go to receive it. The curriculum will be a personalized one and not a standardized one. This is the vision of the next learning system and I propose that the longer we delay in establishing it, the worse for all of us.

Principle Seven: How you learn is as important, if not more important, than what you learn.

As an example, let us take literacy. It is assumed that literacy is automatically a good thing. But learning literacy in a bully institution makes you a literate bully. Author Richard J. Prystowsky, in *Paths of Learning*, Autumn 1999, reminds us that at the Wannsee conference, January 20th 1942, high-ranking Nazis met to plan the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" – that is, for the destruction of European Jewry. Over half of the conference participants had PhDs – a cohort of highly literate bullies.

When someone proposes that literacy is the aim of the learning system, we need to ask, "What kind of literacy?" Are we to produce literate fascists or literate totalitarians? Do we want literate demo-

crats or a literate minority composed of the greedy and super greedy? If we want literate male chauvinists, we need single sex institutions.

If some of the highly literate are responsible for many of the major problems that now face the world, perhaps we need less education and more wisdom. We are producing the wrong kind of person!

If we want to produce people with democratic habits, discipline and understanding, or self-directing and self-managing people, then we will need to adopt a learning system that will do this.

Principle Eight: The modern world requires behavior flexibility and competence in all the three forms of discipline: authoritarian, autonomous and democratic.

Schools work almost exclusively to an authoritarian model of behavior. Being comfortable with the logistics of authoritarian behavior is necessary because there are situations in which this is the appropriate pattern, so the authoritarian form of discipline has a modest part to play in the scheme of things – but only a modest part. Other types of discipline are necessary at other times. Autonomous behavior and discipline are more appropriate much of the time. Indeed, we live in a world that increasingly expects people to manage their own lives in an autonomous way. In other situations, co-operative or democratic patterns of behavior and discipline are appropriate. Until schools become more flexible in providing the variety of behavior patterns necessary, they are doing their pupils a disservice.

The absence of democratic experience is a serious weakness of present-day schools. Far more than at present, schools, homes and the community should be enabling pupils/students to learn the democratic arts of co-operatively planning, doing and reviewing all aspects of their education. This implies that they should learn to speak their minds responsibly, but nonetheless fearlessly, and listen attentively to others. These skills are not merely optional or desirable, but absolutely essential to the education of people who are to be citizens of a democratic country and creative members of a participant workforce, both now and in the future.

This participation cannot happen successfully unless members of the next generation, from their earliest years, become accustomed to it and acquire by experience the inner strength which can empower them to negotiate responsibly and, ultimately, on equal terms with parents, teachers and fellow students, with the assurance that their voices will be heard. Learners need real, honest respect. It is not

enough to talk in abstract terms about how we value the individuality of our young people, if we only show our esteem in token ways, such as letting them have a school council but only letting it discuss non-controversial subjects. This breeds cynicism and alienation in many young people. Participation must be real and involve the actual experience of sharing power and responsibility for decision-making, otherwise it will be rejected as mere adult manipulation.

Principle Nine: Uniform approaches to all are intellectual death to some.

Next, given the fact that we are able to locate over 30 differences in individual learning styles, any uniform approach to learning is intellectual death to some and, often most, of the learners and is therefore suspect. These learning differences fall into three broad categories: cognitive, affective and physiological.

For example, some learners have a style that is typically deductive, in contrast to those whose style is usually inductive. Others learn best from material that is predominantly visual, as against others who respond best to auditory experiences. There are contrasts between impulsive learners and reflective learners. Some learn better with some background noise; others learn better in conditions of quiet. Some are early-day learners for their peak learning time is in the morning, whereas others are afternoon learners and still others late-day learners.

In *The Age of Unreason*, Charles Handy (an Irish author/philosopher specializing in organizational behavior and management) notes that another way in which individuals differ is in types of intelligence. Seven types of intelligence (analytical, pattern, musical, physical, practical, intra-personal, and inter-personal) are identifiable. He notes, "All the seven intelligences, and there may be more, will be needed even more in the portfolio world towards which we are inching our way. It is crazy, therefore, to use only the first of the intelligences as the criterion for further investment in any individual by society."

Principle Ten: Deep learning is needed more than shallow learning.

Swedish educational psychologist Ference Marton of Gothenberg University established a crucial difference between shallow learning and deep learning. In the former, learners learned a wide range of facts and attitudes without any effective conceptual map as

to how they were related. Their knowledge was fragmented and shallow because they had no understanding of the deeper level principles that underpinned their studies. Schools are better at shallow learning than deep learning because of the limited range and inflexibility of their curriculum, teaching methods and assessment approaches.

One consequence of this kind of analysis is that we are probably wasting our time and money training many more subject teachers. Not only do they teach the least effective kind of learning for the modern world, but all they know can now easily be made available through a variety of interesting resources. The teacher as a subject "living database" is now becoming obsolete.

Principle Eleven: Effective teaching requires much more than being an instructor: Welcome the "learning coach."

John Holt proposes that what we can learn best from good teachers is how to teach ourselves better. The roles of teachers need to be extended, the most important role being that of learning coach – supporting learners as they develop the complex skills of learner-managed learning.

But in a situation of an information-rich society, teachers – even when extensively trained, educated and provided with adequate in-service updates – are just a part of the resource team needed for a flexible education system. The experience of home-based educators has clearly demonstrated this point.

Principle Twelve: Nobody grew taller by being measured.

British educator Philip Gammage made this observation and went on to argue further that imposed testing stultifies. Some people respect tests because they seem to be scientific and seem to be fair. Unfortunately for everybody, these tests do not work. Teachers start to teach to the test and soon very little gets learned apart from the test content. Students forget most of it after the test and gradually lose any desire to learn.

Test-driven education fails on many grounds. One-size-fits-all standardized exams assume that every child learns in the same way at the same time. But young people have all kinds of minds. Some excel at academic work. Some have vocational or artistic talents that tests do not measure.

Next, the companies that set and mark the tests cannot guarantee accuracy. Major errors have been reported. The test items themselves can often be false, telling you more about the limited understandings

of the test writers than any real knowledge.

American author Alfie Kohn, on his personal website (www.alfiekohn.org), writes, "A plague has been sweeping through American schools wiping out the most innovative instruction and beating down some of the best teachers and administrators. Ironically, that plague has been unleashed in the name of improving schools. Invoking such terms as 'tougher standards,' 'accountability' and 'raising the bar,' people with little understanding of how children learn have imposed a heavy-handed, top-down, test-driven version of school reform that is lowering the quality of education in this country. It has taken some educators and parents a while to realize that the rhetoric of 'standards' is turning schools into giant test-prep centers, effectively closing off intellectual inquiry and undermining enthusiasm for learning (and teaching). It is taking even longer to realize that this is not a fact of life, like the weather – that is, a reality to be coped with – but rather a political movement that must be opposed."

Principle Thirteen: We need to identify humanity's greatest mistakes and admit that Adult Chauvinism is suspect.

We should start being brave and face up to the fact that adult chauvinism has a poor record. Adults in power have, amongst other things:

- allowed policies for short-term profit that have resulted in polluted beaches, seas, rivers, water supplies, farm land and atmosphere, in the name of the gods of competition, the market and greed, and resulting in the self-indulgence of the few at the expense of the many, and creating a society where the rich are at war with the poor;
- helped develop enough destructive capability to kill us all several times;
- sold arms to autocratic regimes and then had to go to war with them to limit their activity;
- often proved incapable of organizing their own personal lives to any effective model;
- glorified competition rather than co-operation, and then wondered why this mindset leads inevitably to wars;
- sought revenge before truth and reconciliation.

With such a record, the adults in power are not in a strong position to think they are fit, morally or intellectually, to hijack the learning of the young by imposing upon them a curriculum based on their

assorted hang-ups.

Principle Fourteen: Education is an octopus and not a snake.

Many discussions about education follow this kind of pattern:

"What we need to do in education is to create small groups so that learners can work closely with a teacher and learn more effectively."

"Yes, yes, that will sort things out."

Education is a snake, you see and now that we have felt along it, we have discovered its true nature. But somebody notices a branch at the end of the snake.

"But what should they be learning?"

Yes, the curriculum needs to be considered too. There is another branch.

"What method of teaching should the teachers in the small groups use?"

Yes, yes, teaching methods are important too. There is a third branch in the snake.

"Where is the best place to learn?"

Perhaps it is a knot of snakes and not one snake at all. Somebody feels another branch in the snake.

"How can we best motivate the learners to learn?"

No, it is not a knot of snakes for all these branches are joined up. It is an octopus! We have to face up to the fact that education is a complex problem and not a simple problem at all, however inconvenient this may be.

By way of conclusion, I will pose a question. How do you know when someone is educated in our complex and changing society? One indication is that they can fill the gaps. All programs of study leave people with huge gaps in their knowledge. Those who have learned how to be taught must wait on someone else to motivate them and direct their next learning. Those who have learned how to learn, how to research, can go on to fill the gaps at will. They are competent, capable and habitual researchers. And that should be the goal of education.

The Flow of Self-Directed Learning

by Amy Spang

"Living in an environment replete with voluntary activity, self-determined goals, immediate feedback to relevant tasks and concentrated attention, a self-directed child garners critical advantages in work and life."

There has been discussion in recent years about a psychological concept known as "Flow." The concept was originally defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Professor C. for short) at the University of Chicago. His research identifies conditions under which human resources and skills are totally utilized in the accomplishment of a task. During the course of certain activities, a state of intense concentration is achieved and sustained for a period of time...and this is known as the "flow experience."

Professor C. distinguishes the state of flow from a state of happiness in that it is not produced by outside influence, but by an intrinsically focused state. Here, the full range of a person's abilities is met with a task slightly above the margin of their capacity – for example, the doctor performing a challenging surgical procedure. One of the factors Professor C. attributes to a state of flow can be found in his book *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*: "When a person likes what he does and is motivated to do it, focusing the mind becomes effortless even when the objective difficulties are great."

Determining factors in the achievement of flow include voluntary activity, a consistent set of goals, the concentration of attention and immediate, relevant feedback. These combine to create the flow experience – "when a person's entire being is stretched in the full functioning of body and mind."

What conditions negate the experience of flow according to Professor C.? Stagnation – defined as inactivity or a feeling of inertia – is one factor cited as being particularly harmful to the health of the

psyche. Anxiety, stress, passive leisure activities (such as television watching) and environments of constraint at work and school also contribute to conditions which limit precipitation of flow.

Professor C. notes that some flow experiences occur at work for adults, but motivation to achieve them is stronger at home. Similarly, home is preferred by children as a motivational setting, while school is the location least apt to foster flow experiences. As he asserts of children in general, "They feel most constrained in school, in churches and other places where their behavior must conform to others' expectations."

The professor acknowledges that although self-motivation is ideal, most individuals have long since lost the ability to understand what stimulates them. Due to social pressure and the "inertia of habit," the greater majority of us lose touch with experiences we found rewarding in youth. Rather than engage in activities that recapture flow, we turn to passive leisure activities that fail to promote an enduring sense of emotional well-being.

Professor C.'s points about the nature of this experience are original and he has taken pains to conduct numerous studies which support his concepts. However, many life learners have long been aware of the power of flow without having identified it as such. Observant parents may note that there are certain conditions under which children immerse themselves in learning to a remarkable degree beyond every expectation, regardless of age, place or whether their intelligence is documented or not. To investigate this phenomenon, we might expand the concept of flow to include the variables that comprise it. What are the principles of flow and how do we apply them to self-directed situations at home?

If we examine the concept closely, it is evident that flow adheres to principles of Nature that we encounter in daily life. Within its confines, we find matching sets of conditions that govern the natural environment and human intellectual activity – especially in children.

To begin with, Nature operates on a seasonal basis. If the time is incorrect for any natural function, it simply won't occur. Premature growth, development or untimeliness of any kind in Nature could lead to the distortion of its flow. This, in turn, risks damage to the entire system. According to Professor C., stress is a great inhibitor of flow, yet children are forced to read and write everywhere before readiness is indicated, often under conditions of extreme stress. In contrast, self-directed environments negate out-of-season develop-

ment. They provide time for skill acquisition on an individual basis.

If we ignore the principle of seasonal development, children sublimate internal needs in order to satisfy adults. It is at this point that the source of flow begins to dry up. If children should demonstrate avoidance of a subject for reasons unexplained, we must respect their choice unequivocally. Inclinations such as these stem from the instinct to maintain wholeness, which is absolutely critical for children operating in a perpetual state of flow.

A second principle to consider when comparing the laws of Nature and flow is that organisms develop adaptations that benefit survival. In Nature, unnecessary characteristics aren't retained and waste is a non-existent entity. In imitation of this, children retain knowledge that is useful only in context of the groups they inhabit – knowledge which fosters their personal survival in those groups. If information in an environment is irrelevant and not related to the immediate world, it is promptly forgotten. Many of us recall being forced to memorize foreign material, only to banish it completely after the test. Life learning works and preserves its sense of flow because the family group is a paramount essential based in a motivational location. Irrelevant skill instruction in passive leisure settings cannot result in permanent retention, but retention can and will occur when self-regulation exists at home.

If we want to encourage flow, we should not presume to determine what is relevant for anyone else. Few have the ability to predict what is meaningful for any person – especially without possessing insight as to why the knowledge matters or to what purpose its intent. The costs of determining relevancy for others are witnessed daily in the lives of those continually seeking what originally held meaning for them as children.

A final comparison of flow's relationship to Nature is this: Dormant periods occur at varying intervals in the lives of children and adults. Analogous to spring's renewal of life after winter, the bursts of energy we experience often occur after modes of hibernation. Conversely, sustained periods of intense activity can be followed by days, weeks and months of no visible activity whatsoever. This is a critical period in which the brain rests in order to prepare itself for the next intellectual surge. These phases are vital to the conservation of energy and ensure absorption of material that is learned. Inactivity in this case serves as an incubative state.

Contrary to conditions that support creative flow, environments

maintaining rigid schedules give no allowance for the principle of dormancy. With manipulation, the rhythm of learning gets corrupted, effectively cutting off the ability of flow to maintain itself.

Do Professor C.'s ideas support home-based learning? His research was not intended to promote or debase educational practice, only to observe its effect on the achievement of flow. Notwithstanding this, he seems to describe the ideal situation as one in which individuals direct their own interests. If his theory is correct, the unschooled child is the most promising recipient of happiness to come along in decades. Living in an environment replete with voluntary activity, self-determined goals, immediate feedback to relevant tasks and concentrated attention, a self-directed child garners critical advantages in work and life.

Professor C.'s solution to a lack of flow in one's life is to set goals that are challenging in nature. He spends a great deal of time suggesting methods to resurrect motivation and locate goals that were squelched by earlier experiences. Perhaps a determination of what caused the loss of these goals in the first place could foster investigation as to why we fail to achieve flow in our daily lives. Raising our children on a seasonal basis, with knowledge that is meaningful to survival allowing for periods of dormancy will significantly enhance the odds for a successful life in the future. In his words, "The flow experience acts as a magnet for learning – that is, for developing new levels of challenges and skills. In an ideal situation, a person would be constantly growing while enjoying whatever he or she did."

Play is Self-Directed Learning

by Marty Layne

"When a child is engaged in play, learning is something that happens as part of the experience. It is not directed by someone else but self-directed by the child."

A few years ago, I helped a ten-year-old boy at the beach to build a dam across a little stream. I was helping my teacher husband with a class field trip. At the end of each school year, he takes his class to the beach. We live in Victoria, B.C. While the air gets warm, the Pacific Ocean never gets much warmer than about 12 or 13 degrees C in the summer. So instead of swimming, the children often build sandcastles or climb around on and/or build things with the logs that have been washed ashore.

One of the boys wanted to build a dam across a stream quite a way down the beach from where the group was. He needed an adult to go with him, so I volunteered. I found it fascinating to be with this child as he built his dam. He had lived in Victoria for most of his childhood. One of the best things about Victoria is that there are many accessible beaches that have lots and lots of driftwood. I watched as Hayden (not his real name) carried various pieces of wood to his dam location and started building. I asked if he wanted help to carry more driftwood. He agreed. Soon we exhausted the supply that was light enough for us to lift. Hayden then decided that he needed a bigger log. He tried to move a log that was almost two meters long and sixteen or seventeen centimeters across. He tried tugging at it. He tried pushing it from one side. He tried pushing it from the ends. It was too heavy for him to move. I offered to help, but he wanted to work on his own. After ten minutes, I offered to help again. He accepted my help then and I suggested that he use a long, thin log nearby to put underneath the bigger log to pry it up and move it that way. He thought this was a great idea and soon he was using the pole as a lever. It took him a while to get the hang of it, but he kept trying and soon began to figure out how the pole could help him move the bigger log to where he wanted it to go.

I was pleased for him that he had time to explore the possibilities

of a lever. At the same time that I was pleased, I was sad. Here was a child who had not had the chance to spend enough time just poking around on the beach to discover that you can use one log to pry up another one. It made me think about how many times I was asked how my children could possibly be learning anything if they were just playing all the time.

This experience on the beach epitomized why children need to have time to play in unstructured ways. It helped to remind me that self-directed play is a vital component of learning. Children need to explore the world and experiment to really begin to understand how things work. They need many experiences of rolling down a hill, rolling a ball down a hill, watching water from a hose run down a hill, seeing streams run down hill, etc. to grasp what gravity means. It is from experience that we build understanding and knowledge.

Current learning theory states that learning is:

- a process of knowledge construction, not of knowledge recording or absorption;
- knowledge-dependent, as people use their existing knowledge to construct new knowledge;
- affected as much by motivational issues as by cognitive ones;
- highly tuned to the situation in which it takes place.

Let me illustrate how this theory works during play. Recently I watched an eighteen-month-old play with Play-Doh. Sara wanted her mother to make a Play-Doh snake come out of an extruder. She had had enough experiences with this toy to know that it makes snakes out of Play-Doh.

Her mom showed Sara where to put the Play-Doh and demonstrated how to push it in. Her daughter put the Play-Doh in where her mom had shown her and then tried to put it in the place where she knew it would come out. Her mom showed her again where it needed to go in. Mom then pushed down and the Play-Doh came out in a snake form while Sara watched. Then they went through the whole procedure again and again and again. Sara continued to try to put the Play-Doh in the place where it would come out as well as in the correct spot. She played with Play-Doh for about forty-five minutes, continuing this process with her mom helping her while we were talking.

As I watched this little girl try to put the Play-Doh in the place where it came out, it was clear to me that she had experienced other situations where when something comes out, it also goes back into

that same place so that it can come out again (learning as a process of knowledge construction). This toy had a different way for things to come out. The Play-Doh had to go in one place for it to come out another place. It may take many more times before Sara understands that while the Play-Doh comes out of one part, that is not where it goes in. She has to build new knowledge based on her other knowledge. (Learning is knowledge-dependent; people use their existing knowledge to construct new knowledge.)

She will continue to try to put the Play-Doh in the place where it comes out until her new learning fits on top of her old learning. Her mom will probably show and tell her each time where the Play-Doh goes because that is what we do with toddlers: We give them words and demonstrate how something works. But until Sara has learned for herself, she will continue to try to put the Play-Doh in at the place that makes the most sense to her based on her previous understanding of how things work. The Play-Doh extruder works differently and she will need many experiences before this makes sense to her.

Children learn about arithmetic in much the same way – with hands-on experience of objects like dolls or rocks or LEGO pieces as they play. Parents give a child words and concepts, but it is the manipulating, the sorting and tactile experiences that make sense of number concepts. Until a child has his own understanding of these number concepts, has built this knowledge internally and understands it, math problems may make him feel like Sara did when she was trying to figure out why the Play-Doh didn't go back in where it came out. Until a child has had many experiences with quantities of items and manipulated them, the process of addition, subtraction, multiplication can look as mysterious to them as the problem Sara had figuring out the Play-Doh extruder.

When my children were young, it was in their fantasy play that I observed them using all kinds of objects, materials and ideas that led to knowledge and understanding. They played for hours, both indoors and out. They dressed up in costumes, built forts and tents, created towns, both life-size and in miniature, in which to enact their spontaneous play. Their fantasy plays sometimes continued over many days, as they returned to a certain setting they had created, and sometimes it was a very short thing.

This time to play gave them a background of experiences to draw on as they grew older. They learned how to create situations and how to make choices that fit into the situations they had created. They

learned to do practical things like how to hammer nails into wood so that a fort would stay together or how to sew something so that it stayed together. If they wanted finger puppets to enact a story, they made them. I was there to give some basic instruction and then watched and helped as needed.

Living and learning at home allows families to create time and safe places for children to play. Children can take advantage of the time at home to build LEGO structures that can take days to build and perfect, create a fort in the living room to play in if it's raining outside, spend hours swinging or engage in any number of other activities limited only by their imaginations. As they play, they learn many things – some that are measurable and some that are not. As stated in learning theory, learning is affected as much by motivational issues as by cognitive issues and it is highly tuned to the situation in which it takes place. When a child is engaged in play, learning is something that happens as part of the experience. It is not directed by someone else but self-directed by the child.

This opportunity to be self-directed – to make decisions about what to play with and how to play – will help in later life. Decisions about which of the Playmobil pieces to play with and sorting them out accordingly can lead to an ability to organize and prioritize. Unlike artificially divided subjects, play covers the entire learning spectrum – for example from biology (learning which berries are okay to eat) to sociology (how many people are needed to make a village fantasy game work). Self-directed, spontaneous fantasy play gives children an opportunity to interact and make decisions the way adults make them in life. What could be more educational than that?

Doing Their Best, Naturally

by Rachel Gathercole

"People automatically give their best to things they care about...unless, of course, they have been told their whole lives that their best isn't good enough."

I am sitting on my front step trying to figure out my son's Rubik's Cube. Though such puzzles don't usually interest me much, I am absorbed in the rhythm of each turn and flip of the block, when I am snapped out of my trance by a friend stopping by with a question that's been nagging at her. Knowing that I am the mother in a family of self-directed, "delight-driven" learners, she puts the question to me this way: "If you don't give your kids grades, if you don't give them assignments and tests, if you allow them to just pursue their own interests, how will your children ever learn to achieve, to apply themselves, to reach their full potential – you know, to do their best?"

I value my friend and her question far more than solving the cube, so I put it down and focus my attention on her. I've heard this question or ones like it before, but often don't have time to respond fully. Right now, though, I have a rare moment to muse. My son, an artist, is busy preparing paintings for a local art show and my daughter is practicing for her clogging team's upcoming performance. So I answer my friend...and my response is quite simple: They automatically do their best. They do it because they are pursuing their own interests. Period. In fact, it's possible they may never learn to do things any other way than their best.

My friend is flabbergasted. "What are you talking about?" she inquires bluntly. Frankness is something I value in our friendship and I am always happy to answer honest questions, so I continue:

Take drawing, for instance. My daughter, who is seven, draws because she wants to make a beautiful picture for someone. Given that this is her reason for drawing, why would she do it to any less than the fullest extent of her ability? After all, she wants to please the recipient and to show how beautifully she can draw, as well.

My 11-year-old son, on the other hand, draws because he is an aspiring comic book artist. He gives it his all simply because he wants

to make awesome comics. More importantly, he loves to draw. When he wants his comics published or wants to sell them or wants a job with a comic book company, he will have that added reason and will naturally try as hard as he can and do the finest job he can because he will want those outcomes. This is known as motivation.

My kids also study the martial art of Ninjitsu. This is their choice and they approach that with discipline and focus, too. They excel at Ninjitsu because, quite simply, they love it. My son, in particular, also wants to be respected by his senseis (instructors) because he respects them. Furthermore, he wants to be strong, skilled and reap all the other benefits that they work toward in their study of the art. And that is, of course, why he has chosen to study it in the first place.

My son also writes novels and stories. He goes to great lengths, asking many questions and choosing words carefully, to craft these works well and to achieve the effect he is after – a funny story, a scary scene, a gripping cliffhanger. Why would he bother writing them otherwise? He gives writing his optimum effort for the same reason that he writes at all…because he chooses to. Thus, on one level, it is actually free will itself that leads my children to do their best.

But if they don't do what appears to me to be their best, that's okay with me, too. It is also free will that allows them to be selective. In point of fact, it is not necessary, desirable or even possible to give one's all to every single thing – especially things chosen by someone else. When I am parking my car, I do not put my most concerted effort into making sure the car is exactly the same distance from each side of the parking space; just getting it between the lines is good enough. To spend significantly more effort than that would be a waste of time, possibly bordering on the obsessive. Likewise, I wouldn't want my kids to feel "locked in" to doing their absolute best on everything, since this would be impossible and would come at the expense of things they care about.

Today when my friend stopped by, I chose not to finish the Rubik's Cube so that I could give my full attention to her and her question. If my child is making herself a peanut butter sandwich, it is enough that she gets the peanut butter and jelly to cover most of one side of the bread. There would be little to be gained from spending time trying to get it "perfect;" that time could be better spent on things that matter. In our constant choice-making, we put more effort into the things we care more about…and with good reason. This is known as prioritizing.

And the importance of prioritizing is not to be underestimated. Understanding that we have the option to choose what we put our efforts into is a very valuable and powerful asset. A stay-at-home father I know, who has Ivy League degrees in both chemistry and business, is often questioned about why he is not choosing to fulfill his enormous (money-making) potential as a businessman. He responds that he cannot be "father of the year" and the CEO of a Fortune 500 company at the same time. He chooses to focus on fatherhood. It is more important to him.

This applies on a smaller scale as well. The other day, in the middle of cleaning his room, my son stopped to hear the hurt feelings of his younger sister. I overheard him addressing these feelings in a way that I could tell was employing all of the skills and sensitivity he had access to. This took time. Ultimately, his room-cleaning went unfinished, but his relationship with his sister was intact. If it had been up to me, I would have made the same choice as he did. A spotless room just isn't as important as a healing conversation between family members.

Later, in the midst of attempting, with frustration, to work out a difficult mathematical problem on his own, he walked away from it in favor of going to work on a perspective drawing technique he has been trying for weeks to master. I could have insisted that he stay and pursue the math problem to its completion. I did not. Drawing is more important to him and I respect that priority. In most cases, I value things he has his heart set on well above things it might seem he "should" do. And so, of course, does he.

And therein lies the fact that makes this all work. People automatically give their best to things they care about...unless, of course, they have been told their whole lives that their best isn't good enough – a discouraging yet common phenomenon. If we stop and think about the things we care most about, I believe we will recognize that we give these things our very best efforts, simply because we care about them. In fact, perhaps the only reason to do less than our utmost is if we are doing something we didn't ourselves choose. Since they pretty much direct their own lives, my kids do tend to give things their all. Thus, on another level, it is the freedom to prioritize that leads my children to do their best.

And then, of course, there's modeling. When we adults strive to do a first-rate job on the things we tackle, our children see that, as far as we're concerned, making choices and then giving them our very

best shot is what people do. Likewise, when we assume that they are trying their hardest, kids don't get the message that we don't trust them to. Without grades or criticism to hurt their pride, they needn't get discouraged and decide not to try.

That's great, my friend says. But what about the times in life when they will have to do things they don't choose? Like show up to work and pay the bills? What will they do then?

I see what she means. And here is my answer: If they have to do those things, and do them well, then they will do them because they have to. Of course, by then, they may be in the habit of doing a good job, so may just do so as a matter of course. On the other hand, individuals raised in a climate of non-coercion are also likely to realize that, even in such cases, they do ultimately have a choice. They may choose to go to work so as not to get fired or so as to maintain a certain lifestyle. Then again, they could choose another path that reduces the bills they have to pay or that positions them in a job they'd rather get up and go to. Rarely is there literally no choice. Life is full of choices. An awareness of the choices one is making is ultimately another motivation to follow them through with gusto.

Besides, children, like adults, tend to do what is expected of them. I expect my children to do the best they can and also to do what is right for them. I don't mean that I expect it as in, "I expect you to behave, young man." I mean that I expect it in the same way that I expect water to turn to ice when I put it in the freezer. The same way I expect the sun to come up in the morning. The same way I expect the mail to be delivered. It is the usual pattern. If it doesn't happen, I am surprised. It means the freezer is unplugged or not working. Or it is a national holiday or the mail carrier is sick. Or my child is too tired, or discouraged or something else to give it her all. Or he just doesn't want to. And that's okay with me. It's not my children's job to be perfect.

Of course, if they are doing something that is not good for them, I will ask them to change it. I am their parent and if they need help or guidance, I will give it to them.

Still, most of the time they try their little hearts out. Why? Because they're not learning to do the minimum required to just "get by." Because no one gives them a bad grade that tells them their best wasn't good enough or a good grade that tells them they needn't try any harder. And most of all, because pursuing their own interests – and thus automatically doing the best they can – gives them ample

chance to experience and discover the many positive effects that doing one's best produces.

Like, say, a sold-out comic book. A smile from a grandmother who receives a beautiful card. A delicious cake. A successful art show. A reliable friendship. An acceptance letter. A call-back to an audition. A referral to mow another lawn. A standing ovation. A request for a sequel. A blackbelt.

And yes, the simple pride of a job well done. Now that's motivation – a real reason for them to try their darndest again next time. And the next time. And the time after that. And the time after that....

"My grandmother wanted me to get a good education,
so she kept me as far away from schools as possible." ~ Margaret Mead

What You See May Not Be What You Get

by Jan Fortune-Wood

"We can't assume that we can tell what's going on inside someone's mind from simply looking or even by testing; after all, we might be testing the wrong thing."

Recently, I've been helping my older daughter with a course in biological psychology. As well as being fascinating in itself, some of the material got me thinking about the gap between perceptions of education and actual education taking place. One of the experiments we studied concerned a basketball pitch. Observers are asked to focus on one team and count the number of passes made by their chosen team during a fixed time period. During this time, a person in a gorilla suit wanders onto the court, stands in the centre, beats his chest and wanders off. Most people fail to see the "gorilla!" This and many other experiments tell a great deal about the power of attention: We see what we are attending to. Yet mainstream educational theory and practice often blithely assumes that children can be objectively tested to see if they are learning without paying attention to what the child was focusing on at the time. Metaphorically, all too often, standardized tests or theories of educational monitoring check for whether children see the gorilla, while totally failing to notice that the children are mentally occupied elsewhere counting passes made by a basketball team.

Life learning families don't educate in ways that look anything like school-based education. For those looking in from the outside, it might feel a bit like taking a trip to a very modern art museum. The observer might stare in bemusement at the modernistic installations or challenging abstract and ask whether this is really art or whether some so-called artist is being paid a huge amount to create a mess? Education, like art, is not a single monolithic concept; it is something capable of many definitions and, most importantly, it is something that goes on in someone else's mind, to which only they have privi-

leged access. To some onlookers, autonomous education may seem unlikely to even qualify as education, but not only is it radically different, we also know that it is radically effective.

The key to autonomous education is not whether the children are busy doing high level math or spending whole days and weeks contemplating a stream from a perch up a tree. Both might be autonomous education but, then again, they might be something else. We can't assume that we can tell what's going on inside someone's mind from simply looking or even by testing; after all we might be testing the wrong thing. Let's take those two examples.

Imagine Susie, a child of thirteen who is speeding through math generally studied by average eighteen-year-old students. What might be happening here is that Susie's parents are pushing her along with a highly structured and coercive plan. On the other hand, it might be that Susie loves math and that an idiosyncratic path of free choices has led to an early and advanced passion for it. The point I want to make is that we can't say for sure which type of education is being pursued simply by looking at what Susie is doing.

The same applies to thirteen-year-old Emma who spends most of every day climbing, exploring and contemplating out of doors. What we might have is a family that isn't particularly interested in education and parents with no desire to interact with their child. She might be out every day because the house lacks resources and stimulation and the parents lack commitment. On the other hand, Emma may live in a home full of books, computers, TVs and resources with engaged and supportive parents, but at this point in her life is pursuing exactly what she wants to learn. Her learning simply isn't something that can neatly go down on paper or even be discussed right now.

Perhaps Emma is taking a long gestation period for an amazing progression in knowledge or unwinding after making previous leaps in her ideas. Sitting around apparently doing little or nothing could have educational purpose that makes it an extremely efficient use of time, although we may not be able to see this in the short term.

What is important to note is that taking a snapshot of what a child is doing tells us very little, especially when we are dealing with autonomous education. Is the fourteen-year-old scientist coerced and timetabled to within an inch of his life by parents who control the educational process or is he entirely free to learn anything and physics just happens to be his passion?

Is the ten-year-old play-station ace who can't read more than three letter words horribly neglected or is he simply taking an alternative path that will make wonderful sense only in hindsight?

The problem is, if we can't tell from looking, how on earth do we tell whether autonomous education is taking place or whether nothing at all is going on? The key is intrinsic motivation. We don't learn best like Pavlov's dogs conditioned to say "four" every time we hear "two plus two." Rather, we learn best when we try ideas out for ourselves and we do even better when we are trying out ideas that interest us. If what we are learning is linked to our own preferences and interests, then the learning will be the most efficient.

Autonomous education has two components: autonomy and education. Autonomy is the right of self-government and free will. Education is harder to pin down, but a shorthand working definition might be "the process by which we develop intellectual potential and foster the growth of knowledge." Autonomous education, then, is simply that process of growing knowledge because we want to.

What makes a particular course of education autonomous is not whether it is structured or unstructured, whether it is academic or practical, whether it looks like something that might happen in school or looks completely random – it is simply whether it is the learning that the learner really wants to be doing for her own ends.

Some autonomously educated children choose formal exams or qualifications; some want specific teaching for various areas of learning; others want to experiment alone or learn by apprenticeship and others will choose completely informal, unstructured means. Autonomous learning is not about what the style of learning is, although it often tends to be much more informal for many years, nor about the content of what is being learned; it is simply about the learner being in control. When learners are truly in control, we can trust that education is taking place, even if it's not always visible, testable or immediately apparent; what we see is not always what we get.

This often puts life learners at odd with the mainstream. Autonomous education is much more radical than simply presenting lessons in child-centered language or giving children a choice from a list of parentally pre-approved educational materials. It questions whether there is any such thing as a core curriculum that must be got through. Intrinsic motivation requires that the content is just and only the content which the child wants to engage with. It requires that the environment is one in which the child chooses to be and can leave, and that

choice is genuine and unrestricted. This type of education, in turn, demands a lot of trust in children as learners and a great deal of engagement from adults as sources of information, support and resources.

Is this education or is it simply pie in the sky madness? Autonomous education raises a lot of questions and fears, not only from education professionals, but often from parents contemplating which philosophy to follow in their own home education situation. So it's worth dispensing with a few myths.

Firstly, autonomous education is not the same as neglect. Educational self-government, free will and intrinsic motivation does not require that we casually leave our children to get on with their lives and learning without help, input or without the benefits of parental information or experience. Children are natural learners; adults have both a negative duty not to destroy that natural learning ability and a positive duty to help children to achieve their ends.

The parents of autonomously educated children do not have an easy life. They don't breathe a huge sigh of relief and go off to do their own thing while their children fend for themselves. They provide resources and demonstrate their uses. They make suggestions endlessly. They offer helpful criticism about every new idea, project and experiment. They take part in learning alongside their children or help children to interpret materials. Giving absolute choice is not an act of parental abandonment; it demands that parents be fully engaged and willing to take on a lot of new learning for themselves in the process of supporting and helping.

Secondly, autonomous education is not mere "pie in the sky." It is not sheer madness to imagine that children possess motivation and can be trusted. There is a common fear that life learning will leave most children uneducated and unprepared for life. Without force-fed, systematic instruction children don't grow up illiterate, innumerate and generally ignorant. The evidence of many of us life learners confirms that a basic skill like literacy might be learned at a much wider age range – anything from four to twelve or older. But once the child sees a need to learn for her own purposes, then far from taking a couple of thousand literacy hours, reading is often picked up very fast. Anyone would be hard pressed to tell the difference between a child who learned to read at age five and one who learned to read at age eleven, both of whom are now reading *The Lord of the Rings* at age thirteen.

Far from fearing that children will never learn unless they are

made to, life learners know that children will acquire the skills they need to pursue their own aspirations. What autonomously home educating parents across the spectrum agree on is that however the "essentials" are defined they will be acquired without resort to lesson plans, set hours or externally imposed motivation.

Life learning demands that we trust children as learners; are willing to follow the child's questions and interests; offer a stimulating environment; engage with our children with ideas, conversation and fun; and recognize that the boundaries between life and learning are very fluid indeed. When we do, we are often pleasantly surprised to find that what we get is not only more than we thought we were seeing, but beyond our wildest imaginings.

"Thank goodness I was never sent to school;
it would have rubbed off some of the originality." ~ Beatrix Potter

Whose Goal is it, Anyway?

by Pam Laricchia

"At our house, the goal is not learning to read. But if the goal is to immerse yourself in the world of Harry Potter, you'll likely learn a lot about reading along the way."

It all started with a plant. My husband was talking about training a plant – just the right combination of water and fertilizer, the right soil and sun conditions, a bit of pruning here and there, and most likely you'll be rewarded with a beautiful, healthy plant.

Like parenting, he theorized. You try to create the right environment for them, love them, nurture them and you will likely be rewarded with successful young adults.

It sounded good, but I was having a hard time swallowing the word "training." I'm not "training" them to be anything. Training sounds like you are trying to get them to meet your goals, not their own.

"But don't you have any goals for our kids?" he asked curiously.

"No," was my short answer. But the look that flashed across his face spurred me to explain further.

"Well," I floundered, "I want them to be happy." And thinking quickly because that sounded so sappy: "I want them to be able to choose what they want to do in life and feel confident pursuing their goals." Then I had a seemingly obvious thought: "The difference between a plant and a child is free will."

Think about it. In training a plant you are training it to your desired outcome, not the plant's. Sure, it looks "happy" on the outside – nice green leaves and bright, colorful flowers. But, if the plant had free will, maybe it truly would have chosen to keep that branch you trimmed off last week.

If you try to "train" a child, even in the most loving manner and with the best of intentions, you are trying to determine their goals, their path in life; you are trying to mold what they look like on the outside. And eventually that may well backfire. It will certainly take its toll on your relationship. It also manages to subvert learning about

choices and goal-setting, which is so crucial in life once a person is responsible for her own actions and future.

I couldn't get the conversation out of my mind. When most people talk about goals for their kids, they usually mean things like learning to swim, being the best hockey player on the team or getting into college – things they believe will make their kids' lives better. But whose goal is it, really? Often parents are seeing through the distortion of their own filters, not clearly through their children's eyes. It takes work to recognize and remove these filters but I have no desire to reshape my childhood by directing theirs; the risk to our relationship is too great.

In comparison, my hopes for my children aren't about accomplishments; they are about living. But I guess I do have goals for my kids! I want them to know and understand themselves. I want them to feel confident making choices. I want them to feel comfortable learning any new skills they may need to accomplish their goals. In other words, I want them to feel confident living a joyful life. Not happy, smiley surface joy – everyone encounters disappointment and sadness – but the deep, soulful joy of being satisfied with the direction of one's life, even with its unexpected twists and turns.

So why did I choose these goals? And how do I help my kids reach them?

To Know and Understand Themselves

I believe a strong sense of self – a deep understanding of who they are – is essential to my children confidently finding their places in our world. If they know what makes them tick, what makes their hearts sing, they will be able to search for their niches, those places where they can take great pleasure in making contributions to society. What kinds of things do they like to do? How do they like to learn? Do they like pursuing interests surrounded by others or do they prefer a more solitary approach? Do they like their activities to be predictable or to have a sense of adventure or an element of the unknown?

Over the years, they will probably realize that for many of these traits it is not one end of the spectrum or the other; they will likely find themselves enjoying elements of both to differing degrees. What is important is that they have time to discover themselves and to realize that they are always growing, their ideas and views changing based on new facts and experiences.

Schooled children spend most of each day learning to do what other people tell them, not to mention the plethora of after-school ac-

tivities and homework that fills up the remaining hours of the day. So if they don't get the time to understand themselves and discover their dreams and passions as children, they may need to take it as young adults. How often have we heard of people in their twenties going off to "find themselves?" And they are the relatively lucky ones, the ones who decide it is important to get to know themselves before they get immersed in the next stage of life – career and family. Many others just continue to pursue what they have been told will bring them happiness – the good job, the "perfect" family and so on.

Maybe they will manage to hang on for a couple more decades, though they may wear, as meditation critic, film critic and author of author of *Cinema Nirvana* Dean Sluyter puts it: "the drained, dispirited faces of silent adults – post-op cases who have already undergone the freedomectomy." Then the midlife crisis hits and they may begin to take stock of their lives so far and wonder if they are truly happy. "Is this really what I want to do with my life?" "Am I really happy?" Divorces and drastic career changes are all part and parcel of waiting until midlife to take the time to really know and understand yourself, what makes you tick, what brings you joy.

So, my first goal is to give our children the time and space to figure out who they truly are. And then I want them to have more time and space to discover how their views evolve with age and life experience, to explore what they like to do, how they like to learn, what makes them shine. Always, I am near, available to chat about what's on their minds, share my experiences or provide transportation.

I believe that giving them the time they need to understand themselves is the single most important foundation I can give them in their search for a joyful life.

To Feel Confident Making Choices

Freedom of time – so abundant in life learning – also allows our children to gain lots of experience making choices and living the outcomes. From choices as simple as what to have for breakfast or when they are tired and want to go to sleep, to bigger ones like whether to join Scouts or the local baseball league, I want to take the time to help them figure it all out. It takes more time to give children choices – to discuss the options, the possible outcomes, time to decide which choice is best for them – than just to tell them what to do, but how else are they going to gain real experience at it? They need more than remembering what choice you made for them last time. What will they do when they encounter a new situation and you are not right there to

tell them what choice to make?

Many of us grew up that way: Our well-intentioned parents told us what to do instead of discussing our options and ultimately letting us decide – without the guilt trip if we chose a different path. Then we may remember the heady but scary feeling of first being on our own – free to choose what to eat, what to do, to stay up all night – our time truly our own for the first time. But at that point we had moved out and had to figure it out all on our own. Which choices were truly best for us? Which were we making in reaction to our parents? Which were we making just to get along with our friends? And even with the voices in our heads (and maybe as a result of them), it took a quite a while.

I don't want to be that nagging voice in my child's head as she gets older. I want to spend time with her now helping her analyze situations, possible options, likely outcomes. I want to spend time supporting her decisions, helping her figure out how to make choices, not what choices to make. Then when she's older, that voice in her head can be her own. I won't mind, though, if she occasionally hears my loving reminders that she knows what's best for her, that I trust her.

And on the other side of this coin: Children who have the freedom to try on different hats, to pursue different goals and activities and to discard them when they no longer make sense, do not feel like a failure when choosing to drop something. They see it as another experience from which to learn a bit about something and a lot about themselves. This is a much better attitude than the child who is forced to stay, being told to "suck it up" and "stick it out," who feels powerless and resentful. As an adult, this child is more likely, for example, to stay in an unhappy career so as not to look or feel like a failure, though he will definitely feel trapped – not the joyful life I hope for my children.

"What work have I got to do, then?" said Will, but went on at once, "No, on second thought, don't tell me. I shall decide what I do. If you say my work is fighting, or healing, or exploring, or whatever you might say, I'll always be thinking about it. And if I do end up doing that, I'll be resentful because it'll feel as if I didn't have a choice, and if I don't do it, I'll feel guilty because I should. Whatever I do, I will choose it, no one else."

"Then you have already taken the first steps towards wisdom," said Zaphania.

This quote from *The Amber Spyglass* by Philip Pullman sums up

human nature so succinctly and describes what life learning parents are trying to do, which is to give their children the freedom to determine their own life's journey. And through each choice made and outcome lived, our children gain experience with making choices and, in turn, learn a bit more about themselves. In this way, my first two goals are inextricably linked; but I believe each is important enough to stand on its own.

To Feel Comfortable Learning New Skills

My last goal for my children is for them to feel comfortable learning new skills. It is in this area that they pick up the day-to-day skills they need to achieve their goals in life. They want to accomplish something and they are motivated to learn whatever is needed to get them there. Here, they also encounter the more academic skills like reading, math and writing.

And here's another big difference between life learning and school. In school, the focus is on the skills: Learning to read is, in itself, a goal, as is learning the times tables or learning the capital cities. But stuck within the confines of the school's four walls, kids find it hard to understand why they might want to learn many of these things. Those subjects are completely disconnected from the kids' goals. School disconnects people from life. And without the connection to real-life goals, learning these skills is all the more difficult. "Why do I need to know this?" is a common refrain and for good reason. The kids need something to connect a bit of information to, some way for it to make sense in their world and, with that, to gain understanding and real learning.

So at our house, the goal is not learning to read. But if the goal is to immerse yourself in the world of Harry Potter, you'll likely learn a lot about reading along the way. We don't have learning percentages as a goal. But if the goal is to make a well-rounded party that can defeat the final boss in your video game, an understanding of percentages and data management is pretty crucial. This learning is really incidental to the goal – just stepping stones, something to figure out along the way – but it is real learning; it makes sense in their world and has a purpose. And the kids truly enjoy it because it helps them accomplish their goal. Learning is fun!

I have heard people exclaim, "But what if they don't encounter a skill that they really need to know?" To which I say, "Then obviously they truly don't need it; it really wasn't necessary – yet. Or maybe ever." Without the timeline and curricula of schools, there is no

"start" and "end" to learning. Learning is really a byproduct of pursuing goals and interests in life – and that is a lifelong thing. There is nothing wrong with not encountering a need to learn some algebra until the age of twenty-five. If that's when they find a use for it, that's when they can learn it! And it will make sense and be remembered because there is a real-life reason for it. Even in school, if there's no real need for a skill in a student's life (long division? historical dates? the periodic table?), he will most likely memorize it for the test and within a few weeks forget it. I question whether it was actually learned or understood at all.

So how do I help my children feel comfortable learning new things? I basically do it the same way I help them learn about themselves – by being there to talk to and bounce ideas off of, by sharing what I know (maybe pointing out new connections they may not have yet noticed), by helping them gather more information if they want it and by providing any "stuff" to help them pursue their interests further.

With my goal of helping my children as they learn the skills they need to pursue their goals, they are gaining experience and learning how to learn. I can't predict what they may want to learn some day, but lots of experience in figuring out how to gather information and piece it together will help them build their unique view of the world over their lifetime. It's not about telling them what to learn, but helping them figure out how to learn. As futurist Alvin Toffler put it: "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn."

Looking at my kids today, I tell myself that they are already living joyful lives! They do understand themselves, they are confident making their own choices (just try to convince them otherwise!) and I see them learning new things every day in pursuit of their interests and goals. Maybe my real job is to keep that spirit alive as they get older, to keep their authentic selves shining brightly by protecting them from or countering those who would toss well-meaning (in their view) handfuls of sand on their soul.

It seems to me that extending life learning principles beyond academic bounds and living these goals with my children gives them a much more useful outlook on life – and a lot more self-knowledge and life skills to start with – than the one offered by school and traditional parenting practices. This approach has a better chance of bringing them a joyful life. And that was my goal from the beginning.

Principles Not Rules

by Robyn L. Coburn

"Rules for children are often not designed to be useful in themselves but to function as molds, designed to teach some idea, especially the idea that rules must be followed, without defiance or even contemplation."

Recently, on an unschooling e-list, someone asked, "How does a person who has no rules to follow as a child cope with life as an adult in a world filled with rules?"

There were several replies addressing the idea that a home without rules does not mean chaos, but instead can be a world of principles. And that made me muse on the possibly startling notion that the regular adult world is actually far less filled with rules than the world of any ordinarily parented child.

I look around at the adult world and I don't see a world full of arbitrary rules. Instead, in a civil society like ours, I see a world of customs and laws. Most of the time, the customs and laws of the adult world make some kind of apparent sense, being based on some principle, and they engage the reasoned cooperation of most of us.

Moreover, our freely living and learning children are not isolated from the real world, but living in it, and have the opportunity to see the purposeful nature of real world customs and laws. They are subject to the customs and mores of society. This is in contrast to the notion of adult freedom from rules that permeates the longing daydreams of restricted and limited children.

Rules are a two sided, oxymoronic coin – on one side the expectation of automatic compliance, on the other side the punishment for breakage. Rules for children are often not designed to be useful in themselves but function as molds, designed to teach some idea, especially the idea that rules must be followed, without defiance or even contemplation.

Children who live surrounded by rules rather than principles become adept at getting around rules, finding the loopholes in rules, disguising non-compliance or deflecting blame for non-compliance. These are the skills that they then bring into adult life.

The few rules in a child's life that might be useful, such as "Don't turn on the stove when Mommy is out," can be converted simply and easily into principles that can allow for empowered exploration and make real sense to a freely living child. These only reiterate how ineffective and inefficient arbitrary rule making (or expressing rules in a manner that makes them seem arbitrary) is in itself.

Most children live in domestic situations that are filled with picayune, inflexible rules that they have no authentic say in developing, designed to control their behavior from the outside, with the underlying assumption that children are inherently untrustworthy. The adults in their lives are not subjected to the same rules. Or, in the event that the adults are supposed to comply but don't, different consequences result for the adults than the children.

Think of a rule like "No snacks before dinner." Suppose the cook in the kitchen feels a little hungry. Realistically, is that person not going to grab a taste of the meal or a quick cracker? If another adult comes in and reaches for a cookie are they going to be told they can't have it because dinner is nearly ready? Perhaps the information that dinner is coming soon would be offered, but what might be the response? "This is just to hold me until then." They could also make the free choice to put the cookie back. (Of course I'm assuming a healthy level of equality between the adults here, rather than some kind of weird power playing relationship.) However, what is a kid likely to be told? "No, you have to wait until dinner."

Rules within the home tend to be entirely for the children to "follow," whereas principles apply to everyone in the family, as well to other people with whom we all interact in daily life. Principles are ideas like Kindness, Respect, Honesty, Consideration.

There are rules for pleasant conduct, many of which are unspoken, but all based on principles like Courtesy, Consideration and Kindness. Long-term life learners have found that a child's learning of these mannerly behaviors is best done by observing their parents' good manners (modeling), and receiving respectful, mannerly treatment, which they then reflect.

There are customs that make living or working in a crowded place easier also. These are practices like raising one's hand for attention in a moderated meeting that would probably take a young adult about four seconds of observation to learn once they were in that situation. They need not spend twelve years at school to do so, or rehearse throughout childhood. These customary behaviors with strangers

and in public situations seem unlikely to be anything we would consider necessary to practice in our own homes, amongst our own family and close friends.

Many laws are based on safety, like speed limits and stopping at stop signs. These laws make sense. Many laws are based on concepts of ancient morality – no stealing, no killing, no trespassing – intent on allowing people to feel reasonably safe in their homes and workplaces. It just never occurs to most of us to break these laws.

Many laws are based on keeping the common areas of life functioning, such as paying for the roads or other public facilities, paying the salaries of government employees and paying for the upkeep of the military. I'm talking here about tax laws – somewhat onerous but necessary.

The mere existence of laws and customs and rules does not mean that they won't be broken or ignored or fought against by people who have supposedly been trained to follow rules all their lives. We all have the choice to keep the laws or not. Most of us are moral people. Most of us obey the laws because we agree that to do otherwise would mean doing wrong by our fellow creatures, or be risky and unwise. We discourage our children from breaking laws for the same reasons that we choose to keep them.

What happens when someone breaks a law? Either nothing happens because they were not caught, or they get a citation, or they get arrested and have a fairly lengthy due process to go through before incarceration or other punishment – that is, assuming conviction.

With the exception of people deliberately engaging in civil disobedience for a cause, one of the things about people who commit crimes is that they usually do not expect to get caught, or they hope to get away with it even if caught. The deterrent effect of punishment is an area of debate in legal, political and religious circles. However, regardless of how many people choose not to commit a crime because they do not wish to risk the consequences, those people who have deliberately broken some law evidently were not deterred at the time.

The final huge difference between the Rule of Law and the adult-imposed rules of a household over a child's life is one of political process. Adults in a democracy, through the process of voting, petitioning and litigation, have the ability and right – even if not taken up – to challenge, change and influence the laws we agree to follow. It may not be a perfect process, and there are certainly other factors and influences in the political world. But the right and possibilities are

still there.

However, the unequal power relationship in a family where the adults have the final say or veto power, as well as the power of the law to enforce the rules they choose, whether the kids agree or not, means that the children are disenfranchised as long as they are minors.

Those of us who are life learning, living a life of principles instead of rules, are adults voluntarily discarding the adversarial power relationship that society would say we are entitled to impose on our children. The results are empowered children today in their real-life childhoods and, as the reported experience of unschooled grown children shows, thoughtful, politically engaged, civil, mannerly, principled adults navigating an adult culture not significantly different from the real world they have always inhabited.

Did Einstein's Mommy Worry?

by M. Jeanne Yardley

"Did the famous homeschoolers come to their great achievements of their own volition, or did their parents force them to study/invent/write?"

I'm sure there are life learning parents who never doubt what they are doing. I think I even know one. But the fact is that most of us torture ourselves with second-guessing. We want to follow the kids' lead but we worry that they're not leading anywhere. Will they ever learn to read/write/multiply/do quantum physics or whatever? Will they grow up feeling they've wasted a lot of time in idleness? Will they wish we had pushed them harder?

That's always the big one for me: whether to push and, if so, how hard. We who have been through conventional schooling know from (sometimes bitter) personal experience that we can be forced to perform beyond our expectations. In retrospect, we might be grateful for having been made to try something difficult or even sorry if we were not dragged kicking and screaming past the point of no return. We might also have nightmarish memories of having failed under the same kind of pressure. Are we better or worse for it? If we don't force our life learners to reach beyond their grasp, will they be better or worse off?

If you want theoretical answers to these questions, authors John Holt and Alfie Kohn, among others, can outline the philosophy and research supporting intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation for you. But if you're like me, nothing calms those niggling doubts as fast as cold, hard evidence about real people. And, while it's always great to hear about successful modern-day life learners, whether you find them down the block or in a magazine article, it would be even better to get a more long-term perspective on whether parental expectation leads to success.

Maybe we can find this longer view by looking back. After all, even though we may feel as though we're pioneering in our families and communities, home learners abound throughout history. Some of them have accomplished great things and become household names.

Maybe you've seen the lists: Alexander Graham Bell, Agatha Christie, Winston Churchill, Noel Coward, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Benjamin Franklin, Theodore Roosevelt and so on. We know these people did not wind up wasting their entire adult lives playing Game Boy or the equivalent for their time. Did they come to their great achievements of their own volition or did their parents (in historically adjusted terms) turn off the tube and force them to study/invent/write? I mean, did Einstein's mommy worry about whether he was working hard enough?

Funny you should ask. According to biographical and autobiographical writings (the sources we have to rely on from this distance), Einstein's parents were almost obsessively concerned with some aspects of his early education. For example, they sent Albert at age three or four to navigate Munich's busiest streets alone, secretly monitoring his ability to be self-reliant. They also hired a tutor, hoping he could jump ahead and enter school at a higher grade. Not that it did any good: He was at best an average student and even dropped out for a time during high school. But an uncle and a family friend introduced him to science, which he studied on his own and at his own pace. His parents did not push him to greater achievement in this field; in fact, his father urged him to abandon the "philosophical nonsense" of theoretical science and to apply for a "sensible trade." The younger Einstein resisted, however, and the rest is, as they say, history.

So the short answer is "yes, but." Yes, his parents tried to motivate him and direct him, but he needed to go his own way to develop the ideas that changed modern science. As an adult, Einstein wrote, "The same work may owe its origin to fear and compulsion, ambitious desire for authority and distinction, or loving interest in the object and a desire for truth and understanding, and thus to that divine curiosity which every healthy child possesses but which so often early is weakened."

Keeping that "divine curiosity" alive and well is obviously the vital component to successful life learning, and the parents of many greats did a superlative job of encouraging their children's development. Young Roosevelt, for example, was fortunate in having an altruistic father, who not only responded to his various interests by providing learning opportunities and resources, but also advised him to build up his mind, to compensate for his frail physique. The self-taught Coward, lured by his father's passion for music, had his

mother both to find him acting parts as a child and to resist attempts on various fronts to send him to school. Agatha Christie escaped the generally accepted resident governess ("and certainly my mother was much better fun") and, although she took various classes, had lots of time to learn on her own how stories work. Her childhood, like the others', was so different from today's mainstream that one biographer felt compelled to justify the freedom Christie enjoyed: "In an age when we have confused meditation with idleness, the idea of leaving a child alone with a book, or just alone to think, seems almost sacrilegious."

These are textbook home learners, the ones where the formula obviously worked. From what we can tell, their parents didn't push them but, instead, supported them and allowed them the freedom to explore their interests. Hearing their stories both inspires and reassures: In our mind's eye, we see our eclectic lifestyles somehow producing, if not future household names, at least future confident, well-rounded individuals.

But remember Einstein's worried mommy and daddy? Others off our list had parents who misunderstood them. Franklin's father took him out of school for financial reasons and tried energetically to find him a trade – any trade — that would keep him from running away to sea, not realizing for several years that "bookish" Benjamin, who learned to read so young he could not remember being unable, was best suited to a writer's and publisher's life. Similarly, Churchill's father failed to interpret his son accurately. Completely distracted by politics most of the time, he happened to notice Winston's collection of lead soldiers and jumped to the conclusion that the boy should be heading for the military. (Winston had earned a reputation as a dullard at boarding school, in spite of what he called the teachers' "large resources of compulsion:" "Where my reason, imagination or interest were not engaged, I would not or I could not learn.") The irony is that the younger Churchill wanted nothing more than to follow in his father's own footsteps and read up on his political career in newspaper reports sent to him by his almost equally busy mother. He later wrote, "I would far rather have been apprenticed as a bricklayer's mate, or run errands as a messenger boy, or helped my father dress windows in a grocer's shop. It would have been real; it would have been natural; it would have taught me more; and I should have done it better. And I would have got to know my father, which would have been a joy to me."

The pathos in these stories is enough to put fear and trepidation in any parent. What if we are just too busy to figure out what they might want to do and our kids are unable to articulate it themselves? Will the window of opportunity be closed forever, because we parents are not perfect people?

There's worse. Some of the people on our list encountered real domestic challenges to their budding passions. For example, Bell reported that, when he showed an interest in botany, his father insisted each specimen had to be properly mounted and annotated with its full scientific name and thus "spoiled the whole thing for me." More seriously, Edison's father could make nothing of his son, who "seemed wanting in ordinary good sense" and, besides complaining about his endless questions, publicly thrashed him in a (fruitless) attempt to cure him of his dangerous pranks and experiments.

These parental attempts to mold young home learners show extrinsic motivation at its worst – and they make us cringe with guilt, even if we're not given to humiliating our children in public. How often have we erred on the side of too much involvement in our children's explorations — and then found ourselves alone with an assortment of expensive equipment that we rushed out to acquire just before the kids tuned out? Again, we worry about chances lost and windows closed, through parental error.

And yet, in history, as we know, even these victims of misunderstanding and interference went on to great things. They recovered from their early frustrations and, one way or another, found their way to the passionate interest that made a difference in the world. Franklin, once settled as a printer's apprentice to one of his brothers, was challenged by his father to learn to write well, and ultimately went from journalism to politics. Churchill used his free time while in the military to teach himself political history from books his mother provided, to the point of writing out his own responses to past parliamentary debates. Bell's mother encouraged him to develop his own talents, while his father, still heavy-handed, set him practical problems to solve, leading him eventually to his innovative combinations of electromagnetism and sound. Edison's mother, an unusual woman in her time for her knowledge of good literature and history, engaged his volatile intelligence by reading to him and, one fortuitous day, showing him an elementary book of physical science. Later, when explosions in his basement laboratory distressed his father, she defended his right to experiment. "My mother was the making of me,"

he said. “She understood me; she let me follow my bent.” If the window slammed closed early on for these life learners, it obviously didn’t stay closed for long. (Big sigh of relief from anxious present-day parent!)

So what can we conclude about Albert Einstein and the others? Did their moms and dads make them successful by pushing them to achieve? Some of these parents tried hard to motivate their kids; some simply allowed the children to go for it; some even tried to push their children away from their natural interests. Apparently, the way their parents tried to make them learn does not explain their success; they dove into their particular area of interest whether pushed or not. So we can’t make a simple connection between the great achievements of certain home learners and this aspect of parenting – in fact, that question is a non-issue. Obviously, the way their parents tried to make them learn does not explain their success; with time available to them as home learners, they dove into their particular area of interest whether pushed or not.

But wait. Maybe we’re just asking the wrong question. If parental pressure didn’t make them into high achievers, what did? When parents discouraged them, where did their persistence in pursuing their interests come from? The thread through all the stories that answers these new questions is the part played by adults in these home learners’ childhood experiences. Involved mothers, fathers, uncles and others helped them to find their niche. Einstein’s uncle and boarder talked to him and showed him science books; Coward’s mother got him to auditions when he wanted to act; Christie’s mother filled the role of governess; Franklin’s father devoted his attention to the matter of his son’s trade; Edison’s mother spent hours each day reading to him; Roosevelt’s father helped him further his early interests. Even the isolated, lonely young Churchill had a nanny who mothered him all her life, continuing long after she had ceased to be a family employee. Caring adults who were genuinely available and attentive clearly made a difference.

But even more significant, I think, is that these home learners found themselves in the company of role models. They had parents who were actively engaged in life, even if they weren’t particularly successful in their pursuits. Churchill, Bell, Einstein, Coward, Franklin and Roosevelt, in particular, grew up with adults who were committed to a lifework of their own. Surrounded by politicians, scientists, musicians, humanitarians – in other words, by people pur-

suing their dreams – they could see motivation in action. Their role models were, by definition, motivating themselves, demonstrating the very kind of internal incentive that leads to great achievement.

So the kind of motivation we want for our young life learners is already around them. Our children, whether they're hiding behind a game controller, buried in a fantasy novel or focused on bugs in a jar, are learning about the drive and ambition of the adults in their lives. This aspect of their education arises, simply and inescapably, out of being based at home and in the real world. Bottom line: We don't need to worry about pushing our kids; we just need to let them see that we push ourselves.

Reading When You're Ready
by Ruthe Friedner Matilsky

"Society's zeal to push reading has resulted in a huge number of people who find the expression 'reading for pleasure' to be an oxymoron."

Recently, I walked a trail with my husband that takes hikers past beaver dams. We took turns reading the trail guide out loud and I realized that I know a lot about beavers. Over the past 15 years or so I've read a certain beaver book many times to various young family members and I guess some of the information stuck. Reading out loud could be one of the greatest benefits of life learning for a parent.

I learned to read when I was six and, while I became a voracious reader, most of what I read was on the order of *Nancy Drew* and *The Bobbsey Twins*. As a teenager I continued to read, but the caliber of the books wasn't much better because I had trouble keeping my mind focused on anything that required a little thought. I think it had something to do with the speed reading that was pushed in seventh grade, as well as the fact that all those books I read when I was young allowed me to skip paragraphs and daydream while still getting the gist of the story. My time would have been better spent playing with LEGO or building tree forts.

My own experience has made me skeptical of the emphasis on early reading. Not only did I not read great literature, I didn't develop the critical ability to recognize when a book was blatantly racist or sexist or just plain incorrect. When my kids were born, I knew from my own experience that it is not enough to recognize word symbols; a reader needs to be able to critique what she is reading and pick out the worthwhile from the atrocious.

When I thought about teaching my children to read, I had this gut feeling that, if I read aloud to them and had books in the house, they would eventually learn to read. I figured if they loved it when we read aloud, eventually they would want to read on their own. Now I can say that I was right five times over.

During the years that my children were learning (or not learning) to read, conversations with other parents often drifted to Our

Children's Progress With Reading. I would generally spout off my theories about all children being different and learning at their own pace, but there was always some worry mixed in with my bravado. I believed in the theory, but I was going against what most other people thought, and I did have an occasional doubt here and there.

Meanwhile, I heard lots of stories. Some parents reported that their school children learned to read when they were six and just loved it. There were other children who learned right when they were "supposed to" but never enjoyed it. Then there were the school kids who were classified as "learning disabled" because they couldn't read when they were seven or eight. There is no respected place for the late reader in the schooled society.

I have spoken to so many homeschooling parents whose children were late readers and they all tell pretty much the same story about their children. The parents read to the children and, while the children didn't read on their own, they had many other interests before they started reading at ten or twelve or thirteen. Once they started reading, they invariably enjoyed it. I have never spoken to a school parent who can tell that story because you aren't allowed to be a late reader if you go to school.

No matter how gentle the approach, if a child (or an adult, for that matter) is not ready to learn something, he can get so anxious about it that the anxiety gets in the way of learning. Society's zeal to push reading has resulted in a huge number of people who find the expression "reading for pleasure" to be an oxymoron.

I personally can't stand to have anyone pushing me to learn something. It makes me nervous and I usually can't perform. I will probably never play tennis because I don't know how I will ever get past the experiences I had in gym class when the teacher kept barking orders at me until I was too nervous to even look at the ball.

Of course, tennis is not an essential skill in this world, but reading is…and that's why we're all so hung up about it. In every society, there are certain skills that must be taught to the young so that they can take their place in the adult world and help out the tribe and themselves. The needs change over time, so what was an essential skill in one century is not needed for survival in the next. Fire building in most communities is no longer essential; reading is.

Children observe their world and they see what must be learned and what is optional. All able-bodied children learn to walk but not everyone learns to jump hurdles or jog. Everyone learns to talk, but

not everyone learns to sing (that's another skill that's killed when people tell six-year-olds that they should mouth the words because their voices aren't good). Children who grow up free desire to do things for themselves. They will want to read if it doesn't involve humiliation and negative reinforcement. My children all noticed how reading would help them be independent. They wanted to know what the road signs said. They wanted to order their own food in restaurants and they wanted to play games that required reading. And, eventually, they wanted to read books to themselves.

Now, I can hear people thinking: Aha – a child with a physical disability may not learn to walk or talk, so perhaps some children have physical disabilities that have to be addressed before they can read. In actuality, very few of the children who are currently labeled "learning disabled" actually have neurological problems. Somehow, we need to understand as a society that learning to read at eight or ten or twelve is normal.

How quickly we forget that when they were little, our children all learned to walk and talk and crawl at different ages. I, myself, do remember this. I also remember the subtle competitions that went on among the parents. We were all so relieved when our children reached those crawling, walking, talking milestones, as though the age at which she began to speak had something to do with a healthy child's intelligence. (A well-meaning friend suggested speech therapy when Sara had nothing to say at the age of two.) As soon as they could crawl and walk and talk, we started worrying about the next stage. Eventually we began to worry about reading. Here, however, there is no room for flexibility unless one's children learn at home, because society and the schools don't know about Learning At Your Own Pace.

It's important to remember that I am speaking with hindsight. On one level, I really did believe that if I read to them and left them alone, my kids would learn to read. On a more nervous level, whenever I saw an opportunity to kind of speed everything up via a lesson here and there, I must admit I seized the moment. However I didn't get very far with the lessons I tried.

When Sara was one or two she was absolutely not interested in books, other than to eat them. People in our parenting group reported that they read to their babies and some of those babies were learning the alphabet. Not us, and I will admit that we were a little on edge about the whole thing. But when Sara got to be three or four, she de-

veloped an interest in books; by the time she was five, we were reading constantly. When she was six or seven, Sara announced that she wanted reading lessons and I was thrilled, but that lasted about 15 minutes. Her idea of a reading lesson was telling me what to read! We continued reading to her and she began to recognize a word here and there, every now and then, and slowly, ever so slowly, she started to recognize sentences. By the time she was eight-and-a-half, she was reading books. By the time she was nine, she could read complicated origami instructions.

Matthew (now thirteen) wanted nothing to do with reading lessons and, in fact, hid in the closet when he saw me coming with a reading book that I misguidedly thought would be just the ticket. At eight-and-a-half he started to read.

Loren was the heartbreaker in the crowd. He agreed to lessons several times and several times told me he didn't want to do it anymore. So often I would think he was on the verge of reading and, in fact, he would sit with an easy-to-read book, only to decide that it wasn't fun because he read so slowly. Matthew reminds me that one of Loren's biggest breakthroughs came when Matthew, disgusted with the reading book I was using with Loren, sat down with his little brother and got him to read a book. But even after that he wasn't reading a whole lot. However, somewhere along the way, it got easier for Loren. He is now ten and for about a year he has been doing a lot of reading.

Jake (twenty) did not read until he was twelve or thirteen, and for a couple of years he read mostly comic books. Today, he reads everything, including the complete texts of presidential speeches when they appear in *The New York Times*. He reads politics and philosophy and religion and an occasional trash novel. This fall, he came home from his English Comp class amazed because even though he hadn't begun to read seriously until a few years ago, he seems to have read more books than most of the kids in his class. You better believe I tried reading lessons with Jake. He informed me recently that the lessons were useless. He said that what finally got him reading was *Calvin and Hobbes*. Thank you, Bill Watterson.

Athena (now sixteen) was the only one who actually demanded a more organized approach. At the age of six, she requested reading workbooks, which she faithfully used nearly every day. By the time she was seven, she was reading, acquiring the title of "early reader" in our family. I couldn't tell you why she, of all the children, chose the

workbooks. She has always been quite orderly but, then, so is Sara. In fact, in their own way, each of my kids is meticulous about whatever their immediate concerns happen to be, so orderliness is not a clue. It could be that physically she was ready to sit still, but Loren has no problem sitting still and he did not want to stick with workbooks. All I know is that I backed off when there was resistance to lessons and I read to them as much as I possibly could.

As we added more children to our family, figuring out when to read to whom got more and more complicated because, unlike car seats and strollers, no one ever outgrew the need to hear Terry and me read out loud. It never occurred to us to stop reading aloud to our kids just because they could read to themselves. They still expected it and we would have missed it. And, especially for the first few years, the kids' reading skills did not match their intellectual need for more complex reading material.

Reading out loud slows me down and forces me to pay attention to the descriptive passages that I am often tempted to skip when I read to myself. I enjoy the discussions that we have about the books and I like the intimacy that reading aloud creates. I've already mentioned that I know a lot about beavers; I have also learned a lot about trees and insects and birds from reading to my children.

Athena went through a women's rights period that was as interesting to me as it was to her. Loren's Greek mythology phase lasted for two or three years and I can now speak about the Greeks with authority. The novels I've read to ten-year-old children in our family are far superior to the *Bobbsey Twins* books of my youth; I've filled in a lot of my own gaps and I'm staying abreast of the trends in children's literature. I am glad to be aware of the ideas that are being introduced to children via their reading material.

I have heard parents say that they don't read aloud to their children because they are afraid that will discourage them from reading to themselves. I never understood that logic. Being read to is wonderful, but it is different from reading to yourself and kids figure that out. No matter how much we read to our kids, there was never enough time to read everything they wanted to hear. Once they learned to read, there were many times when I would read a few chapters of a book only to have one of the kids go off on his own and finish it because he was too impatient for me to resume reading.

I didn't feel my job was over once my kids could read the printed page. I have always been concerned about the quality of their reading

material and there were times when I worried that they were wasting their time. But I can see now that I didn't have to grow an ulcer when Athena grabbed a bunch of *Babysitter Clubs* from the library shelf. Unlike my early reading life, hers has been balanced by the reading aloud and by the availability of thought-provoking literature.

One by one, all of my kids have branched off from the comic books and the easier novels, and begun to read what I call "the serious stuff." I tried to assist the process by bringing home "worthwhile" books from the library and leaving them on the coffee table. Sometimes those books were read but what really pushed the kids to branch out were their own interests. For example, Jake said that when he wanted to sound intelligent during a political argument, he began to read books about politics. His younger siblings are reading about history, philosophy, nutrition and coin collecting because of their own interest in these subjects.

I am now the mother of five readers and it would be easy for me to make it sound as though I was Oh So Mellow about my late readers. In fact, it has been my challenge to get past the idea that reading, as well as sports and music and other skills, must be taught when children are young, because if we "miss the window" they'll never catch up.

When my kids weren't reading, I wasn't concerned about their quality of life. In terms of interests and hobbies and building character, they were doing just fine. My concerns stemmed from my own school days when kids who didn't read well by second or third grade were generally thought to be dummies. Intellectually, I knew it wasn't true, but it's hard to dismiss a belief that is deeply ingrained.

Gut feelings are one thing, but living in society is something else. The world, in the form of friends, relatives and concerned acquaintances (as well as a variety of store clerks and waitresses), has been paying close attention to our life learning "experiment." There were plenty of opportunities for me to doubt my instincts. Here we were doing this radical life learning thing that sometimes antagonized otherwise pleasant people and only one of my kids learned to read before the age of eight! Of course, my philosophy was that each child should learn at her own pace but there were plenty of times when I wished that they'd pick up the pace already.

It can be a lot of emotional work to live in the world and not do what everyone else does. Especially as the non-reading child gets older, he becomes aware that outside his loving, nurturing family,

other people may start acting a little funny because he is not reading. And at times it can be embarrassing.

If I stay calm when my children aren't doing what other people think they should be doing, it eases things for the kids. I'm not saying that they never feel bad or that they don't worry, but it does help if Terry and I are not filled with fear. So, in a way, that is the key. We parents have to really believe that it is okay for our eight- or nine- or thirteen-year-old to be learning on her own timetable. We need to help our kids develop the strength to believe in themselves, even though society is expecting something else from them.

I am happy that I don't have to worry about my kids reading anymore. I am thrilled, in fact, to be able to tell the doubters about my late readers. And maybe, if I'm very brave, someday I'll be able to write an article like this all about math. Life is filled with promises.

"Do not worry about your problems with mathematics;
I assure you mine are far greater." ~ Albert Einstein

Zen and the Art of Unschooling Math

by Rachel Gathercole

"Think of the method as a fine silvery stream, not a raging waterfall. Follow the stream, have faith in its course. It will go its own way, meandering here, trickling there. It will find the grooves, the cracks, the crevices. Just follow it. It will take you." Ch'en (Zen) Master Sheng-yen

I was measuring rice for dinner when my eight-year-old son Saul bounded into the kitchen. "Do four hundred quarters and four hundred more quarters make two hundred dollars?" he asked me, waiting eagerly for a verdict. I had to think about that a moment. And my four-year-old Sadie, who loves to help cook and didn't want to wait, took the liberty of adding the water to the pot herself (two cups water per one cup rice). Finally I agreed that yes, it does make two hundred dollars. Satisfied, Saul dashed off to finish whatever he was doing and I was left with the question that had become my constant companion: How did he know that? After all, my kids have never had a math lesson in their entire lives.

The very next day, while paying the bills, I overheard them finishing a game of Mancala. "I won by four!" said Sadie, to which Saul cheerfully replied, "And I won by negative four!" (Later he asserted that he had in fact won by four minus eight. A more decisive-sounding "victory," perhaps?)

Here's what was puzzling me: I never teach my kids any math, yet they continue to mysteriously acquire more and more advanced mathematical skills. It is as if they are having secret math classes somewhere in the far reaches of their minds when I am not looking, while they appear simply to be drawing pictures or playing with friends or eating lunch. Even though I knew this self-directed learning would happen, and always does, I became fascinated with observing my children's intriguing and often amusing shows of mathematical understanding. I found myself on something of a quest.

I was driven to find the answers to two questions: How were they learning all of this math, and why?

It was not that this learning happens that puzzled me. I have long been aware that self-directed, delight-driven learning works for my kids, having spent nine years watching them learn everything they need to know and more through this method. Though I am available to them, my self-taught children have no curriculum or lessons except the ones that emerge from within them in the form of their own interests and curiosities.

Yet, even to a life learner, math can seem different from other, more transparent, areas of self-directed learning. When a baby listens to adults and imitates their sounds, it is plain to see how this contributes to his learning language. When a child shows interest in the Middle Ages and reads books about it, there is little doubt that this can lead to her learning some history. Math learning is somehow more elusive. Though it does happen, the process seems uniquely cryptic and this can make the idea of natural math learning appear just plain unrealistic.

But as I watched my children, I discovered that math, like language, is all around us and that the children are absolutely driven to use it.

The first day, for example, I overheard them playing a game of Monopoly.

"I owe you forty dollars, but I don't have two twenties," said Sadie. "I could give you four tens."

"Or eight fives," said Saul. "That would work, too." He thought a moment, and then continued. "Or you could give me forty ones! But I don't think there are that many in Monopoly."

The second day, in an effort to stop Sadie from fiddling with a three hundred dollar camera, Saul tried to explain to her in four-year-old terms how much it would cost to replace it. "You'd have to pay a hundred dollars plus a hundred dollars plus a hundred dollars. And you know how much a hundred dollars is? A thousand cents. No – ten thousand cents."

It turns out that learning to manipulate numbers is actually very important to the kids. They are inwardly driven to do it for their own purposes. They want to compare their archery scores, triple the cookie recipe, negotiate a higher allowance and spend their birthday money. They want to express hugeness, run odd-job businesses and lemonade stands, build awesome LEGO structures and get their fair

share of the pancakes.

"I'm six-and-a-half," one says. The other: "I'm six-and-three-quarters!" ("Well, I'm six-and-seven-eighths!")

"You can have half of my cookie." "Can I have two-thirds, instead?"

"How much more money do I need to buy that action figure I want?"

It is not that I, The Homeschooling Mother, am using these convenient real-life experiences as motivations or opportunities for my kids to learn. It is they who want to learn the math because they want to play the game, be the scorekeeper, calculate their batting average or save money to buy a special Father's Day present. They want to learn the math and they will use any method necessary to do it.

If they ask me a question ("How much do I need to buy four houses on Boardwalk?"), I simply answer it. If I were to make a lesson out of each question, they would quickly come to think of the game or activity (and asking me questions) as annoying and not worth the bother and it would be unnecessary besides. They learn the math anyway and rarely ask the same question twice. (If they do, I answer it again. The way I see it, that's my job.)

Of course, oftentimes I glimpse their mathematical exercise without being privy at all to their inner motivations. They come to me with questions I could not have predicted, which emerge from them at seemingly random times. "What do two twelves make?" "Is five a quarter of twenty?" "Does negative twelve plus twenty make eight?" Where these questions come from I don't know. I simply answer them and the answers are soon absorbed.

Even when we see it happening, though, it is sometimes difficult to imagine how children could be learning math that is not taught to them. The ways they acquire this knowledge remain mysterious and fascinating. Back when Saul was six, we were listening to music together one evening when he suddenly turned to me and asked, "Is two twenties forty?" Though baffled that he knew any multiplication at all, I simply answered that yes, it was, and left it at that. Later, though, I asked him: "Saul, how did you figure out that two twenties is forty?" He replied: "Because I've been pondering it for about a year and trying to figure it out for a month." This gave me pause; still, I persisted. "But how did you figure it out?" I asked, until finally he answered (with a sigh), "I figured out that half of twenty is ten, so two tens must be twenty, and four tens must be forty, and stuff like that. I detected it.

I detective-worked it."

When freed from the traditional pencil-and-paper, rote method, children come up with surprisingly varied, creative, brilliant and eye-opening ways of understanding numbers and their interaction. Math suddenly becomes not drudgery but a fascinating and useful aspect of reality that can be learned in so many different creative and practical ways that perhaps only a child herself could show them to us.

When Saul, still at age six, announced quite out of the blue at the breakfast table that four threes was twelve, I asked him how he knew that. He again said that he had figured it out and when I probed further as to how, it turned out to my utter surprise that he had used rhythm. In his mind he had made four beats with three numbers in each beat (ONE two three, FOUR five six, SEVEN eight nine, TEN eleven twelve), just as simple as that. At a time well before multiplication would have been taught to him on a traditional schedule, he had invented, of his own accord, a means of multiplying rhythmically and now could easily produce multiples and products of two, three, four and more.

Much more recently, I overheard Sadie, at age four, counting by twos, fives and tens. How did she learn that? I inquired. The answer: She had heard her brother counting his money.

It seems math just isn't as elusive as I'd imagined. I once thought a grown person would surely teach my kids the ins and outs of manipulating numbers; now I see that I couldn't keep up with them if I tried.

But that's all very haphazard, some will say. What about systematically learning the facts and concepts in order, and what about the harder stuff? The above do sound like isolated arithmetic facts when looked at from a traditional (memorization) perspective. However, when a child figures out these patterns on his own, without outside help, suddenly they are not memorized facts but observations, parts of a complete puzzle forming piece by piece in the child's mind. Each mathematical observation leads to the next, rendering systematic memorization and drilling wholly unnecessary.

It can be scary to look at in this way. I think the idea of allowing kids to learn math naturally, on their own, is intimidating because many of us, as adults, harbor deep inside our own discomfort with numbers. We believe that math is inherently difficult, abstract and unappealing. As the late, great educator John Holt pointed out, we learned to manipulate symbols before we understood the concrete

meaning behind this shorthand. Conversely, given the chance to observe first, at their own pace, how numerical patterns work in real life, kids can then easily pick up the shorthand, which may even come as a welcome way to more easily express already-understood concepts.

At age six, Saul stumbled upon a worksheet and asked what it was. I explained that it was a sheet of math problems and, never having done any written math before, he asked what the symbols meant. When I told him that "+" means add the numbers together and "–" means take the second number away from the first and "=" means "equals," he nodded thoughtfully and then, to my surprise, easily filled out the worksheet with mostly correct answers.

I am not concerned about my kids' systematically memorizing arithmetic facts because their ability and striving to figure out the seemingly random ones they do demonstrates an understanding of the very concepts that make these facts true. Some skills and comprehension naturally come sooner, some later. The fact that they have developed a grasp of these ideas on their own affords confidence that they will continue to acquire more complex mathematical skills and theory on their own as well.

After all, the "harder" stuff is out there for the learning just like the basics. Left to their own devices, children get into surprisingly complicated concepts, perhaps because they do not know that math – "higher" or otherwise – is "supposed" to be difficult. One night, lying in bed trying to go to sleep, Saul (then seven) suddenly lifted his head groggily: "If an hour is a really long time, would a day be a long time with twenty-four reallys?" I had to admit that, in a pre-algebra sort of way, yes, it would.

A year later, when he turned eight-and-a-quarter (an important occasion), he announced for our information that he was actually "six-and-nine-quarters." Shortly afterward, he changed his age to "six-minus-a-quarter and ten quarters." Why he preferred these complex, alternative fractional terms I don't know. But they did add up to his "true" age of eight-and-a-quarter.

In the end, the answer to my quest is perplexingly simple. It seems that the mysterious source of my children's math education is not so mysterious at all. They simply figure the math out on their own. And they do it because (strange though it may seem to the conventionally-schooled like me) it is inherently interesting and useful to them. Their lives are filled with compelling reasons to understand and use math.

Does it matter that these skills are coming to them in a seemingly random, disorganized fashion or, as I prefer to think of it, on a need-to-know basis? I don't think so. Or rather, I do. I think it's important. They are learning the math that they want to know, when and because they want to know it. They are learning that it's useful, why it's useful, when it's useful and how to be comfortable with it. And they are finding out that they can do it themselves. It is not someone else's list of facts for them to memorize. Math is theirs – theirs to work with, theirs to play with, theirs to use as they see fit.

As a parent, my main educational goal for my kids is not to fill their heads with information on traditional subjects (although I have no doubt they will acquire such knowledge along the way). I want them to learn to think, critically and creatively, and to know how to learn whatever they want or need to know using the resources available to them. Figuring out the world of numbers at their own pace, for their own purposes, is part of this. It is not only the math itself that is important; the process of extracting these patterns from the world and putting them to use is just as valuable.

Sure, when they come to me and want to know how long the third side of their triangular treehouse needs to be, I'll probably step up and tell them about the Pythagorean Theorem – because that's how that information is determined. When they want to calculate the probability of rolling a nine on their next turn – or some other more difficult question – I'll accompany them to go look it up or to ask someone who knows. And if they want to learn calculus so they can go to engineering school someday, well then we'll sign them up for a class. They'll be ready.

Unless, of course, they figure it out on their own, which, at this rate, they just might. After all, they'll probably understand things I myself could never imagine.

In fact, you might say they already do. Shortly after Saul's seventh birthday he made the following cryptic announcement: "Twenty-nine is twenty-ten, if you count twenty as twenty-one." This one left me reeling for a while, trying to wrap my mind around it. But on some level, I knew that what he said was true, in a way that, in the end, perhaps only the free mind of a child could fully understand.

Always Learning
by Carlo Ricci

"On a number of occasions, my daughter has taught me that I was wrong and she was right. She has helped me understand that she knows her potential and her capabilities better than I. And she is more capable than I of gauging what she can and cannot do."

How old do children have to be before they can begin unschooling? The answer to this question is simple: It is never too soon. As soon as you are fortunate enough to discover this alternative way of life, it is the right time.

Part of what may motivate someone to ask this question is the word "schooling" contained within the word "unschooling." This is why I prefer the term that was coined as the name of the magazine: "life learning." If we replace the term "unschooling" with "life learning," the question is no longer logical. The question: "How old do children have to be before they can begin life learning?" automatically elicits the response: "They always have been learning."

Life learning is a way of life, a philosophy of existence. In its simplest terms, it is a learner-centered, democratic approach to life. To clarify, I am using the terms "learner-centered" and "democratic" in a way that Jerry Mintz of the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) did in an interview on Radio Free School in 2004. Jerry defined learner-centered education as "an approach that is based on the interest of the student rather than curriculum-driven, where someone else has the idea of what you ought to be learning," and he defined democratic education as "education where students are actually empowered to make decisions about their own education."

"Life learning" is a holistic term that respects an individual's body, mind and spirit. To this end, life learning is not a recipe that one has to follow, but it is a process that differs from situation to situation. In what follows, I am going to share what life learning means to me in connection to what I have learned from my daughters.

First, I need to say that I feel that I have made mistakes as a parent, but I believe that this is okay. Part of life learning is that we are always unfinished and therefore grow and learn throughout life. Admitting and recognizing our mistakes and sharing them with others is an important part of life learning.

My wife and I share a lot of life learning assumptions and struggle with trying to better understand those that we do not share. Again, this is a part of life learning. One big area is whether to school our daughters. I am totally against schooling and my wife is reservedly for it; fortunately, we both agree that the decision ultimately needs to be made by our daughters. Again, this is life learning. I believe that children are capable of making sophisticated decisions and need the respect and belief that their decisions matter. They need to feel empowered and respected for the human beings that they are. Are they going to make mistakes? Of course; as I said, making mistakes is an important part of life learning. We adults can share our thoughts, but children need to be listened to also.

On a number of occasions, my daughter has taught me that I was wrong and she was right. She has helped me understand that she knows her potential better than I do, that she knows her capabilities better than I do and, perhaps most importantly, that she is more capable than I of gauging what she can do and what she cannot do.

Allow me to share several examples. When my daughter was younger and we would go to our local park, I would bring her to the smaller slide. She quickly mastered climbing and sliding down on her own. One day, she told me that she wanted to tackle the larger slide on her own. I immediately shouted, "No! It is too high up and you will fall and hurt yourself." Fortunately, I shouted this to myself and not out loud to her. What I said to her was, "Do you think you can do it on your own?" She responded, "Yes." I nervously watched her skillfully climb down the slide without incident. After she did this a few times, I realized that there was nothing for me to worry about and my concern had been unnecessary.

Another time, she asked to go up a difficult ladder that has a rope to assist the children climb. It is clearly intended for older children. You would think that after all this time I would react in a more trusting way but, again, I inwardly reacted in a fearful way while outwardly asking her the same supportive question: "Do you think you can do it?" Again she said she could. Off she went. After about several steps, she realized that it was harder than she had thought, so she

simply called me to come and help her. I did and, after a few weeks, she was capable of doing it on her own.

From this, I learned that children are capable of determining what they are capable of doing and if they find that they cannot do something, they will ask for help. Secondly, I learned that I need to help when she asks for it and not before. When I forget, my daughter is very firm about reminding me that she can do it on her own. On a number of occasions, she has vociferously insisted that I stop doing what I am doing and immediately leave the task to her. For example, I recall when she was younger and wanted to fill her sippy cup with water. I lovingly took it from her and proceeded to unscrew the lid so that I could fill it for her. She quickly had an outburst that I, at first, thought was an overreaction on her part. However, the more I thought about it, the more I concluded that her reaction was appropriate. She *needs* to do things for herself. She *needs* to learn how to do them. And my interference limits her learning and growth.

My daughter has reacted the same way when, upon seeing her struggle with getting dressed, I have tried to help her put her clothes or boots on. Again, by doing this I am thinking that I am being helpful, but what I am really doing is interfering in her learning and growth. I am convinced that she would not be as skilled and confident at doing what she does if I had not understood the importance of not helping unless she asks for help. And even when she does ask for help, I have learned that I need to help as minimally as possible and do only what she asks and no more. Again, the more I do, the less she does.

Life learning also means ignoring the practice of fragmenting subjects made popular by schooling and, instead, having children learn life as they live life. My favorite insight into learning comes from one of my favorite educational thinkers: John Holt. In his book *Learning all the Time,* he wrote, "Living is learning. It is impossible to be alive and conscious (and some would say unconscious) without constantly learning things. If we are alive, we are constantly receiving various sorts of messages from our environment all the time."

Here are some more examples, taken from my daughter's life, of what this means for my understanding of life learning.

The Rotting Board

The first example took place last summer. One board on our deck was rotted out. I decided it was time to change it and my two-year-old daughter decided she wanted to help. So we both went

out, used a crow bar to remove the old piece of board, got a measuring tape to see what size the replacement board had to be, went to the lumber store to buy the replacement and discovered that we did not know what type of wood we needed. We went home, researched it, discovered it was cedar and went back to purchase the replacement, had them cut it to size, came home and nailed it in place.

My daughter has a real hammer that is a smaller version of my hammer and she banged away as best she could. I will not disrespect the situation by fragmenting the learning that happened in terms of a schooling curriculum because I truly believe that does not matter. What matters is that we were life living and therefore life learning. If what we learned fits into what schools arbitrarily value, that is immaterial.

I do, however, want to add that I believe the learning that resulted from this life experience was so deep because she embodied it and because it was genuine. She learned about measuring tapes, hammers, nails, the importance of numbers, the value and need for money and so on.

After the board was in place, it was time to prepare and paint the deck. She was very helpful when it came time to clean the deck. As I scrubbed, she hosed it down. Nothing, and I mean nothing, would have kept her away from helping with the painting. So, she dressed in her smock and away we went.

Some have commented on me allowing a two-year-old to use real nails and a real hammer, and allowing her to paint the deck. The truth is that she was never in danger and you cannot tell the part that I painted from the part that she painted. Incidentally, this may say as much about my painting skills as it does hers!

Admittedly, the whole process took a lot longer than it would have if I had done it by myself; however, it would not have been as enjoyable and rewarding. As well, my daughter's presence forced me to be more mindful. I was much more careful and aware of the present dangers. For example, as we removed the old board I did not simply throw it aside; we made sure that we removed all of the nails so that there was no chance of us getting hurt. I also covered the hole where I removed the board so that we would not accidentally fall in.

In saying that it would have been faster, I am not implying that my daughter was not a genuine help, because she was. On one occasion, I asked if she wouldn't mind going inside and getting the broom and dust pan. She came back with my broom and dustpan as well as

hers. She helped me sweep and keep our work area clean.

On another occasion she warned me that there was a nail that we should discard. On yet another, she turned off the hose while I was busy doing other things. In short, the next time I have to change a board, I hope she will agree to help.

The next example happened a few months ago when my wife went out the door and to her surprise ended up with a cracked storm door handle in her hand. Again, my daughter helped us throughout the whole process. She skillfully worked the screwdriver until she got the screws out and so on until the handle was replaced.

Similarly, when our faucet needed to be replaced, she was a ready and willing helper. I will not go into the details because I believe that the point has been made. Whether it is cooking, cleaning, repairing, gardening, bathing and on and on, she and her younger sister are ready and willing to help in any way that they can.

Taking the Time To Hug the Trees

Another important part of life learning is mindfulness or being in the moment. I am often reminded of this by both of my daughters. When we go out for our walks, speedy is not how I would characterize the walks, nor would I have it any other way. My daughters remind me that the faster you go the more you miss. When we go for our walks, we need to greet the trees, watch the ants and explore whatever catches our attention. I had forgotten how great it feels to hug a tree! Having young children around is great because on the few occasions when my neighbors witness my tree hugging, they do not question it because they connect my behavior with appeasing the children. I often wonder why I would not hug a tree without my children around. What other wonderful things do we miss out on, just because we are now adults?

This is not a complete description of what life learning means to me, nor is it intended to be. Part of what I wanted to do was to share my commitment and resolve about the value in life learning for all age groups. Like many who have shared their experiences and successes with life learning, I want to stand side by side with these pioneering heroes who live life learning. Whether it is in making mistakes, doing daily activities or simply being mindful, the power and value in life learning needs to be respected.

"Be the change you wish to see in the world…" ~ Gandhi

Culture & Community
by Eva Swidler

"How do we combine letting our children make their own paths with instilling values of community, anti-racism, anti-sexism or any other value we hold important?"

Life learners excel at realizing just how much kids – and adults – learn from people they know, from situations they encounter and from their surroundings in general. This is the foundational insight of the philosophy. We know, value and facilitate the fact that children and adults alike learn by example and immersion, from every interaction with reality. We also emphasize the active part of the learning process: We know that for real, positive learning to take place, learners have to want to learn. Learners choose to learn, they discriminate among possibilities, they seek out their mentors and models and information and they interact with reality to arrive at their own insights and conclusions. The desire and initiative of the learner to understand and master – rather than outside coercion or manipulation – is the driving force of real education. All of these insights are minimized or even denied by mainstream ideas of schooling, succinctly described sometimes as the "banking theory of education." (The teacher deposits information in a passive student's brain, for later withdrawal.)

The strong emphasis that life learners put on the importance of the role of the individual in building her own learning and life path makes perfect sense, given the pressures from society at large and from the educational bureaucracy that urges us to be passive, not active, to put ourselves and our children into the hands of "experts" and to allow ourselves to be taught rather than to learn. But as a result, sometimes the first principle of life learning – that we learn constantly and imperceptibly from the world around us – fades into the background of our consciousness.

When life learners critique the institution of school, we do think about how we learn lessons from the social world around us. We know that the world of school structure can lead us to learning patterns that are self-destructive, hurtful, paralyzing, counterproductive,

divisive and even immoral – all that "hidden curriculum" that John Taylor Gatto, for instance, points out in his book *Dumbing Us Down*. Keeping our children out of school protects them from these crippling lessons that we don't want them to learn. But is keeping our children out of school enough? If kids learn at home, should we still be thinking about the world they are surrounded with and what they will learn from it, or should we as life learners let things run a seemingly unguided course?

Perhaps because of life learners' focus on the role of the individual in self-determination, I think that many of us wrestle awfully hard with what our roles and possibilities as parents are in building social and personal values in our children. How do we combine letting our children make their own paths with instilling values of community, anti-racism, anti-sexism or any other value we hold important? Does being a "real" unschooler mean that there isn't a place for us to pass these values on? That our kids have to construct their own morality and vision from the ground up? That they should have unlimited access to things we find morally objectionable or personally disabling and just make their own decisions?

Most of us know that we want our children to have a moral compass that we feel expresses justice and compassion. We want our children to believe that every door to a positive future is one that they could open and follow, if they wanted to. But how do these outcomes happen? Our experience as life learners, emphasizing and demonstrating how much we all learn all the time from our surroundings, also teaches us that we all get lessons in gender, race, class, violence and many other values from our daily life experiences. What if these are lessons we are not happy about? Is there a place for us to intervene? Is there a responsibility for us to intervene? How can we, without violating our principles as life learners?

I think the answer lies somewhere in the ideas of culture and community. What we call life learning isn't so dissimilar from a lot of what anthropologists call acculturation or what sociologists call socialization. No one is just an individual, nor are we just families; we are all part of a culture and society. What we all learn from life isn't just the result of natural interest and inclination; it's the result of culture too. After all, the most uncoerced, life-learning North American child has developed very differently than, say, a totally life-learning Mayan child in the year 950 in what is now Guatemala. Of course, their life learning is different from each other's; their lives are

different.

Kids who learn naturally in each of these cultures are not just following a natural course. Each culture presents different possibilities and different messages about adulthood, success, men, women, etc. It is out of this cultural raw material that we all shape our own lives. For instance, for us now, the culture at large tells us that girls like pink and don't like math. And although our girl didn't think so when she was a newborn, she'll certainly get these messages pretty quickly. However she copes with them, she will have to cope with them. There is no such thing as a cultureless person. Interactions with every object and every human carry cultural messages, whether we notice them or not and whether we like them or not.

How can we work with this observation? Well, we've already taken the biggest first step, the one that in our society might require the most courage: We've kept our kids out of school and away from its culture, its social order, the milieu from which children absorb pernicious lessons. We've taken the responsible step of protecting our children from the destructiveness of standardized tests and grades, classroom tracking and humiliation, bells and coercion. How do we follow through on that continuing responsibility for our children's surroundings after we make the decision that they won't go to school? What next? The specific answers will be different for everyone, but all will share the next step. Before anything else, we have to ask the questions: What world is our child learning from, what lessons might he be drawing from that world and how do we feel about those lessons? We've removed one social and psychological world, that of enforced schooling, so what world have we put ourselves into instead? And are we content with it and the lessons that it will be teaching?

One important place where life learners start asking these questions and going about creating answers we like is ourselves and our family. Not only do we parents frequently engage in a deschooling process to rid ourselves of baggage from our own schooled days, we take steps to become more engaged life learners ourselves, teaching our children by example and healing ourselves in the process. Beyond the internal personal steps I've needed to work on about judgment and self-judgment, I also try to think about the social lessons that I reflect. What kind of expectations about gender roles will my daughter learn from watching my husband and me interact, divide household tasks or decide which parent plays sports with her and

which parent cooks with her? Do I really walk the walk or just talk the talk about body image and beauty? How do I treat homeless people who approach me on the street? Why is my social circle so white in such a multiracial and multicultural city? Do I hope for my daughter to be able to do better than I have and, if so, shouldn't I be able to do better too, both for myself and to show her how and why? These questions and projects will surely be a lifelong task...and that's a good thing, not a bad thing.

Life learners have also assembled assorted tools in their bags to help their children (and themselves!) think about the unspoken messages in our larger culture outside the household. Sometimes, I am unashamed to say, that technique is as simple as elimination. I see no reason why I should allow the corporate media to feed my daughter images and messages destructive to her sense of self-worth at the age of seven, any more than I should have allowed the school system to have her for six hours a day. Both of these cultures (school and corporate media) are out there in the "real" world, but that doesn't mean that as a parent I don't have the right and responsibility to control their access to my young child, or that it will be good for her or toughen her up if she has to confront their real but destructive messages in her formative years. Going to school isn't natural learning, but neither is mass media. Both of these experiences are products of a culture, in this case North American culture of the last decades or century at most. As humans in general as well as parents, it's always up to us to be active constructors of just what parts of our culture we want to participate in ourselves and with our children. Staying home from school is just the beginning.

Of course, as members of a larger culture, our children will also want and need the ability to use many techniques from media literacy and critical thinking to look at the social world around them. Regardless of whatever age your child begins watching movies or poking around on the Internet, we're all exposed from birth to a sea of persuasive messages as well as built-in cultural assumptions. I still cringe and try to distract my daughter as we drive by the giant highway billboard of a pornographically clad woman advertising a men's sex club. I still scramble for answers when my daughter asks me about the bus stop posters for TV shows featuring what are, in fact, children in heavy makeup and high heels. Luckily, there is a large body of writing and videos specifically for and about children and the media. Although Canadian media literacy expert Shari Graydon, in

her book *Made You Look*, claims that my daughter is still in an age group where it is difficult for her to perceive the agenda of advertising, we've already been able to use many of the techniques recommended in that wonderful book (written for children approaching and in their teens) to discuss billboards, kids' movies and toys.

But our focus on the fact that learning takes place constantly and effectively through our life experience means that we can use another set of tools – positive tools – that doesn't get talked about as much: the tools of community building. Sometimes our need to defend unschooling leads to an emphasis on each of us as individuals with individual needs and abilities, and a minimization of each individual as a part of and contributor to our culture. We can use our understanding of the power of social surroundings as the source for what we learn by focusing on finding, participating in or building communities that embody our values.

Those communities don't have to be with other homeschoolers. In fact, I think it is even more important for my daughter to be in community with adults outside the unschooled world who share approaches and values with us and who feel the way we do about war, social injustice or making music. My daughter and husband, for example, volunteer at a street puppet making center that helps people to create street theater on social and political issues. We all recently joined a Philadelphia New Year's Mummers' parade performer brigade based in a local artists' collective; our theme for the New Year's parade was being under water in rising coastlines in the perpetual global warming summer. We also take the bus with the local organizers from U.S. Labor Against the War to Washington D.C. for peace rallies. Sometimes society's ideas about age segregation and appropriate childhood participation are a challenge that we must work on, but all of these situations have presented to our daughter the possibilities of being an adult like those people are, and having a community like these are, not just for the years that she will be homeschooling but all her life. To her, these are viable lives to live and cultures to be part of.

This is true within the homeschooling community too. There are those who happily go their own way, choosing not to participate in local playground days or support groups and finding their community in the larger world. But many or most of us have at least some consistent contact with others in a homeschooling community. It offers support for the parents, companionship for the children and a lot of

practical help for all its members.

So a final question is: How does that homeschooling community function? Are we spending enough – or even any – time thinking about its power dynamics, racial and class makeup or gender relations? What kind of community are we immersing our children in? What kind of culture are we building as an alternative to the culture of school and, thereby, offering to our children as examples? And what can we do to make it better?

Educator and author Frank Smith, in a wonderful book called *The Book of Learning and Forgetting*, makes a case that the emotional connection a learner feels to a community is actually the key to any successful learning. With such a connection, learning may take effort, may take time. But it unfolds automatically and unconsciously, as well as consciously. Without such a connection and sense of identification with the community that is providing and demonstrating information or a way of thinking, no real learning will ever take place. The sense of membership and inclusion must underlie any learning that is adopted into the heart and soul of the learner. Any other learning will fail to be incorporated into the thinking of the learner and will be of the regurgitate-it-and-forget-it variety.

This observation explains, for instance, how boys and girls may grow up in the same family, but by identification with different family members learn to talk, walk and think differently. It explains how members of different races may go to the same schools, watch the same media, spend most of their waking hours exposed to the same accents and teachers as each other, but maintain very distinct subcultures; they each identify with different people in their cultural surroundings and educate themselves in the ways of those they identify with. Naturally, the identification process results partly from some kind of choice by the learners and partly from processes of society that tell them that they belong to some groups and not to others whether they like it or not (gender, race etc.).

Ironically, recognition of the power of this immersion learning has built support in many communities for the idea of public education – however unhappy many of those communities are with the realities of schools. Poor and oppressed communities want something better for their children than the hardships they have had to struggle with in their own lives. The promise of public education for these people is to offer children an avenue to social mobility through access to a different set of skills than the ones they would learn from life at

home. The promise is a set of skills (not necessarily really useful, mind you, or actually any better than the skills at home, just valued by the powers-that-be in society) that might gain their children entrance to a different social world. They might include the "right" accent or "sophisticated" musical tastes. But we all, unfortunately, know what the perverse realities of public education are in exactly these communities.

Saying that we are all cultural products doesn't belittle or minimize our individual power to create our lives. Instead, working with that realization gives us a key of self-reflection to do more, to work together to create cultures and social worlds that open far more doors for our children as individuals and as parts of communities. We can make sure that our communities are ones that welcome girls into math and science or that encourage our boys to follow their desires into dance or fashion. We can widen the circles of possible friendships and relationships for ourselves and our children into true diversity. Building our own communities consciously can create a better world for us but also make – and teach – the world we want to pass on to our children.

"If there is anything we wish to change in the child,
we should first examine it and see whether it is not something
that could be better changed in ourselves."~ C.G. Jung

Children and Power
by Lael Whitehead

"Protecting a child's power is not as simple as it seems. I have raised three daughters and time and again I have caught myself in the midst of an act of covert dominance."

We parents have a lot of power…over our children, at least. They begin life entirely dependent on us for survival. They inherit a worldview from us – a set of assumptions about the way things work that will affect them for their whole lives. They learn from us patterns of relating: The way we treat them becomes an internal model for their future relationships with others.

People today are perhaps more conscious of power than they were fifty years ago. We talk a lot about "personal power," "power trips" and "power hierarchies." Most of us, I imagine, would like to live in a world that is egalitarian and democratic, one without a dominant class or race or gender, where each individual is free to pursue his or her personal vision of the good life. And yet, as a culture we aren't very good at detecting unhealthy power situations. Most of us are quick to give too much authority to experts, teachers, officials and other gurus. In our personal lives, we often can't tell when we are being dominated or when we are dominating others. In short, we are poorly educated in the language of power.

Learning this language begins at home, during the early years of life. All children begin life as powerful agents. Toddlers are bold and determined. They want to learn to do for themselves what they notice others doing around them. But what they encounter in their family environment is crucial: The way their parents and caregivers treat them will either begin to prune away their faith in their own power or will nurture and protect their native confidence.

The pruning of power happens is many ways. Overt coercion is easy to spot – punishments, threats, criticism, on the one hand, and rewards, bribes and praise for compliance on the other. But you can also undermine the power of a child in subtle and insidious ways. You can "worry" about them continually, causing them to doubt them-

selves. You can withhold approval and love when they don't meet your expectations. You can act disappointed, hurt and ashamed when their wishes don't coincide with yours, and thus threaten the attachment between parent and child.

The child who is manipulated into being "good," whether by punishments, rewards or the withholding of attachment, is not an empowered child. She is not practicing her ability to choose. Instead she is learning to ignore her own instincts and intuitions in order to please others. The child whose power is protected, on the other hand, discovers early that she is the author of her own life. She experiences how it feels to make a choice and to live with the consequences. She will know immediately, any time in her future, when another is trying to dominate or control her. She will say, "No thanks," to any relationship that does not honor her autonomy.

Protecting a child's power is not as simple as it seems. I have raised three daughters and time and again I have caught myself in the midst of an act of covert dominance. I have offered unasked-for advice. ("Learn Spanish rather than Gaelic, sweetheart. It's more useful!) I have issued warnings that had more to do with my own anxieties than with any real threats to my daughters' well-being. ("If you don't learn to spell well, other people won't think you are very smart!") I have tried to bribe and cajole them into activities I thought "good" for them, but which I knew they found unappealing. ("If you spend fifteen minutes a day on this boring math stuff, I'll pay for you to take guitar lessons!") The only thing I can say in my own defense is that I always felt bad about these power maneuvers and usually spent a good deal of time apologizing and debriefing afterwards!

True, radical honoring of the power of another takes determination and vigilance. As parents, we continually have to step back from a position of authority over our children. We have to admit to them, "I really don't know what you should do in this situation but I will support whatever choice you make." We have to allow them to write their own unique life-scripts, conduct their own experiments, make their own mistakes. After all, a good parent is the same as a good friend, partner or citizen. Such a person does not try to shape or control another's life. Such a person knows that all we can offer one another – and it is a huge gift to give – is a complete, unconditional allowing of the other to be precisely who she or he is. Nothing more, nothing less. My daughters are mostly grown now and they dazzle me with their power. They hardly ever need me for support, although

they seem to like to hang out with me now and then. Since I have rarely tried to solve their problems for them, they are independent, brave and resourceful in ways that would have been unimaginable for me at their age. And they are compassionate defenders of the power of others. They don't sit quietly in the presence of bullying!

Adults who feel disempowered are dangerous: They either seek to dominate others in order to restore their personal sense of worth or they seek to be dominated, since that is what feels "normal" and right. People hungry for power make unsustainable social and ecological choices. They create cultures based on dominance, competition and exploitation rather than on fairness and compassion. They take more than they need. The result? Look at the environmental mess we currently face. Only a culture fueled by deep, insatiable hungers for power could so violate and destroy the very sources of our health and well-being.

Imagine a different kind of world – one in which children were all raised to be powerful. Imagine a whole generation arriving at adulthood, each knowing his or her intrinsic, inviolable worth. Picture what they could build together: They could build joyful, creative and mutually supportive communities in which all are welcome and respected, in which bossing, bullying or attempting to take more than one's share would seem alien and absurd. If schools existed in such communities, they would look a lot different than the ones we are used to. They would never be compulsory, for starters. The use of punishments, time-outs, grades and prizes for "good" behavior as motivational tools would be unheard of. A new code of conduct would rule every interaction in such communities: Respect others, no matter what their age, race, gender or economic class. Never, under any circumstance, violate their integrity and otherness with controlling remarks, manipulation, uninvited criticism or coercion. Never steal their power. Period.

Maybe those of us active in the search for a sustainable future should pay more attention to the way we raise our children. Perhaps the revolution will begin there, in the language our children learn as their mother tongue: The language of true power, which is never power-over, but always power-with. After all, it is the only language of love.

"I was fortunate enough to extricate myself before insensibility set in."
~ Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel Prize-winning poet and playwright,
on quitting school at age 13

Re-choosing Life Learning

by J. Ann Lloyd & Erica Gotow

"In the end, I have learned to trust my children. I have also learned that perhaps the greatest joy in parenting a self-directed learner comes not through academic success, but through watching your child become a successful adult."

Ann:

Having been unschooled until high school, my daughter, Erica was eager to take on the world. Academically she had long ago passed me and finding helpful resources was becoming more difficult. Thus, in the fall of 2004, thirteen-year-old Erica chose to enter high school. Conquering even the toughest honors classes, she was soon encouraged to attend the South West Virginia Governor's School – a school for the gifted in math and science. Attending the Governor's School was a great honor and our family rejoiced as she received a two-year scholarship. Unfortunately, along with earning college credit for advanced course work, came a ninety-minute twice-daily commute.

Each morning, Erica and I met in the garage at six o'clock. I drove the first leg of the trip, approximately twenty miles to a rival high school, where Erica would catch a bus and continue on. Academically, she was thriving. She was given the opportunity to dissect a sheep, collect data from a creek and attend a statewide science fair. She took advanced calculus, participated in Math Olympiads and received the Outstanding Junior Mathematician award. But the price she was paying was high. Erica was exhausted. By January of her junior year, I hardly saw my child. Homework, papers, tests and exams had taken over her life.

In retrospect, perhaps I should have intervened. No doubt it's our job as parents to notice when our children are going astray. But I had always emphasized personal choice and self-directed learning. How could I now contradict myself? How could I preach about embracing opportunities while asking Erica to go after less than her academic best?

When our children are young, parenting struggles abound, but

holding their hands on a tightrope goes without saying. With teenagers, however, knowing when to hold on and when to let go is often the greatest challenge. I worried that pulling Erica out of the South West Virginia Governor's School would decrease her chances for college. Yet family values, community service and extracurricular activities had been as much a part of our makeshift "curriculum" as academics had ever been. Clearly, Erica had lost her way and the balanced life she'd once cherished had all but vanished…or so I'd thought.

On the morning of April 16, 2007, as the last of the snowflakes fell, Erica and I robotically completed our daily routines. Little did we know that by nine o'clock our lives would be forever changed. The massacre on Virginia Tech's campus occurred only a mile from our home. Thirty-three people were dead. Our family and friends were devastated. Our community was shocked.

As Erica returned from the Governor's School that morning, she found herself literally and metaphorically trapped. Physically unable to get home, she was placed in lockdown with the students of a rival high school. Metaphorically, however, she was also trapped – no longer a well-rounded self-directed learner, but a public school student caught in the academic rat race.

Erica knew she needed to do something, both for her grieving community and for herself. Thus, with the spirit of a true life learner, she relinquished her scholarship and withdrew from the Governor's School just prior to the start of her senior year. Today, Erica is once again a balanced teen. She is still headed for college but with a much better appreciation for the limited role of academic-only success.

Allowing Erica to choose school at the age of 13 was far from easy, but holding her back would clearly conflict with a firmly established self-directed learning approach. Perhaps if I had considered the future, I would have left a contingency clause, telling my children they are free to self-direct their education in any way they chose, but only within the box I select. But I left no such contingency. Walking the line between parental intervention and child self-direction is never easy. Though we hold safety nets for our children, I often wonder why there are no such nets for adults.

In the end, I have learned to trust my children. I have also learned that perhaps the greatest joy in parenting a self-directed learner comes not through academic success, but through watching your child become a successful adult. It is my hope that when others read Erica's inspirational essay, which follows, they will take heart

and know that their children are listening, learning and modeling, even when it seems they are not.

Erica:

We lifted the last of the gleaming black bags onto the pile, nine trash bags threatening to burst with old candy wrappers, slimy Coke cans and receipts that read "Thank you for shopping at the Virginia Tech Bookstore." What had started out as picking up a few empty cans at the duck pond on Virginia Tech's campus, ended in a full day of community service.

Because I had been unschooled until high school, extracurricular activities and community service were in no way extracurricular. They were as much a part of our curriculum as were English, math and science. My brothers and I were taught that knowledge is an enabler, a catalyst not valued unless used. Knowledge of a cure alone will not save lives, just as thinking about pollution will not clean a pond. I've harbored this notion for as long as I can remember. However, under the pressure to learn, to take the most rigorous classes and achieve top grades, these lessons were pushed into dormancy as I entered Blacksburg High School in fall of 2004. Eager to explore all that high school had to offer, I ran headlong into every class, gifted program and academic opportunity that came my way. Though I excelled in the track that I had put myself in, something was missing.

On the morning of April 16, 2007, I was attending the South West Virginia Governor's School, as I had been every morning for months. At ten-thirty, I boarded the bus for my high school. Yet, as I sat working out calculus problems, struggling to avoid the slipping of my pencil as the bus bounced, I realized that we were on the wrong road. We were headed towards Christiansburg High School, a rival school in the adjacent town. Clueless as to the tragedy occurring only miles from my home, I was ushered out of the bus and placed in lockdown with the students of Christiansburg High. The hours passed slowly as I waited for information and to finally be reunited with my family.

Once safely home, I turned on the TV and sat spellbound. I found myself watching a community pull itself together, offering out every form of support and condolence possible. Individuals stood with their arms wide open; their businesses ready to contribute. Our entire community was grieving. I wanted to help, to do something, anything. But what could a 16-year-old have to contribute?

My grandfather, a Virginia Tech physics professor, mentioned that the physics department intended to fold a thousand paper cranes as a gift for each of the wounded students. The cranes would be hung in their hospital rooms as a symbol of hope. I was eager to be involved. For hours, my grandfather and I sat hunched over on the living room floor, folding small squares of optimistic paper, more than three hundred in all. I finished the last of the folds and tossed the light black bird aside. There were three hundred paper cranes, a huge assortment of colors and patterns, all lying motionless in a large cardboard box on our floor.

After the Virginia Tech Massacre, I was left feeling helpless. But by becoming involved, I found myself empowered. Our cranes were delivered to the area hospitals, along with thousands more made by other individuals. Hung in long chains, they filled each patient's room. Extra cranes were sent to the Virginia Tech students' center where they can still be found today under a sign which reads: "Take as many as you need. We are Virginia Tech: We will prevail."

Through this experience, I realized what I had been missing, and that was being a part of my community. I had been absorbing masses of information, yet hadn't been using it. Homework, exams and research; there had to be more. I needed to get involved. I needed time. I needed a change. While many doors had opened through my attendance at the South West Virginia Governor's School, an equal number had closed. Three hours a day spent in commute and a schedule full of classes suddenly felt constricting. After numerous discussions with my parents and school counselors, I made the difficult decision to restructure my life, just before the start of my senior year.

As fall comes to a close, I am happy to say that I have once again found myself dragging wet trash bags around Virginia Tech's campus. Community trail maintenance, Habitat for Humanity, food drives, recycling and clean-up projects, walking dogs at the local shelter: I've found what I was missing. Extracurricular activities and community service are no longer extracurricular, but once again, a part of my total learning experience.

Learning Love of the Natural World

by Beatrice Ekwa Ekoko

"This is a Mysterious Land.
Blue grass, purple flower
Red person, red sun
Brown rain
This is a Mysterious Land."

Bronwyn Kay, age 4

What does it take to move a people to act? What does it take to move a people to defend a forest, to protect a valley? To even risk arrest for their conviction that Nature is worth fighting for? And what effect does that have on kids?

A friend who is usually reticent about taking a public stance on social/environmental issues suddenly becomes impassioned enough to go up to a local, currently threatened site where tree cutting for an expressway has already begun and risk being nabbed, children and all, because she believes in the need to preserve this space for future generations. She still cherishes fond memories of hiking in those very same woods as a child, playing in the manholes, catching minnows and tadpoles, watching clouds pass by as she swung on the tire swing. Other friends reminisce about skipping school to get down to the creek and "have a blast!" Not surprisingly, these are some of the same people who are out there today, trying to save what is priceless, what once blasted away may take hundreds of years to return, if ever.

Australian professor J. S. Gould said somewhere that, "We can not win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and Nature as well – for we will not fight to save what we do not love." Here lies the crux of the matter. Clearly, people who have that emotional attachment to the natural world are agonized at what is happening to the last remnants of natural spaces all around the planet. On them, we pin our hope of action

for a livable future.

And that brings me to education. Becoming aware of how important is contact with the natural world to the future of our race on this planet, schools across North America have begun naturalization projects on their school grounds, a much welcomed sight for eyes accustomed to the usual visual deprivation of concrete and cement associated with schools and prisons. These projects include planting trees and native species, shrubs, meadows and ponds.

If even schools are attempting to increase ecological awareness in kids, imagine how much more opportunity life learning families have to learn to love the natural world! Life learners can work with their communities to adopt a creek, a piece of forest or a wetland, becoming a steward of it. This is a commitment that could extend over a long period of time so that concern for and love of the adopted site could evolve. Unschooled children are fortunate enough to have the chance to be in a forest as opposed to studying a forest in the classroom. They are able to engage directly on a face-to-face level with animated life. (I think of the tragedy of how right beside a school filled with kids sitting passively in the classroom, possibly studying the different parts of a leaf, the real thing is out there in that valley, as people struggle to save the very trees that produce the leaves they are studying.)

Even with most learning establishments and homes embracing the celebration of Earth Day, practicing recycling programs and so on, the reality is that this is not enough. We continue to educate the young for the most part as if there is no planetary emergency, the assumption being that better technology will take care of the rapidly worsening environmental crisis. But the crisis, as environmental scholar David Orr says in his book *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect*, is "in the minds that develop and use technology. The disordering of ecological systems and of the great biogeochemical cycles of the earth reflect a prior disorder in the thought, perception, imagination, intellectual priorities and loyalties inherent in the industrial mind. Ultimately, then the ecological crisis concerns how we think and the institutions that purport to shape and refine the capacity to think."

Like Orr, I am convinced that "nothing short of a redesigning of education by adopting the 'protection of the ecology' as a basis, in every discipline will do."

The earlier that love for Nature starts in a child's life, the better.

Someone who respects and honors the natural world, who loves this awesome earth, its astounding diversity, its frightening power, its mathematical elegance, needs to walk with a child in a truly natural world. Regularly, someone needs to take that child to forest and meadow, gaze with her into the depths of a sparkling stream, explore in secret caves and hide behind tall grass, be still for the deer and the rabbit to pass. The idea is that, rather than approaching Nature through a lens, dissecting and evaluating, classifying and measuring, one ought to first allow the natural world to take ahold of one.

Orr proposes that children should be introduced to the "mysteries of specific places and things before giving them access to the power inherent in abstract knowledge...aim to fit the values and loyalties of [children] to specific places before we equip them to change the world."

In this way, as the children grow, their commitment to their own environment will grow with them and we will have a stronger pool of people to draw from in reversing the tide. What the planet needs now is not more "successful" people but, as Orr says, "it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make habitable and humane."

Perhaps it is because so many people are separated by modern life from the natural world and cannot perceive their actual dependency on it as a reality, that there are still too few people willing to take on the challenge of saving our Mother Earth.

But if children of all ages were to be given the opportunity to commune with the natural world with as much enthusiasm and zeal as many do in shopping malls, no doubt we would stand a better chance at having a beautiful and healthful ecology in the future. No doubt we would come to know beyond words and thought that, indeed, we are a part of this magical world. Then, in the words of social activist and writer, Joanna Macy, we would witness that "as we work to heal the Earth, Earth heals us."

"If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder,
he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it,
rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery
of the world we live in." ~ Rachel Carson

Letting Go
by Renata Rooney

"What were all these control issues and power plays that seemed to be in charge of my psyche? I examined myself. I examined my interactions with my children, my husband, parents, food, friends, housework, exercise…."

This year at the beginning of summer, our eight-year-old daughter became an unschooler. We arrived at this situation by default. After two years of being what we considered relaxed homeschoolers, we no longer could take the daily stress of insisting that Sonya practice her math, spelling and writing. Suddenly only two doors were open to us: one leading inside our local public school; the other simply out of our dining room, where the daily power clashes over imposed learning played out. We chose the latter.

This was not an easy transformation. I had wished for a long time that I could be like all those unschoolers I read about. But then I would mind my fear, put the magazine down and turn back to the daily math worksheet, spelling flash cards and writing assignment. Slowly, gradually, I started seeing things from a different perspective. There were things that made me ask questions, search for answers and often catch my breath. In the end, I couldn't go on creating power struggles between my girl and me. I wouldn't go on watching her adopt my fears and my power issues. What I saw were simple, real life situations: my life's situations.

First, there is my girl sitting at our dining room table hunched over her daily dose of imposed (what we thought was) learning. She is wiggling, squirming, whining, crying and even pounding her fists on the table. Her whole body is expressing her resistance and rage. When I ask her what's going on (duh) she says she doesn't know why, she just doesn't want to do it. We have long discussions about the importance of acquiring these skills. We (I) talk about how everybody who wants to learn something has to do the hard/boring/regular work. I give examples of her dad and I learning new things through regular practice. I hug her. I yell. I throw up my hands and (close to tears myself) tell her to let it be and leave it. She refuses. She seems

terrified by that idea. She doesn't want to do it but she is afraid to stop. I feel like the worst mother; I feel caught, powerless, stupefied. Sometimes I hate her for putting me through this!

Day after day, this same scenario repeats. I keep going, believing that perseverance is needed. Sonya would eventually accept the inevitable and, as a result, her skills in math and writing would be assured. Except that reality is not following my fantasies. Sonya does just fine filling in page after page in her math workbook, yet when faced with the same math problems in real life, her first reaction always is: "I don't know. It's too hard!" She "knew" the very same math fact this very morning! I see the same thing happen with spelling. All this work and striving is turning out to be for nothing! I can hardly believe it. What now?

I am breaking into goose bumps as I am about to write this, but here it is. We tried bribery. We offered our daughter a horseback riding lesson if she mastered twenty words from a spelling list. We promised to buy her a watch when she could tell time and we supplied her with a workbook and an educational game that was supposed to teach telling time in a fun and effortless way. Each day, Sonya taped one word from the spelling list on the fridge and asked me to quiz her. She got up to about eight words and then she stopped. She wouldn't tell me why. Eventually she admitted that it was getting too hard. She never touched the time telling materials. Quietly we put it all way. Humbled, I recognized how much I admire my daughter for not allowing herself to be bought.

Then there is my recent three-and-a-half week visit at my parents' home. My dad is taking care of everything. He is wonderful. But, on this particular day, he has to leave for an appointment. He tells me that I should boil some pasta to go with the leftover dinner for lunch. I agree. I get the pot, pour water, start the stove. Dad comes into the kitchen. He is about to be late. He is wringing his hands nervously, shifting from one foot to another. He tells me that pasta needs lots of water to cook properly. He points out to me a bigger pot than the one I have chosen. He explains how he always uses that one for pasta and even though it is a big pot, sometimes the water still boils over while the pasta cooks. I look him in the eyes and inform him that I am thirty-one years old, have been married for eleven years and have been cooking for my family frequently for all that time. I have a four-year degree in hotel and restaurant management. I graduated at the top of my class from, among other subjects, cooking! I have to

laugh as I am saying this. Dad chuckles, too, and then tells me to switch the pots. Quietly, I say no. The pasta cooks just fine. My heart, though, aches. I am starting to see.

Finally, back at home again, I ask Paul, my very fit husband, to be my trainer in weightlifting. He has been learning for the last two years everything there is to know on this topic. He has totally changed his body. He has become an expert. We are in our basement early in the morning. He is staring right at me while I struggle through some awkward and unpleasant moves. I am uncomfortable. I don't want him to stare at me. I don't want him to encourage me. I don't want him to cheer me on or say that I can do it, just one more lift. I don't want him to praise me. I keep at it. I feel rage. I act irritable. I complain. I start an argument. I hate this. I am extremely angry at him. I recognize that something is not what it seems. I tell Paul how I feel. I start crying. I so hate being told what to do. Then I try to picture how I would feel if Paul woke up one morning and announced to me that, for my own health, from now on he would train me every morning whether I wanted to or not. And that until I have done my training, I would not be allowed to do anything else. I cringe. I want to wiggle, squirm, whine, cry, pound my fists.… I think of my daughter and the worksheets and flash cards awaiting her on our dining room table. My heart tightens. I am finally defeated. Now I see that there really are only two options left to us: Give up on homeschooling or unschool.

This is where the hard work started. We didn't want to send Sonya to school. And we didn't want to continue the way we had been going. Above all, I wanted to understand. What were all these control issues and power plays that seemed to be in charge of my psyche? I examined myself. I examined my interactions with my children, my husband, parents, food, friends, housework, exercise. I realized that much of my life was based on this premise: control or be controlled. I cringed. I held my breath. I made an appointment with a therapist. I meditated, read, contacted all the kind, experienced homeschoolers and unschoolers in our homeschooling community whom I knew and I asked endless questions. I prayed. Slowly, very slowly the clouds of uncertainty started to disperse. I took a deep breath. Then another. I shunned my fear and took the plunge. I told our daughter that there would be no more school work for now. My daughter was free, if with a slightly worried face. I, on the other hand, had a long way ahead of me. I took small steps and all the while I watched my girl soar higher and higher every day. My heart rejoiced for her.

At first, life learning seemed to be based on some very puzzling, mysterious premise. Bit by bit, I started to put the pieces together. A recent acquaintance, new to homeschooling, asked me: "What do you do when you unschool?" "Worry," I answered and laughed. "But less and less everyday as you see that your child thrives, learns and loves life, and that your family flourishes," I added quickly. Then I tried to list some of the things I do: I go to the library twice a week and get bags of books on endless subjects to leave around the house for my daughter to get into at her will. I buy craft kits, art kits, tickets to performances, toys and tools. I pay for classes. I drive her to classes. I watch. I watch her learn, come to conclusions, have sudden illuminations and understandings. I offer. I offer to play games, show her how to add, help her write a letter. I offer to organize a Math Adventure Day, book club, Halloween party. I listen. I listen to her lead. If she wants to know why a circle is divided into degrees, I find the answer and don't push any more information on her than that. But I do look for a good book on geometry for those future questions. I look within, too. I look at my fears and reactions. I look at my habits and hopes. Slowly, from under the layers of fear and need to control, I am unearthing this big mystery that is myself.

I like to know what I am getting into before I make the decision to participate. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why life learning seemed so scary. With a curriculum, you can examine the whole scope and sequence. You can plan your school year. You can attempt to predict the future. When I finally waded into the swirling waters of life learning, I acted against my habits. I only knew what *not* to do: impose learning. A few months into this, I am starting to see a surprising phenomenon. I thought I would at last discover the rules of daily unschooling life. Well, there are none. I really cannot predict what activities my girls and I will get into today. One day it's crafts, the next one we end up watching a video about the Leaning Tower of Pisa. We might go orienteering or draw in our backyard. I am amazed how much I enjoy this way of life. This lively current takes us to some delightful places. I actually wake up energized and curious about what's ahead – a whole new way of waking up for me. I astound myself with my curiosity and playfulness. I am developing new interests.

I admit that I have not completely let go of all control. I keep a portfolio of the things we do, places we visit, books we read, videos we watch. I translate our activities into school subjects for my and our

school district's records. I know what topics kids Sonya's age study in school. I keep a mental check list to check items off as I see her mastering them in her daily life. I read about how we humans learn and forget (Frank Smith's books). I read about writing, math, spelling, art, parenting, education, psychology, testing. This reassures me and helps me to sit on my hands and keep my mouth shut when worry surfaces. It works for me for now. I expect that might change. If I should describe life learning with one word, "change" would be the perfect fit.

A few weeks into our new life, I was lying down with Sonya at bedtime in her bed. We were chatting. I asked her what she has been enjoying lately. Stitching and math, she answered. This made us both giggle. I asked her why then she wouldn't do math when I requested it. She said that she hated doing math when asked because she was slower than I am at it. She wanted to be as fast as I and never make mistakes. She thought it was funny how on some days she still hoped that today I would forget to make her do her school work. We had decided to stop doing school work several weeks before that and she would sometimes forget! We had a good chuckle over that one. In the darkness of the bedroom, my eyes were not merry though. I knew control and power issues were still lurking in the black corners.

During the visit with my family that I mentioned earlier, I was ready for the accusations for not speaking in my mother tongue to my young daughters. What I was not ready for was the sheer assault of them. There wasn't a day during those three-and-a-half weeks when a friend or stranger didn't accuse me of this failing. It started in the airplane on the way there! Sometimes I tried to explain myself; mostly I changed the subject as soon as I could. But I couldn't just forget this issue there. It was in my face all the time. And so were all those pointing fingers. Guilt over this matter pierced me again. I questioned my abilities and choices. Couldn't I just muster enough will power and self-control and make myself speak to my girls in Czech? Shouldn't I just make them cooperate? It would…it could be for their own good one of these days.

Finally, at a high school reunion, of all places, I found the words to defend myself. I was talking to the young woman who used to be the unofficial queen of our class. I said that we all have things in our lives that we would like to be different, to disappear, to change. Yes, it would be wonderful if my daughters could speak and live the language of their mother, grandmother, great-grandmothers. But if I

could do it all over again, I would marry my American husband again; I would leave my home country for him and for my young family again; I would experience all the big and little losses of it again and again. And, as much as it pains me, knowing what I know now, I would most likely choose to raise my daughters in English again, too.

Something in the eyes of this woman, who was listening to me so intently, stirred understanding within me. Suddenly, I saw how easy it is for all of us to assume that we know what's best for the other. We pass judgment, offer advice, even condemn. We try to manipulate and control. We think if only the other ate less and lost weight, or stopped smoking, or sent their kids to school or quit using curriculum or just spoke her own language to her children, all would be well.

It's so simple and easy from where we stand. We plot, admonish, try to control.

And we do it to ourselves, too. We tie ourselves up into knots in our efforts to overcome ourselves with willpower and self-control. We berate ourselves and often we disappoint ourselves. We bribe, threaten and manipulate ourselves. And sooner or later we lose that battle. We simply can't control life as it flows through us or those around us. We can accept it, get to know it, welcome it, celebrate it. We can play along. We can enjoy this mystery and watch it unfold. We can support and accept ourselves and each other. We can pray. We can surrender. Not give up. There is a difference. Giving up means losing all hope and trust in life as it comes. When I surrender my daughter to her life and the learning that stems from that life and not impose math or Czech or any other subject on her, I am placing her into safe hands – the hands of Life as it unfolds for her.

A few weeks ago, to Sonya's immense delight, I bought her a bright dolphin watch. She loves wearing it. Slowly, she is getting better at telling time as she begins to understand the concepts involved. At different times during the day, with bright eyes, she runs to tell me what time it is, showing off her watch. I scoop her up and give her a big kiss. Silently, I say a prayer of gratitude for finally being able to let her learn in the only way possible: in freedom.

Birthing Our Selves, Our Children and Our World

by Amy Childs

"We cannot fully trust others when we do not fully trust ourselves. The process of learning to trust ourselves is a long and bumpy road, and those of us who have chosen to travel it need tender loving care along the way."

Growing into unschooling can be a bumpy, painful and lonely journey. It might surprise those new to the concept of life-based learning to hear that developing a life wholly based on freedom, trust and fun often includes times of deep angst, shame and fear for the parents.

Yet many new unschoolers do describe their transition into life learning as a very painful process, and even seasoned life learners can experience times that are far from easy or carefree. Even with a vision of the peace and joy that this type of learning lifestyle offers, the struggle to get there can, at times, feel like too great a burden to endure. What can life learners do to manage and ease the painful times that can be an inherent part of manifesting this new way of life?

One way to describe the philosophy of life learning is living as if human beings are already perfect. This is a radical concept and, for most of us, a dramatic reversal of what we've always thought about ourselves, about our children and about humanity. The pervasive assumption about human beings, expressed overwhelmingly in our collective beliefs and practices, is that we are naturally bad, lazy and dumb. These beliefs are responsible for most people's approach toward children, thinking that they must be forced to learn, forced to be productive and forced to be good. Healing this paradigm requires a deep shift in one's psyche. Moving toward a place of trust in and respect for the inner selves of our children (not to mention of ourselves and of all people) is usually uncomfortable. And it often takes longer than we'd like to fully arrive at a life of relaxed peace and fun.

Another way to describe life learning is as a continual exploration into who we are and what we want. This unfolding is what we

want for our children, but most of us haven't had the opportunity to develop this in ourselves and we may not be familiar or comfortable with the path from here to there. I imagine that, for people who were always unschooled in a loving and supportive environment, this self-awareness and acceptance comes easily and naturally. Unfortunately most of us have not been this lucky and we have spent many years focusing on who we are not, trying to become "better," without much attention (if any) given to what we deeply want or who we really are.

In order to turn this upside-down, inside-out world right-side-up for our children, we have to do it for ourselves at the same time. Their journey is our journey, and ours is theirs. As adults and as parents, staying with the intention of discovering who we truly are and what we truly want requires an ongoing emotional process of uncovering the shame, fear and judgment that we have internalized and lived with for much of our lives. It is no wonder that society parks children in schools, protecting adults from having to deal with this painful reality.

Most of us have believed for as long as we can remember that we are imperfect, that there are things we must change about ourselves and that the goal of living is to improve. When we were children, this "improvement" program was nearly constantly enforced and monitored by our parents, teachers, ministers and other authority figures. By the time we reached adulthood, most of us had accepted this version of reality and had become expert at constantly evaluating ourselves and finding ourselves lacking. Although it isn't fun for anyone, most people still manage to go through their entire lives thinking they are fundamentally incomplete and flawed and believing that they must struggle in order for their lives to be of any real value. Giving our children the freedom and encouragement to be their true selves will likely illuminate our own lack of freedom and self-acceptance, which can leave us confused and floundering in the discomfort of it all.

It is common to interpret pain as a sign that something is wrong. Sometimes this interpretation is helpful, such as when one puts a finger into the fire. On the other hand, there is the pain of childbirth which, when resisted, impedes the good and natural process that is underway. Midwives support and encourage laboring women though the difficulties of birth with the awareness that going with the flow of the pain, rather than working against it, will bring both the mother

and the baby through with less struggle and more ease. Because unschooling is so rare, we do not have exposure to, nor a collective understanding of, the sometimes severe discomfort that most new life learners experience, nor the doubts and fears that come back to haunt us periodically along the journey. Many of us have to go through these painful times alone, without midwives holding our hands.

In our first year of life learning, although I was familiar with homeschooling, I didn't know that something called "unschooling" existed. I had been going through what I had initially labeled my "midlife crisis." (I later saw things differently and called it my "midlife emergence.") In light of all I was going through, I decided that I and my two daughters (eight and ten at the time) would take a year off from life as we knew it, live as if we were perfect and discover who we truly were. We called it "Essential Self School." It was exciting and terrifying, and it brought up lots of difficult feelings for me. Since I had no idea that this way of living and learning existed in anyone's head but mine, it couldn't occur to me to find other families for encouragement, information and support. I didn't even know anyone who schooled-at-home! In this adventure, I was on my own.

But not really. I have spent my life consciously surrounding myself with loving and supportive friends who have been with me though the ups and downs of life. I call these women my "lollies" (they are as good as candy) and they have provided me with a large and wonderful sisterhood. Although they didn't personally relate to the "Essential Self School" that I was doing, they knew and loved me and, as always, supported my inner journey towards happiness and peace. I asked these women to be my "midwives."

In this first year of life learning, I felt a huge range of difficult feelings – fear, sadness, annoyance, overwhelm, embarrassment – you name it. I would call one of my lollies and ask her to hold me (metaphorically or literally) while I cried. My lollies knew that I was on the right journey for me and didn't question my decisions or my request for support. They listened to me without judgment. They reminded me to breathe. They showed me that they loved me. Their enfolding presence helped me to be more in touch with who I am and what I want. Through this messy and unpredictable process, several magical things happened but the most notable and exciting was an amazing new sense of fun, freedom and peace for me and my children. Eventually, when I was describing this adventure to someone I met on a bus, he asked if we were "unschoolers." I had never heard

the word before, but as soon as I heard it I knew the answer was yes.

Since then, I have seen many life learning families attest to the kind of freedom, love and joy that I had been discovering. I have also heard many in the transition stages express countless forms of fear, doubt, panic, anger, judgment, embarrassment, despair, concern and other painful feelings. I now see this as an unavoidable part of the process. When "becoming an unschooler" is realized as "re-evaluating everything that you thought it meant to be alive," it becomes easier to understand why it feels at times so impossible and overwhelming. Since we are so vastly in the minority, we can be easily and often tempted to doubt the wisdom of trusting human beings. Not only do we lack role models and strong support systems, we also can find ourselves the unlucky recipients of other people's fear and judgment as well. Whatever our own negative thoughts may be, there is always someone "out there" who is more than happy to give validity and voice to them. For many life learners, this makes the process even more painful and isolating.

As with preparing for a birth, there is a lot we can learn about life learning – new ideas, practical suggestions, philosophical background and so on. All of this intellectual information can help pregnant women immensely. But when the real labor pain comes, the "facts" of the situation are of little help when compared with the midwife who looks us in the eyes, wipes our brow, holds our hand and guides us to be consciously with the pain. The skills we gained in birthing our children can be used when we're giving spiritual birth to our own and our children's inner selves. When we need to, we can hold our midwife's hands, cry our tears and remember to breathe.

Taking time to breathe is crucial, as both a regular practice and an emergency measure. Conscious breathing can bring immediate physical and emotional relief, by relaxing our bodies and our minds and bringing us back into the present moment. In this centered and calm place, we can reconnect again with our inner selves and our deeper wants. From this place, we can remember our and our children's perfection, no matter how confusing or messy the outer circumstances seem to be.

As I've trained myself to breathe more consciously and to release my own emotional pain, I've also found it useful to reward myself by indulging in the things that bring me pleasure, such as a short nap, a bath, a favorite snack, yoga or sitting in the sun for a while. As I've treated myself with an abundance of love and compassion, I've

grown better at trusting my children and treating them the same way. By following my heart and relaxing into my own perfection, I create an environment in which it is safe for my children to become who they really are.

Because most of us are accustomed to thinking that our desires and pleasures are suspicious (at best), this process does not usually come naturally. Just as a deschooling child may alternately binge on or refuse certain foods or activities, deschooling parents usually discover that their own natural instincts have been severely compromised. We might not know how to indulge ourselves; we might not know what we really want. It takes time. Giving ourselves the space to flounder will help remind us that our children need time and space to flounder as well. We can lessen the discomfort by increasing our and our children's pleasure as much as possible along the way.

Most importantly, wherever you can, find people to be with you in this journey. Consider seeking a therapist, counselor or life-coach who is on a continuing personal healing journey and who is comfortable with the approach to life that life learning expresses. Some peer-counseling techniques and practices (e.g. re-evaluation counseling) can be a wonderful and inexpensive way to learn to become fluent with difficult emotions and can help you to build a network of support and compassion.

Find people who believe in you – friends, siblings, parents or other life learning parents. Tell them of your desire to unschool and ask them to support you in the confusion and difficulty of it. We don't have official "unschooling midwives," so we need to train our birthing support team ourselves. Warn them that life learning may look too hard but that, as with childbirth, this is to be expected. It does not mean that you have made the wrong choices. It simply means that you have taken on a very big project, which is going to take a while and is going to involve some pain.

We cannot fully trust others when we do not fully trust ourselves. The process of learning to trust ourselves is a long and bumpy road, and those of us who have chosen to travel it need tender loving care along the way. This tenderness not only smooths the way for life learning, but also moves everyone further along toward a more happy and peaceful planet. A world that honors, respects and trusts people of all ages will be one well worth living in, and I deeply appreciate those who are willing to face the pain and uncertainty necessary to birth it.

"I suppose it is because nearly all children go to school nowadays, and have things arranged for them, that they seem so forlornly unable to produce their own ideas." ~ Agatha Christie

The Hardest Thing is the Unknown
by Karen Ridd

"What is it like to have unschooled grandchildren? How do you explain it to your friends and co-workers? How can a grandparent get support?"

"It's the hardest part of my job," said the affable Manitoba government liaison for homeschooling. He was talking about dealing with concerned extended family members of homeschoolers. As he went on to describe these encounters, I thought of my own life learning friends and the complaints I have heard about relatives – often, and understandably, grandparents – who keep asking when the kids finally will be sent to school or who insist on "testing" the children whenever they see them. One friend's mother cried out, when she heard that her grandchildren wouldn't be attending school, "But the boys will grow up to be drug dealers and your daughter will be a prostitute at 16!" Phew!

I have been fortunate. My extended family has been, at least, tolerant and, at best, very supportive. But as I thought about these questions, it dawned on me that in all the reading I've done about homeschooling – and believe me, I've done lots! – I've never read anything about the grandparents' journey. What is it like to have unschooled grandchildren? How do you explain it to your friends and co-workers? There are lots of ways that I, as a parent, can access support (although never enough!) But how can a grandparent get support? Filled with these questions, I arranged to interview a grandparent of homeschooled children: my mother.

Karen: Tell me about when you first learned that I was going to be homeschooling your grandchildren [neither Daniel, now eight, nor Ben, who is four, has ever attended school.] How did you feel? What did you think?

Bev: I had a mixed reaction. Homeschooling wasn't a new idea to me, since I had met other homeschoolers a long time ago. I liked these parents; they were solid people, people I admired, not wingnuts. So the only people that I knew who were doing it were

good people, which was helpful.

Now back to you: I could see right from the beginning that it would be difficult for Daniel to be in the classroom. He was so smart and didn't find it easy being in large groups of people, so I could see that homeschooling was a really positive thing for him. The one concern that came into my mind was about socialization. I was quite relieved to hear about the homeschooling association and glad you had him in soccer. Also, when I heard that you were going to do this, I did some research on my own and talked to some excellent teachers that I know. One, in particular, was really enthusiastic. She said, "If you have a child one-on-one you can teach them the whole curriculum in two months and then they can spend the rest of the time playing – and that is what children should do." She was very positive. I never did talk to another grandparent, though, because I didn't know any.

The other thing I thought about was how children learn and that they learn so much through play. Every moment is a teachable moment – even raising my own children, I was always doing that, quite naturally. Another big thing for me was trusting that you were doing the best for your kids. Right from the time you were pregnant, you did research and did things differently – midwives and home birth for instance. The most radical thing I had done was "Childbirth Without Fear!" You were doing things differently than me, but you were doing them thoughtfully and responsibly, and that is what mattered.

Karen: I'm assuming that you see both good and bad in this, but let's start with the positive. What do you like about having life learning grandchildren?

Bev: I like being able to have time with my grandchildren, time that I wouldn't have if they were in school. I think that it has been very exciting to see them take off on a topic that they are interested in, research it and become really confident in their knowledge. Another one of the neat things is how much Ben, as the younger child, has learned – just from osmosis. It's been fun – and challenging – because Ben comes out with things that I would not expect him to know about. You just don't expect three-year-olds to be talking about machicolations or "Romans against the Gauls," for instance.

Karen: What about concerns?

Bev: You do wonder if they want to go into the public system at some point, how they will cope. Fortunately, I talked to a teacher at

the high school level who knew kids who had been homeschooled and then entered the school system and did well. It's a big step for a grandparent, having been in school yourself and then having your kids in it – it's a big, big shift from that to homeschooling. When I was in school, there were forty-eight kids in a class! And when we were in school, we could see for ourselves that if you got one good teacher out of the system you were lucky. We had concerns about the system ourselves but we didn't know there were other options, so we just tried to fix the system. You have left the system entirely – and that is really different. The biggest downside, though, is that I don't know what the overall framework is. It's hard not quite knowing where this is all going. You and I haven't had time to talk about this, and it would be something that would be good for grandparents to know about.

Karen: As you are talking, I realize that I really haven't given you a lot of information, have I? I'm glad that doing this interview has made that come out! If it is okay with you, can I finish this interview and then talk more with you about it? I'd love to know, for example, how you explain homeschooling to other people who ask you about what your grandchildren are doing. Especially since I seem to have explained so little to you!

Bev: I do get questions, mostly around socialization, which is interesting. I tell them about the homeschooling association and the children playing community club soccer. People assume that a homeschooling association would be all the same kinds of kids and they think that it is good that they are playing with other kids who aren't homeschooled, who are different.

I don't think people think that they won't learn. But people do think that you must do some form of school-at-home. Unschooling is quite different and new – I haven't actually explained unschooling to anyone at this point, because I don't know enough about it!

Karen: What support do you, as a grandparent, need? Where do you get it from?

Bev: I think right off the top that it would be good for homeschooling associations to have a pamphlet for grandparents that describes what this is all about and then maybe more elaborate material after that. Something in print means a lot to people, psychologically. Also, it would be great if there were other people grandparents could talk to if they were really anxious, especially if their relation-

ship with their children wasn't easy.

Karen: Any "last words?" What advice/guidance do you have for other grandparents of homeschooled children?

Bev: The hardest thing for grandparents is the unknown. There are no books, pamphlets or support groups for grandparents. People will be anxious, of course, because they love their grandchildren, but there is nowhere to go with that anxiety. There seem to be support groups for everything else but not for that. So grandparents need to find more information, talk to their children, talk to teachers. You need to go to your grandchildren's activities and meet other homeschooling families.

I really do think that the grandparents have to let go and trust – trust the values that you have instilled in your own children. You need to be open to doing things differently – these children will be growing up into a very different world than we did, or our children. It is not always easy to let go when you are older and it is easier for some than others. But if you get involved with your grandchildren, you can see for yourself the good things that are coming to them from homeschooling.

Karen: It is clear, isn't it, why my mother is one of my heroes?

Learning is Children's Work
by Wendy Priesnitz

"Personal empowerment starts with the realization of the value of our own life experience and potential to affect the world – whether we are babies, toddlers, teens or adults."

Life learning is about making the real world accessible to children so they can have real-life experiences, instead of the sort where they are "allowed" to "help" within certain constraints (usually relating to cleanliness and efficiency) or where they pretend to do real work with the aid of toy tools. Life learning is about kids doing their own real work, motivated by their own real interests and goals…and being around adults who are also doing their own real work.

Unfortunately, there are few places where children can experience the adult world in that way. Most children – and even many homeschooled ones – don't have nearly enough opportunities to be with adults who are doing their own thing in the real world and not, as John Holt once put it, "just hanging around entertaining or instructing or being nice to children."

The working world of adults is not very accessible to children because we fear they will get hurt, get in the way of or slow down production, or abuse or break the equipment. So we make childhood a rehearsal for adulthood, replacing real experiences with pseudo experiences. Many of those pseudo experiences take place in schools but they can also be part of the home-based learning environment.

Our daughters Heidi and Melanie grew up living and learning in the midst of our busy home-based magazine and book publishing business. They used all the tools of that business and never abused them. They respected the tools as part of our business and saw how carefully we used them. And, more importantly, those tools were an important part of their everyday lives too, so they had a stake in taking care of them.

But one of my friends, who also happened to be a writer, was horrified to discover that our children were able to use my typewriter, then my word processor, then later my computer, as well as various

photocopiers, typesetters and other related equipment. She said her kids would wreck hers for sure if allowed anywhere near them. Maybe...or maybe not, if given the opportunity and the trust.

There are many opportunities for children and young people to learn in and be of service to the real world. They include volunteering with community organizations, helping in their parents' businesses or at their workplaces, working for pay or as apprentices at neighborhood businesses and running their own businesses. Our daughters often put all that office equipment to good use in their own money-making enterprises...and they were noticeably more passionate about those businesses than they were about stuffing magazines in envelopes for their parents' business!

Although I don't want to romanticize the past or ignore the abuses against children that took place a few centuries ago (and still do in some parts of the world), there was a time when children had the opportunity to do real work at their parents' side, as well as on their own accord, and to be involved in the life of their communities. In our more complex modern world, this same type of opportunity and respect for children's abilities is still possible if we all share a sense of responsibility for helping develop the minds that will lead us into the future. In our current economy, no one has all the experience and information necessary to prepare young people for a rapidly developing future. But we can share our skills and experiences with our children or take on other people's kids as apprentices in order to pass along our knowledge and skills.

Unfortunately, that sort of real world learning experience is often easier to describe than to arrange. A group of parents came together in a community park in Toronto to build a series of cob structures housing a sink, cooking fireplace, baby-changing station and, ultimately, a composting toilet with a rammed earth foundation. Cob is a traditional style of construction that uses a mixture of sand, straw, clay and water and is people-friendly, low-tech and community-building. Aside from filling a need for those facilities in the park, one of the purposes of the project was to offer people of all ages a chance to learn how to build low impact shelter. And that included children of various ages. But the municipal bureaucracy enforced labor code regulations, which required the building of a six-foot-high fence and excluding the participation of children. Georgie Donais, an unschooling mom who coordinated the project, devised a "workaround" whereby people mixing cob materials on tarps were

located outside the fence and only work-booted adults were allowed inside the fence. Unfortunately, besides segregating people by functions, this relegated children to the mixing function and prevented them from being involved in some of the more "exciting" aspects like shoveling, hauling materials or filling bags of dirt. Georgie, trying to see the situation through the bureaucracy's eyes, admits, "I imagine it is a truly strange thing to be asked to listen to and support some woman who wants to – with barely any money and very few power tools, but with many bare feet and children involved – create a building out of mud that houses a toilet."

That "strange thing" is something our children need much more of, especially if the well-meaning powers-that-be (whether they are municipal officials, business owners or parents) can sort out the mindless bureaucratic requirements from the necessary safety concerns. Kids need the sense of accomplishment that comes from being trusted with a real job to do in the real world. They benefit from the increased self-esteem that comes from participating – at whatever level – in a functioning group. Everyone benefits when kids develop the grace and confidence that accompanies being in control of themselves and of their surroundings. And they don't need the sort of "protection" that results from lack of adult trust and preparation and that keeps them sitting on the sidelines and away from meaningful work.

Aside from safety, there are other reasons for sidelining children. Showing respect for a child's developing skills takes patience and skills. Doing a task ourselves is usually easier and more efficient than allowing the time needed for a child to do it. Children's results might be not good enough for the satisfaction of perfectionist adults. And some people just underestimate what a child can do.

These may be the same people who question how life learning children will ever learn how to function in the real world. Perhaps they misunderstand the concept of life learning, or maybe they mean that the real world is a competitive, hostile and grim place. (Does that mean it's intentional that schools are so often such ugly places?!) If that's the case, I'd have to say that not only do life learning kids have the secure preparation of a joyous childhood to prepare themselves for adulthood, they are able to observe, experience and celebrate the positive aspects of life by interacting with friendly, supportive adults. And who knows? That might be just the sort of childhood that's needed to make the whole world a better place!

Personal empowerment starts with the realization of the value of our own life experience and potential to affect the world – whether we are babies, toddlers, teens or adults. So, as life learners, we need to find as many ways as possible to nurture this awareness of the value of experience in people of all ages. Our children especially deserve the same flexibility, control, access and opportunities to be part of – and learn from – the daily life of the families and communities in which they live.

Learning & Prospering in the Real World

by Gaye Chicoine

"When little people are treated with respect for who they are by the adults in their lives and are given the opportunity to learn at their own pace what they are interested in learning, they grow up with self-esteem, display an ability to think things through and appear to develop a confidence that gives them the idea they can take on anything they put their minds to."

A little over a year ago, our family of eight purchased and took over running the convenience store in our small community of Wakefield, Quebec. Ed and I have six children: Tanya (twenty-three), Ben (twenty-two), Dayna (twenty), Karina (eighteen), Jake (sixteen) and Whitney (fourteen). They have had a home-based, life learning education their entire lives and are now growing into young adults supporting themselves.

In 2006, Ben convinced the rest of his family that the store, which had come up for sale, was an under-performing business and would be a good investment for the future. If we pooled our resources and worked together, we could increase the value of the business and provide income for everyone who put energy into it. When he had his siblings committed to the idea of working in a business and creating assets of their own instead of working for someone else, Ed and I joined in and helped them make it happen. All eight of us are shareholders, employers and workers in a business not one of us has had any experience in before.

So one might ask how these young people had the initiative to take on such a project. I often wonder myself but, then again, I learned many years ago that when little people are treated with respect for who they are by the adults in their lives and are given the opportunity to learn at their own pace what they are interested in learning, they grow up with self-esteem, display an ability to think things through and appear to develop a confidence that gives them the

idea they can take on anything they put their minds to.

I speak from my own family's experience, of course. But from being friends with other life learning families over the past seventeen years, I have observed that these characteristics are common in many of the children I have watched grow into adulthood. Children learn through what is modeled to them within the environment in which they live. When curiosity is encouraged, helping hands are welcomed in whatever "adult" job is underway and whatever comes up is discussed in a respectful manner, kids grow up with a sense of value in the people they are. And when those children grow into teens knowing they are worthy individuals, whose ideas will they follow? From my observations, they are far less likely to be swayed by potentially trouble-making peer pressure and, more certainly, will follow their own established life principles.

Our children were born at home. From the beginning of each pregnancy, older siblings were informed that there would be a new little person joining our family and that they were welcome to be present at the birth if they wanted to be there. We had real "birthday parties" with aunts, uncles and grandparents as support crew for the children while dad and mom were preoccupied. I start here because this is where the true bonding of our family began and it appears to have created a sense of responsibility to each other in a way I don't see possible under other circumstances.

Many Willing Hands

We moved into the house we presently live in before Ben turned a year old because it was a convenient location for Ed to run his chiropractic clinic and for us to live in as well. It is a great house but close to one hundred years old and was in dire need of many things being overhauled to make it the comfortable place of business and the home we live in today. We did have contractors do some major work but every year there were home improvement projects that, of course, always involved the kids. Their helping hands were welcomed and then, as they grew older, encouraged because they had become an integral part of getting things accomplished. Projects definitely take longer when little people are involved but what better way to spend time with our children and to create a learning environment?

So, at our house, whatever the project, the kids were involved, from their opinions of how they would like to see the end result and through each workable stage. We ripped the summer kitchen off the back of the house to build a sun room, tore the wall out from between

the kitchen and dining room to make one big room, put new drywall up and new flooring down, gutted and renewed the bathroom, painted, wallpapered, built a dock on the river and a deck off the sun room, constructed picnic tables, laid interlocking stone around the deck and undertook several other landscaping projects. If the kids were willing participants, they were included at the level of their abilities.

Home Business Helpers

With Ed's business located in our house and his sister being the office receptionist, the kids often spent time in the clinic during office hours, just to visit with their aunt. It didn't take long before Diane gave them little jobs like putting files back on the shelf in alphabetical order and counting the cash for the weekly deposit. While our kids were young, they had more contact with adults than with children their own age and adapted to a more mature level of interaction with the people around them. I am positive that time spent in the clinic as young people helped cultivate those social skills.

So, during those early years as the kids were growing up, we spent our days working on the house, reading together as a group for hours on end and running a public business from our home. Once and often twice per week, the kids and I would go to the city to make the business bank deposit, do personal banking and shop for groceries. It didn't take long for them to figure out that as long as we put a deposit into the bank a little money would come back to buy the good food, clothing and things they liked to have.

Learning on the Road

Until 1996, that was the rhythm of our lives. That year, an opportunity surfaced that gave Ed and me a chance to live out our dream of traveling with our children. Ed sold the practice; we sold most of our personal belongings and rented out the house. We packed the eight of us into our van with a minimal amount of necessities and, over a little more than three years, drove to the bottom of South America and back.

Life learning.... Hmmm. New languages, new cultures, experiencing geography, map reading, investigating historical sites, budgeting, currency exchange – the list of learning opportunities is endless. But most of all, we learned to get along with each other.

Part of our travel opportunity was the possibility of Ed working in Chile. We arrived six months after our Canadian departure and cir-

cumstances worked in favor of turning our Chilean visit into almost two years. During that time, Ed set up four chiropractic clinics and had other North American chiropractors join in on his venture. It was the second summer in Chile when the receptionists to the clinics were taking summer vacations that Tanya, at fourteen years old, filled an "adult" job. It involved receiving and acknowledging people by name, having their files ready to go with them, being courteous, keeping files in order, answering the telephone, booking appointments, collecting payments and balancing at the end of the day. (There were only two occasions on which she didn't balance during that six-week period.) This was servicing sixty to eighty people per day and, to add to the challenge, she did it in Spanish, a language she could barely speak a year earlier. If Tanya hadn't had all those earlier life learning experiences, she wouldn't have been capable of doing that job. One might ask why a young person would even want to do such a thing but Tanya enjoys being busy and likes interacting with people. She found a purpose and direction to put her energy into a meaningful contribution to others with a financial reward for herself during weeks when she had little else to do. On completion, she had such a positive sense of accomplishment for herself and felt like a truly worthy person. I wish every young teen had the opportunity to have that good feeling about themselves.

We returned to Canada in March of 2000. Ed purchased his clinic back; we picked up life right where we left off and continued our home-based education lifestyle. Our house was in need of plenty of maintenance on our return and our work crew went at it with enthusiasm after having lived in tents for a year. The third floor attic was turned into two more bedrooms to accommodate our growing family. Ben wanted a room of his own, so he did most of the planning. But once he got started, the rest of us joined in.

So the question of whether this unconventional lifestyle prepares kids for the "real world" is not really a question to me at all. Our children have always been a part of the real world and of the workforce when they chose that route for themselves. And the next question would be: What about post secondary education? From watching a generation of young people raised in this manner, it has been confirmed in my mind that when a child or teen is given the opportunity to discover the world and we adults help facilitate their interests, they will find somewhere they want to put their energy. If they discover they want to become a member of a particular profession that requires

credentials, they will do what they have to do to get where they want to go.

Designing Their Own Way

For instance, Tanya educated herself in ways that interested her. At sixteen, she started to work as one of Ed's chiropractic assistants and managed the office up until September 2006. With ski racing being one of her favorite activities, she obtained her Level II ski coaching certification and coached during the winters for the Vorlage Racing Club in Wakefield. To expand her social life, she worked as a server at the nearby Earle House Restaurant as well. On turning eighteen, she began work on her Fashion Design Certificate through Algonquin College in nearby Ottawa and took courses out of interest at the University of Ottawa until she was accepted into the Theater Design Program at Concordia University in Montreal. She has been attending school there full-time since but spends most of her free time back home in Wakefield earning income to get through university without student loans.

Ben went to high school for one day after our return from South America and decided he preferred designing his own education. He started working at the Earle House Restaurant as soon as they would let him. He likes having cash in his pockets. One winter in Whistler, B.C. was enough for him to decide that he wanted more out of life than working for someone else and riding slopes. On his return in the spring, he again worked at the restaurant until doing odd jobs turned into full-time work. He started at the University of Ottawa that September with the ambition of becoming a chiropractor like his father. It took three semesters for him to figure out that he was going to be broke for a long time only to work in a job that depended on him to be there to earn income. He doesn't like being without money and has been learning business strategies to build passive income with the aim of becoming financially independent. He has been self-employed in his own odd-job business and provides work to friends and his brother when he has more than he can manage.

Tanya and Ben were the trail blazers for Dayna, Karina, Jake and Whitney. Whatever project the older kids were doing, the others were usually included. This then extended to summer employment at the restaurant as well. All but Jake worked there to earn spending money and be part of the community. Jake preferred babysitting.

By the time Dayna reached high school age, her homeschooled peers had chosen to attend school. Every teenager needs a social life

and she decided to try school the year she was at a grade ten age level. She entered grade ten and proved to me that when a kid goes to school for her own reasons, she does just fine. Dayna is an avid skier with a passion for racing. To help fund her equipment and travel costs, she worked at the restaurant during the summer tourist season and in the clinic for her father. She obtained her Level I ski coaching certification and works part-time coaching in Vorlage's Nancy Greene program for ski racers. She is now at college in a commerce program and has just applied to three universities to study international business management. She has her social life, is doing things she loves to do and is gaining an education at a pace that allows for living a life at the same time.

Karina started babysitting for the people who ran the restaurant at thirteen years of age and, when tourist season got busier, ended up working in the kitchen like her older siblings. It was a job that padded her bank account but she did it mostly because people valued her contribution and the job increased the circle of friends she spent time with. It was her decision to follow Dayna's footsteps in attending high school and the Commerce Program at college because her ambition is heading towards university and Business Law.

In August of 2005, Tanya and Ben were figuring out their fall semester course load at university, Dayna decided to work on her advanced math credit and Karina was tossing around the idea of high school. Jake was thirteen at the time. There was plenty of talk of institutional education and he must have been feeling some pressure. He asked, "Mom, do I ever have to go to school?" My reply was simply, "That all depends on what you want to do with your life, Jake. Do you have any idea of how you want to support yourself and earn a living when you are older?" He was quick to answer. "I just want to have a business of my own." And what kind of education do you need to do that? Of course it depends on the type of business, but just because we don't learn within the confines of an institution doesn't mean we don't gain an education and become competent at what we choose to do with our lives.

And Whitney – she was always included in everything we did. When the restaurant was in desperate need of a dishwasher and Tanya asked her if she wanted to earn some money, she jumped at the opportunity to join the work force and spend more time with her sisters. She, too, is an avid ski racer but equipment and expenses are costly. She loves the speed and racing is what she likes to do. Better equip-

ment means greater speed and to obtain the skis she wants she contributes to their cost.

Entrepreneurship

During the spring of 2006, we had a contractor lined up to remove the roof of our house and replace it with a new one. Just weeks before we expected work to begin, he called and backed out of the job, saying he was too busy. We needed a new roof and contractors were not to be found at that point in the season. Ben spent most of an afternoon thinking the job through and announced to his dad that he and Jake could do it. That was the year roles switched between parents and kids. All of a sudden Ed and I became the "gofers" and our children were giving the directions. As a family, we constructed a new roof for our house. And all those years I didn't think I had enough patience.... We have a dry and warm roof and it wouldn't have happened that year without our kids.

And that brings us to the year we have just lived through. When the store came up for sale and the kids had plenty of confidence in themselves as a result of so many previous accomplishments together, a bigger project seemed like a natural step. We spent most of last summer as a family giving the store a facelift and making it a more pleasant place to be a customer. It is amazing what a crew of eight people working together on a common project can accomplish in a short period of time. But, then again, we have had plenty of practice and are almost pros at it now.

It is interesting to watch how these young business owners have taken charge, doing the bookkeeping, placing and receiving orders, stocking shelves, working with customers, cleaning, organizing and discussing the details of the changes and improvements they want to implement and then doing it. We did have moments of concern just because we were – are – learning how to run a retail business through trial and error. But as much as the kids needed our help in the beginning, they are now running the store with very little input from us. They have doubled the income from when we took possession, increased the value of the property and the business, created employment for themselves and others and started an investment to build a financial portfolio for their futures.

A year ago, the prospect of what was about to unfold was daunting, but what a year of learning! And if that group of kids had attended the mainstream school system throughout their lives, I wonder where they would be.

"If you don't make mistakes, you aren't really trying."
~ Coleman Hawkins, jazz musician

The House That Heather Built
by Deb Baker

"If you think you can do it, you're right. If you think otherwise, you just need to read some more!"

Many fifteen-year-olds are considering college and thinking about living away from home. When Heather Martin was fifteen, she dreamed of continuing her self-directed education while living in her own home – one she built herself!

You might think home ownership is expensive and construction is a field best left to professionals. But an increasing number of people are becoming owner-builders, learning enough about each aspect of home construction to do most of the work alone. As a life-long unschooler, Heather decided that she could teach herself enough to build a small home, learning as she went. "The inspiration was to have my very own house," she says.

As she worked on youth conservation corps crews, Heather read everything she could find about building. She cites the library and the Internet as her key resources. Her dad, who is a carpenter, helped with advice and technical terminology. After saving money for about two years through Tangible Assets, an individual development account savings program that helps low-income Vermont residents, Heather was ready to begin.

Finding a building site was the easiest part for Heather, since she lives on Peace and Carrots, her family's organic farm on ten acres in Vermont. Her mom was planning to put up a shack and had already obtained the permit. "I thought it would be a nice place, so I took it over!" Heather says. After choosing a plan at the website www.countryplans.com, Heather ordered materials from her local lumberyard and got to work. Her house uses a post and pier foundation, which she dug herself.

Work on the house began in the summer of 2001. Although Heather took time off to work and travel, by the spring of 2002, she had the entire shell of the house complete, as well as the wiring for future electricity. The house is twenty-four feet by fourteen feet and has

a sleeping loft as well as the main floor. She installed eight windows and a door, and plans to build a greenhouse and eventually a deck, porch, darkroom and tool shed. She doesn't have the house plumbed yet, but plans to do that eventually. So far, she uses candles for light and heats her house with a woodstove she got from a neighbor.

Using items left over or recycled from other homes is one way owner-builders keep costs down. In addition to the woodstove, Heather got a stovepipe, sink, refrigerator, stove, window, door and ladder, all for free. She also bought six used windows for thirty dollars. As she learned various carpentry skills, she was able to earn more money and now earns about eighteen dollars an hour working on other people's houses, which will enable her to continue working on her own.

Heather is proud that she did nearly all of the work alone. She recently co-taught a session on framing at the Women Can Do conference, an annual event which encourages women to consider trades once thought of as men's work. When I asked her how life learning helped prepare her for building a house, she told me it is such a part of her life that it was hard to say. But she cites "being raised in the environment of if you want it, do it" as her source of a positive attitude toward learning and life. "Anything can be done if you want it badly enough," she declares.

Heather suggests that other teens interested in building a house think about starting with a small project, especially if they have no prior building experience, and that they seek out a carpenter for advice and information. She says, "If you think you can do it, you're right. If you think otherwise, you just need to read some more!" And when asked what part of house building was the most fun, Heather answers, "Not too many people build their own houses. It's fun. People look at you in awe. You look at yourself in awe!"

What's next for an eighteen-year-old who has built herself a house? Heather plans to hike the Appalachian Trail and hopes to someday build a boat and sail around the world. She has the confidence to pursue her dreams, as well as the ability to teach herself whatever she sets her mind to. Best of all, she has her own house to come home to when she is done exploring the world!

Teachable Moments
by Suzanne Malakoff

"Learning and discovery are organic processes that happen best when we are in the thick of it with our kids, giving them space to grow but not standing apart from them trying to plan their lives."

I experienced a small epiphany one morning last spring as I sunned myself on the stump of an old cedar tree while my children waded in mud puddles up to their knees. The mud was oozy and sticky at the bottom of the puddle; they decided to make it oozier and deeper and began adding handfuls of dirt from the track the puddles lay in. Finding that their hands weren't the most efficient tools, they switched to curled pieces of bark to transport more dirt at one time. They managed to increase the mud to knee level, then added grass and more dirt and mixed it all in with their feet and rubbed mud all over their arms.

Teaching opportunities came to mind as I watched them – cob building, adobe bricks, the bricks used to build the pyramids. I thought about looking at how different cultures used the natural materials around them to make tools as my children were now doing with the curved bark. I ran down a checklist of animals that use mud to keep cool and to keep the flies off. We could check out library books, find videos on mud-loving animals and the building of adobe villages, and maybe even visit a local archaeological dig. I was sure I was looking at a "teachable moment" and should act on it. After all, not long before this sunny, muddy spring day, I had gone after the local schools in a letter to editor, accusing the education system of letting teachable moments go by in favor of preparing for standardized tests.

We had had an incredible "teachable moment" when the Washington volcano Mt. St. Helens began acting up again – rebuilding her dome and verging on a fresh eruption. My children were fascinated, as was my husband who comes from the sea-level topography of the Netherlands. I dragged out my memories, my newspaper clippings, a little bottle of ash that I scraped off the hood of my truck after the first eruption in 1980 and a picture of me at around the age of five sitting in

a meadow in the shadow of St. Helens in her former, snow-capped glory.

We followed the stories in the newspaper and made good use of the library to learn more about geology and natural phenomena and time. Given the thousands of years of dormancy by all the peaks in the Cascade Range, we were amazed (and yes, a little frightened) to see our corner of the world reshape itself so dramatically in our lifetime.

Our local newspaper asked area teachers if they were making use of this "teachable moment" in their classrooms. Every educator interviewed responded in the negative, saying that they were too busy preparing for our state's mandatory assessment of learning test. Any creative and energetic teacher must feel as strangled by standardized testing as their students do. And they must feel as cramped by that process as their students feel by being in a classroom all day – unlike my children who spend many days in the woods across the street from our house getting dirty. In my letter to the editor, I called this missed opportunity "a crime."

Now, I wondered, as I sunned myself on that cedar stump, had I been guilty of similar crimes because I hadn't gone as far as I could go when one of my kids asked a question or showed an interest in something or when a current event captured their attention and imagination? Did I let busy schedules and chores get in the way of the education of my children? Am I a good enough listener and judge of my children to know when an interest is fleeting or when more information is needed and wanted?

The first time I heard about teachable moments, I was inspired and my course for educating my children was set, I believed. When my kids were approaching school age, I attended a homeschooling conference and my first workshop of the day was "Homeschooling 101." The woman who taught the class had started out with her children in desks in a room in the basement, following boxed curriculum. She soon gave that up, as the effort exhausted her and reduced her children to tears, and began to pay more attention to her children's individual learning styles and to develop a faith in their ability to learn without the aid of a prescribed program. She told us a story of being out with another homeschooling mom and her kids, who when asked by one of her children to identify something she had found in a pond said, "It's a polliwog, but don't worry about that right now, we're going to study pond life next month."

"People," said our teacher with the fervor of a preacher, "this

was a teachable moment. That mother should have embraced that moment with her child and taken her down a path of learning." We all nodded and whispered amen. That mother should have answered that child's question, should have showed her pictures with more information in a book when they got home, maybe found a video or an appropriate field trip to go on, at the very least headed for a library ASAP. That child's mind was ripe for information.

Outside the workshop, in the main hall, there were vendors with tables loaded down with resources for aiding teachable moments. I could be ready for anything. But standing among all the sellers of educational goods, I became bewildered. How could I possibly be ready for every question? What would be basic to teaching and could I realistically be prepared for the future interests of my children? My confusion and my pocketbook stopped me from buying anything but a wall map of the world. It has proved to be a good investment; we use it all of the time. Our home reference library consists largely of maps, the dictionary and Nature field guides.

The ninety-acre wood across from our house where I was sunning myself has provided us with a multitude of teachable moments. We and many of our neighbors use the remnant of a road and deer tracks here and there to go for walks and ride bicycles and horses. We pick blackberries and salal berries and gather boughs for winter decorations.

But it's a planted forest and the owners decided it was time to harvest the cedars toward the back of the woods. We watched heavy machinery go in and trucks come out with the most amazing logs. We were sad when we passed the clearings and stumps where the great trees, some bordering on ninety years old, had stood. One of my kids brought home stacks of books on earth-ripping heavy machinery, which he found fascinating.

The ruts left by the tires of the big trucks became mud holes and deep puddles that froze in the winter and were sometimes frozen enough to slide around on. In the spring, wild blackberry vines covered the stumps; the road, widened by the trucks, became narrower as the undergrowth responded to new levels of sunlight. By summer, there were flowers where there had been trees. A part of our world was reshaped by the hands of humans and the power of Nature.

Both our state of Washington and neighboring Oregon had been dealing with the question of mandated preservation on private property. It's not an easy issue and there are no easy answers, although my

children couldn't see why someone wouldn't want to preserve a patch of woods or wetland that they were lucky enough to have on their property. We relaxed about our son's interest in heavy machinery. We discussed property rights and stewardship and what we would do if we owned such a forest. We will mourn the woods when they are finally gone. It's inevitable that they will be.

In retrospect, I realized I had never viewed Mt. St. Helen's or the evolution of our woods as teachable moments. While St. Helens was a dramatic happening that sent us to the library, it was an effortless and enriching learning experience. We didn't consciously plan any of the steps we took toward discovering more. The changes to our woods had us in a constant state of observation; we read the newspapers, made use of our field guides, took lots of walks and constantly talked about how what was happening across the street made us feel. We talked around the dinner table and to our neighbors, many whom we met for the first time after the logging trucks showed up.

There on my log, I decided that we have moments of learning that may or many not require a mountain of resources or trips to anywhere but our front yard or into the woods to see what had changed due to our actions or simply the seasons. Seems to me that the kids I know who are learning at home and in their communities are in a constant state of discovery, some moments more intense than others.

So people, what appear to be teachable moments will get away from you because life is full of obligations that sometimes get in the way of spontaneity and your children may lose interest in something by the time you get around to gathering all of the resources or coordinating the field trips. Really, learning and discovery are organic processes that happen best when we are in the thick of it with our kids, giving them space to grow but not standing apart from them trying to plan their lives.

When a child asks a question, should we answer then and there? Yes, to the best of our ability. Should we gather all available resources to place in front of them like a smorgasbord? Well, sure, if that's what your kid wants, if she's not satisfied with as much as you know. Really, if your child wants to know more, he will tell you... maybe not directly and in no uncertain terms, so you have to listen and watch for signs. And try to make time when a child specifically requests a trip to the library or the local archaeological dig or even that construction site full of earth-ripping, heavy machinery. Even if you do raid the library and coordinate field trips, interest may wane or

interests might change or you may discover your child isn't quite ready for more. Best to depend on libraries rather than curriculum fairs!

Sometimes, often, kids want an answer to an immediate question – maybe two or three answers beyond that – and that's all. And if they don't ask questions, why interfere with whatever path they are following or even abandoning? Why not simply follow your child and learn alongside her?

Back on my post on the cedar stump in the ninety-acre wood, I realized I was faced with a relaxed and decidedly rich moment that didn't need to be taught. My kids were playing in the mud. What a wonderful, simple, child-like thing to do. And I was relaxing in the sun with my thoughts. What a wonderful, simple thing for a mom to get to do. We were making all sorts of discoveries just by being there.

Maybe it's best to leave the teachable moments be.

**"When a subject becomes totally obsolete
we make it a required course." ~ Peter Drucker**

The Case Against Teaching
by Naomi Aldort

"Although I have Teacheria, I do not teach my children; I am clear that my drive to teach has nothing to do with their needs or preferences. Why should I interrupt their magical tour of this planet with my chatter?"

Q: I cannot get my children, thirteen, ten and seven, into anything of value. I try to create "life learning" situations but they are not interested. We offer Nature activities and celebrations, but they only want to play. Not much draws them into what I offer. They don't even want to know names of trees, lakes or mountains as we go by them. What am I missing and how will they learn?

A: A few years ago, a mother told me about an experience her children had at their friend's house. When she picked them up, her daughter said, "David was making a lesson out of dinner. That was so stupid." "Yes," added the boy, "and I hid under the table so he wouldn't see me laugh." "What did he talk about?" asked the mother. "I don't know, something about how rice grows in China," the girl started and the boy took over, "He just needed to teach, so we waited until he was done and then we could eat."

I thought the boy was very generous and insightful, and he had found a way to keep himself from spoiling David's fun. I often call this desire to teach, with which most of us are inflicted, "teacheria." Teacheria is the drive to give lessons; it is not curable, but the symptoms can be managed or they can be satisfied in an educational setting.

Teacheria is contagious but washing hands and vitamin C don't help. Both my parents had the "disease." I believe it is easily transmitted by modeling. "Let me tell you how it works," my father used to say and I had to listen quietly for his full explanation. Although I have teacheria, I do not teach my children; I am clear that my drive to teach has nothing to do with their needs or preferences. Why should I interrupt their magical tour of this planet with my chatter? If I ever forget and start explaining something, my children set me straight promptly

and without ceremony. I delight in their clarity and assertiveness.

Teacheria can be satisfied through harmless outlets. To use my teacheria productively, I offer it in writing and speaking to those who freely choose to listen. There is nothing wrong with loving to teach. Find your audience and enjoy. In this way, not only you will get your need to teach met, but your listeners will actually benefit from what you have to offer. If you don't have teaching opportunities, you can write your thoughts and share in a blog or in an online forum. At the same time, to stop yourself from intruding on your children, question the validity of your need to teach them.

So I do understand your desire to teach, but as you notice, the children don't want it, which is wonderful. They are clear about what is valuable to them. Life learning is not something we orchestrate. The confusion occurs in our minds as parents when we believe concepts that are not true. Here are some of the deceptions the mind creates in order to keep you teaching:

1) My child is interested...she asked me questions:

Does a curious question mean that a child wants a whole lesson? Absolutely not. So train yourself to answer only the question asked. "Why does it hail instead of rain?" The answer can be, "The raindrops freeze in the cold air." If the child wants to know more, he will ask.

If you want to let a child know that more is available, you can say, "I have a book about it. Feel free to ask me if you have more questions," or " We can search online if you want." Most of the time, when you offer more information without imposing it, a child who feels safe around you will refuse it.

Children's interests are rarely their passions and they only want the minimal answer. When it is a child's passion, you will know about it as clearly as you know when she wants a candy. Even if a child wants to look in the book or listen to more information, keep responding only to his level of interest. Be prompted by the child and resist the temptation to shower him with your knowledge or even wisdom.

2) My child won't learn if I don't teach her:

The deception of this thought is loud and clear. In fact, the opposite makes more sense: It is more likely that she will not learn as much when I waste her time with my imposed lessons, that she will learn best when I don't teach and that I won't learn to honor her ways if I impose my teaching (and if I don't heal from teacheria). She can walk her own authentic path, following her own blueprint and learn to be the author of her learning. Children learn through life and they seek

what they need just on time – when they need it.

3) My child must learn to listen even if it is not interesting:

Why? Should we hurt our children so they learn to deal with pain? Should we disrespect them so they learn to deal with disrespect? I do not see a need to design negative experiences in preparation for such possibilities. Although challenges are a valuable part of life, you need not orchestrate those for your child. Trust and let life be the teacher.

Besides, why should your child have to listen to what is not interesting? I invite you to consider the possibility that, if free to create her life, a child can grow up to create life experiences that don't include listening to unwanted lessons. The other day I was being inattentive to my teenager as he was talking to me. He stopped and said calmly, "You know mom, when I am not interested I just say so. You don't have to listen. Just say so." He was not upset, only asking me to be authentic and honest. Maybe your child is the teacher and it is your time to learn.

4) As homeschooling parents we need to seize the opportunity to teach:

How about turning this thought upside down: As parents we must seize the opportunity to learn from our children – learn authenticity, learn to play, to be happy, to be candid, to connect, to express, to be able to move on from pain to joy, to trust the flow. These qualities will do you and your child much more good than shelves of encyclopedias in her or your head.

5) Knowledge is important:

The value of knowledge seems logical, until we find ourselves at an older age trying to rid ourselves of the endless barrage of limiting information and chatter in our head.

This does not mean that all knowledge is valueless. But what is of value to each child is dictated by her mind and the best time is always when her mind tells her so. Expose, but then follow; don't lead. Children learn what they need and skip what they don't, just like you. It is not your call to decide what is valuable for another human being, and you are free to make opportunities available and to model the joy of life and passion for learning.

6) Knowledge brings happiness:

Does it? Who cares how rice grows if one doesn't know how to be happy? A child only needs the habit of being grateful. In happiness, there is nothing he cannot learn if he wants to. I know people

with Ph.D.s and brains full to the brim who are depressed. People who are at peace with themselves go after knowledge when they need it. When you are at peace with your children's wonderful interest in play, they will have a teacher of joy.

Knowledge can assist an individual in having opportunities to participate in a way that supports her purpose. But then, when she has purpose and joy, she will initiate the acquisition of skill and information. She only needs to know what is available in the process of life itself. Expose, but don't impose.

What do I mean by expose? Simple: Eat rice. That's all the exposure your child needs. The moment you teach about the rice the child loses the initiative of interest and self-reliance. Rice may not be interesting to him. He does not need to know what is neither interesting nor useful to him. Knowledge does not of its own bring happiness, especially when it is not freely acquired. Grow a garden, play music, listen, hike, travel, sing, read, connect, love and laugh. Be the teacher of joy, generosity and gratitude by living these qualities.

The river gives without imposing. It doesn't jump out of its route to water a tree. The trees choose to grow close to the water. The river is just there. Be there...a stream of love.

Becoming Self-Directed Teachers

by Natalie Zur Nedden

"How do I move teacher-candidates' primary interest – wanting to graduate with a 'bag of tricks' on how to teach/manage kids – to helping teachers-to-be foster democratic, meaningful, respectful learning environments?"

As an advocate of non-formal, self-directed learning, it was inconceivable for me to imagine that one day I would be teaching teacher-candidates how to teach in a formal setting – until the fateful day I was offered such a position! After long discussions with people close to me, I accepted the job. I viewed it as an opportunity to explore my philosophy of education in a different setting – a higher education setting, in fact, in a Bachelor of Education laptop program. I accepted a job teaching teachers how to teach with one goal in mind: teaching from the margins – teaching teachers-to-be by breaking all the conventional norms of a conservative teacher-education program. Then I found out what I had to teach, which was the ins and outs of lesson planning: expectations, pre-assessment, content, strategies, and assessments; assessment and evaluations; cooperative learning, etc.

I had not asked myself any questions save one: Would I be able to do this job while maintaining my integrity? I had not pondered the difficulties I might encounter. I walked into this new job armed with my short but varied experiences of teaching in formal settings coupled with an opinionated but informed view of education, all of which I shared with my students on the first day we met. Little did I know that this would be one of the most challenging jobs of my life!

As I handed out my course outline when the students and I first met, I pointed out to them that I included myself as a learner, introducing the concept of life learning. I said that we would learn the "conventional" subjects of learning how to teach but that these rudimentary skills would be criticized and challenged. I pointed out that out of nine hundred students, the one hundred and eighty-five of them were not going to be following the same schedule as the rest. They would not have a final exam, nor were they required to do the same

assignments as everyone else. The students did not quite know what to make of this, except that, as time passed, not following what the rest were doing became a significant cause for concern rather than a cause to celebrate. Control, resistance, power, conformity, anger and fear are some words to describe what I faced in the classroom and within myself. Doing things differently created a considerable amount of resistance from the teacher-candidates. With the exception of a few students, they were not interested in challenging their assumptions of education.

I started my job by creating a democratic learning environment where the teacher-candidates could experience their agency and assume self-directed learning principles. This meant that I was not going to tell them what they could and could not do. However, I found myself doing just that!

In a laptop program, everyone's computer is open at all times during class, ready for surfing the Internet. Rather than engaging in discussions or doing whatever the required task was, my students manifested their resistance by MSNing. They told me they were not interested. They told me they wanted more structure – to prevent them from being "off task."

Dismayed, I noticed a power struggle emerging between us: I wanted them to conform to my ways while they wanted me to conform to their ways. They wanted me to impose structure, to lecture, to decide and implement the entire curriculum. "What do you mean you want us to decide what's important for us to learn?" some students asked me frustratedly. Most were not interested in taking responsibility for their learning. I wanted them to explore how their assumptions might inform their practice and philosophy of education. But as a result of our resistance to each other, I was becoming authoritarian and prescriptive.

I found myself more than once demanding they close their computers. I was foregoing my educational philosophy in both content and delivery. They were exercising their control and resistance by completely disengaging and I was exercising my control and resistance by telling them to close their computers. I wanted to expose them to a different view of education, to a different view of children. Instead, they wanted more tricks on how to control kids. I tried to see their choices as opportunities to explore the philosophy that informed their decisions. Not successful. At least that's what I thought.

Day after day, I would go home feeling utterly defeated. I felt

sadness at the situation and anger at myself for not knowing how to approach the matter. I felt confused at what had possessed me to accept this job. I understood that the teacher-candidates were products of their environments – schooled all their lives – but this did not help me cultivate compassion. Rather, it solidified my resentment of formal schooling. Being who I am, I would bring this to their attention to help them understand their own resistance. We all experienced fear. They were (are) fearful of letting go of an ingrained belief system regarding children, for this is how they were viewed and treated as children. By not following the prescribed program curriculum, I was fearful of letting my students down in preparing them to be teachers in the system. To address my fear, I told the teacher-candidates that I was more concerned about letting their future students down.

We had many heated and revealing discussions that proved to be instrumental in helping them unveil their strongly held assumptions. By now I was bubbling with questions – both existential and practical ones: Can I teach for transformative purposes? Can we impose self-directed learning principles on students who have not asked for this? Can the status quo in education be challenged within a teacher-education program? Can we teach about self-directed learning in a prescriptive program? Can I facilitate transformative learning experiences when met with resistance?

These teacher-candidates chose to attend this program, yet most are unable to take, or are uninterested in taking, responsibility for their own learning. They expect learning to come to them in the form of dissemination. And that is how most intend to teach – without realizing it. Consequently, perhaps the biggest question I faced was: In a formal learning environment, where does one draw the line between coercion and guidance? I was unable to do my job without having teacher-candidates question their assumptions and that was not anything they had thought of in becoming a teacher. Therefore, I wondered how do I move teacher-candidates' primary interest – wanting to graduate with a "bag of tricks" on how to teach/manage kids – to helping teachers-to-be foster democratic, meaningful, respectful learning environments? How do I transform teacher-candidates' view of children as needing to be controlled into lovingly treating children as equals and not lesser-than because of their age?

Perhaps each one of us in this situation will reach our own conclusions. After teaching for four months and after having read their reflective journals (in lieu of an end-of-term exam), I reached my

own conclusion. Most students were very honest about their learning process, of how they came to better understand their teacher-identity. Their stories were moving, honest, raw. Many revealed their frustration and annoyance with me. Many expressed having gained an understanding of the role of schooling in our society and, consequently, now have some choices to rely on when they start their teaching careers. Reading their reflective journals, I was reminded of the process many life learning parents experience in relinquishing control in order to let their children take the reins of their own learning. Many parents who have contributed to *Life Learning* express the painful, messy and, at times, joyful experience of learning to unlearn their past experiences. Many teacher-candidates go through a similar process.

So, has it been worth all my headaches to teach against the grain, to challenge the status quo in education? Absolutely. Do I have any regrets? Nope. Do I believe that teaching from the margins in a conservative, prescriptive program can affect change? Yep. Can this be achieved without coercing students? I do not know. Would I do this again next year? Hmm, most likely with some changes in the program.

The Labyrinth of Life Learning
by Dayna Martin

"Does one ever really get to the center, the destination, of her own personal journey when it comes to life learning? Or is it more about that long peaceful walk, the journey, and not the destination at all?"

We have been radical unschooling our children since birth. It has been an enlightening, healing and amazing journey to get to where we are at today. It has taken us many years to fully understand the philosophy of non-coercive, respectful, peaceful parenting. Just when I think we have reached our destination in how we wish to parent, I learn that we have a long way to go before total enlightenment, peace and ease with how we live our lives.

The other day, I wanted to take my children somewhere special for a walk. I am forever searching for new experiences and adventures for our family, so I had the perfect place for us to visit. We went to a labyrinth. I had never walked a labyrinth before and I was awestruck at how sacred a place it seemed to be. We walked up over a grassy hill to see this amazing creation where someone had carefully laid down hundreds of stones to create an incredible walking path. The stones had been there for a really long time because moss had grown up all around them. It was just breathtaking. I knew we were somewhere very special.

A labyrinth is similar to a maze, but there is only one way through it. When you get to the center, and walk back out again, you have reached your destination. Devin, Dakota, Ivy and I started following the stone-edged path leading in a circle. I had explained to them that I was going to contemplate while walking around it, as a note at the entrance had suggested. I never told them any certain way they had to "be" while walking it themselves, but as I went on, they followed closely behind me in total silence. I wonder now what they were contemplating. I tried to be totally present so I could really feel what emotions or feelings came up during this walk.

I really had such clarity in thought. I had known in theory what a labyrinth was used for but I did not understand on a metaphysical

level until I actually walked one. Just as I would think I was reaching the center of the labyrinth, it swept me around again even further away from the center than I thought I was. It was not frustrating to me; I was actually pleasantly surprised every time I thought I was coming to the center only to be swept around again. I enjoyed being together so much on this journey with my children.

During our last loop around, I could see the center was near. I felt a warm wave flow through my body as a realization bubbled to the surface of my thoughts. With fresh clarity, I understood our life learning journey in a whole new way. Our journey has been much like this labyrinth! Just as I think I am coming to a greater understanding and getting to the destination, the place I strive to be, I am pleasantly swept further around as I come to even a deeper level of understanding of this incredible life with my children.

As we walked back around in the other direction, I was left to contemplate my journey. Every time I walk my own personal labyrinth, I learn to let go of a little bit more, or I understand my children's perspective a bit more, or I heal from my difficult childhood a bit more. Every time around I feel closer to my destination.

But does this labyrinth ever end? Does one ever really get to the center, the destination, of her own personal journey when it comes to life learning? Or is it more about that long peaceful walk, the journey, and not the destination at all? I may never know, but I find great comfort in trusting that, as I navigate toward my own center of understanding, it will be peaceful and joyous because we will be walking hand-in-hand through our own, unique life learning labyrinth together.

"Education is an admirable thing,
but it is well to remember from time to time that
nothing that is worth knowing can be taught." ~ Oscar Wilde

"Education is not the filling of a pail,
but the lighting of a fire." ~ William Butler Yeats

Contributors

Naomi Aldort is the author of *Raising Our Children, Raising Ourselves*. Her advice columns are published in progressive parenting magazines worldwide. Aldort offers phone guidance and counseling internationally regarding all ages – babies through teens – about attachment parenting, natural learning, and peaceful and powerful parent-child relationships. She is the mother of three.

Deb Baker learns alongside her husband and children in Concord, New Hampshire. Her poems and essays have appeared in journals and anthologies in Japan, Europe and North America. She sings in Songweavers, an a cappella women's chorus, volunteers with a refugee resettlement program and blogs about her family's reading.

Gaye Chicoine is a photographer by trade, mom to six life-learning young adults and partner to husband Ed. She has authored two books, loves to travel and, after 18 years of unschooling, still enjoys helping her children with their life directions and family business when it is requested of her.

Amy Childs mentors homeschooling teens and their families through workshops, conference calls and personal support. She is also a "Happiness Consultant," helping clients uncover their true selves and create lives that are authentic and fun. She lives in Philadelphia with her three self-directed young people who remind her how precious and amazing human beings truly are.

Robyn Coburn has been a costume, scenic and lighting designer in her native Australia and the U.S. She was a freelance production designer and set decorator of independent films based in LA before repurposing her life as a work-at-home unschooling mom. She is currently returning to her roots as a textile artisan.

Gea D'Marea Bassett lives in Seattle, Washington with her partner Doug and their unschooled son Zizi. She was unschooled from birth until college and just completed an MA in Education from Goddard College, with a thesis on contemporary homeschoolers in the Seattle area. Her current projects include pursuing a doctorate, cooking and gardening.

Beatrice Ekwa Ekoko lives, works and hikes in Hamilton, Ontario. For seven years, she and her family produced *Radio Free School*: a show by for and about home learners, which is currently taking an extended hiatus. She unschools one daughter and is waiting

for the other two to quit experimenting with school and return to home-based learning.

Ruthe Friedner Matilsky is mom to five life learners. She and her husband Terry subscribed to John Holt's idea that if you provide your children with a stimulating environment they'll learn what they need to know, but just to make sure, they gave away their television. Ruthe now pursues her own life learning as she writes, plays guitar, gardens, does yoga and finds new ways to build community.

Dr. Jan Fortune-Wood is a writer and educational adviser who home educated her four children in the U.K. She has written three novels, two poetry collections and several books on alternative education and parenting, including *Winning Parent, Winning Child*, available from Cinnamon Press.

Rachel Gathercole is the mother of three delightful, delight-driven children and the author of the groundbreaking book *The Well-Adjusted Child: The Social Benefits of Homeschooling*. She is also the author of numerous articles and a popular conference speaker on homeschooling, unschooling and parenting.

Erica K. Gotow was unschooled through eighth grade then attended Blacksburg High School for three years prior to restructuring her education to create more time for community service and extracurricular activities. She is currently attending the College of William & Mary.

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Pam Laricchia and her family live and learn joyfully in Ontario. She loves seeing her kids living with such intention. Choosing the best path for themselves from the rich palate of life gives them so many opportunities to learn about themselves: "It's not always easy, but it is incredible."

Marty Layne, a Victoria, British Columbia-based veteran homeschooling/unschooling mom, experienced life-coach, speaker, writer and published author (*Learning At Home: A Mother's Guide To Homeschooling*, also published in Indonesia), helps parents create positive learning environments. Favorite quote: "Be yourself – you

can't be anybody else!" from *Tubby the Tuba*.

Ann Lloyd is an unschooling veteran and the author of two books: *Just 'Til I Finish This Chapter* and *Tips and Tricks for Homeschooling Survival*. She is currently a doctoral student in Housing/Family Studies at VA Tech. Her work has been published in a number of homeschooling magazines.

Suzanne Malakoff is the mother of three incredible kids who have always learned at home and in their community. She has published several articles and essays on a variety of topics and is working on pieces of fiction. She and her family enjoy a busy but simple life in the Pacific Northwest.

Dayna Martin lives in the White Mountains of New Hampshire with her husband and four children. Her family has always unschooled and strives to live life in joy and abundance together everyday. She is a writer and passionate public speaker advocating for natural birth, attachment parenting and unschooling.

Sarabeth Matilsky is forever indebted to her parents for giving her a free childhood. Twenty-nine years of adventures have taken her many places, including on a cross-country bike ride where she met her true love Jeff. They live in a cohousing community in upstate New York with their two boys Ben and Jem, who have unschooled since birth.

Dr. Roland Meighan is an acknowledged "educational heretic" who feels that mass compulsory schooling is obsolete, counterproductive, abuses human rights and should be phased out. He is author of over ten books, Director of Educational Heretics Press, Director/Trustee of the Centre for Personalised Education, and formerly Special Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham, UK.

Wendy Priesnitz was the founding editor of *Life Learning* magazine. She and her husband Rolf unschooled their two daughters, beginning in the early 1970s, when she established the homeschooling/unschooling movement in Canada. Two of her ten books are unschooling bestsellers. She currently owns and edits *Natural Life* magazine.

Carlo Ricci teaches in the faculty of education's graduate program at Nipissing University, where he tries to incorporate the spirit of unschooling, democratic and learner-centered principles in all of his classes. He edits the online *Journal of Unschooling and Alterna-*

tive Learning (JUAL). He has two young daughters whom he hopes will decide to unschool.

Karen Ridd is an activist, educator, retired clown and delighted unschooling mother. Her children Daniel and Ben are responsible for the biggest growth curve in her life – and she appreciates that! Karen lives with her partner Gord and their boys in a fledgling cohousing community in the bush east of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Renata Rooney and her family continue to enjoy their always evolving eclectic homeschooling lifestyle. Every day is different and quite wonderfully ordinary. Their thanks go to those who walked on this path before them, those who chose to share about their life learning journeys, and those who have offered support and companionship.

Nathanael Schildbach lives and learns in western Massachusetts with his wife, three sons, dog, cat, some racing pigeons and many ducks. His column "The Therapy Fund" began in *Life Learning* magazine and can now be read in *Natural Life.*

Amy Spang is a homeschooling mother of three who resides and works on a small family farm in New York. She is a certified teacher who decided to homeschool her children after working in the public schools for a number of years and reforming her personal views on education.

Eva Swidler lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with her husband and eight-year-old daughter, who has never been to school. She juggles spending time with her family, being part of an anarchist bookstore collective, seeking out community and teaching history at assorted places, including Goddard College, a low-residency, self-directed college in Vermont.

Lael Whitehead is a writer and musician who lives with her husband, architect Richard Iredale, in the Gulf Islands of British Columbia. Lael and Richard raised their three daughters without any sort of formal schooling. The girls have grown into curious, creative and compassionate young adults who probe deeply and enjoy heartily the wonder of being alive.

Jeanne Yardley experienced a quarter century of formal education but attributes her most important learning to seven years of unschooling with her son and daughter in their converted schoolhouse near Cambridge, Ontario. When not worrying about their

choice to go to high school, she continues part-time writing, editing and proofreading.

Natalie Zur Nedden Natalie Zur Nedden left her home in Montréal, Québec and quit school at the age of 13. She has been learning ever since, both through life experiences, including world travel, and university. In 2008 she completed her Ph.D.; she wrote the life history of *Life Learning's* editor Wendy Priesnitz.

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"Life is what happens to you
when you're busy making other plans." ~ John Lennon

About This Book

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About the Editor

Wendy Priesnitz is a book author, award winning journalist, editor and mother of two adult daughters. She is the owner of Life Media, which she co-founded with her husband Rolf in 1976 as The Alternate Press to publish books and *Natural Life* magazine.

Wendy is an agent of change who, when she was barely out of her teens, recognized the need for rethinking how we work, play and educate ourselves in order to restore the planet's social and ecological balance. For the last forty years, her mission has been to help people understand the interconnections within the web of life on Earth and to encourage them to challenge the assumptions inherent in the often conflicting choices we make in our daily lives.

In her quest to inspire, support and live grassroots change, she has been at the leading edge (and ahead of it, in some cases) of many progressive trends and movements. She is recognized as a pioneer in independent publishing, unschooling, environmentally sustainable business practices, home-based and women-owned business, and green politics. Her work is rooted in her experience of motherhood, which taught her about the emotional, social, cultural, economic, educational and environmental responsibilities involved with bringing a child into this world.

Trained as a school teacher in 1969, Wendy quickly rejected the factory model of processing children and became an early proponent of experience-based, self-directed learning – for her own children and for others. She founded The Canadian Alliance of Home Schoolers in 1979 as a national support and advocacy organization that kick-started the homeschooling movement in Canada, cooperating with John Holt as he breathed life into a parallel movement in America. In 1987, Wendy wrote *School Free – The Homeschooling Handbook*, which is now in its fifth edition and has become a best selling classic around the world.

Her more recent book on the subject, *Challenging Assumptions in Education* (2000), is a controversial look at what's wrong with public education and at the need to deschool society in order to liberate children and to create a generation of people who can solve the world's problems. It is on the reading list for college education programs internationally and was updated and reissued in 2008.

In 2002, as a way of encouraging and supporting families to trust their children to learn without being taught, she founded *Life*

Learning magazine. She edited the magazine until 2008, when it was reintegrated back into *Natural Life* magazine.

Under her co-leadership, *Natural Life* continues to help its readers to integrate life learning and natural parenting, green living, sustainable housing, socially and environmentally responsible self-employment, organic gardening and natural healing into an ecologically responsible lifestyle. That work led to Wendy being recruited to a successful run at the leadership of the Green Party of Canada in 1996.

Her work in politics and journalism has given Wendy an understanding of the environmental and social dangers inherent in the globalized corporate mindset and of the transformative power of local small business. In the mid 1980s, she began to help life learning families create home-based businesses – as she and Rolf had done a decade earlier in order to unschool their own daughters. In order to increase the legitimacy for home business, she founded The Home Business Network, a source of advocacy, information and support for home-based businesses. Her book *Bringing it Home – A Home Business Start-Up Guide for You and Your Family* was published in 1996 and is still helping people balance work and family life.

One of the hallmarks of Wendy's life and work is her belief in cooperation over competition, and in the selfless sharing of information and inspiration. She has mentored many other women, has served on the boards of countless non-profit organizations and seldom misses an opportunity to be generous in giving her time, energy, money, support, advice, enthusiasm and ideas in the name of changing paradigms.

A prolific writer, Wendy is also a poet, with two published books of poetry, and a web blogger. She is currently trying to find time to write her tenth book, a collection of memoir-style essays. Her lifelong passion for social and educational change has recently been documented in a PhD dissertation by Natalie Zur Nedden entitled *Reflections on Homeschooling, Mothering and Social Change: The Life History of Wendy Priesnitz*.

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Editor Wendy Priesnitz was the founding editor of *Life Learning* magazine. She and her husband Rolf unschooled their two daughters, beginning in the early 1970s. She is also the author of *School Free: The Homeschooling Handbook* and *Challenging Assumptions in Education: From Institutionalized Education to a Learning Society*. She edits *Natural Life* magazine, which she and Rolf founded in 1976.

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