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Education Fit for a Democracy
July/August 2005
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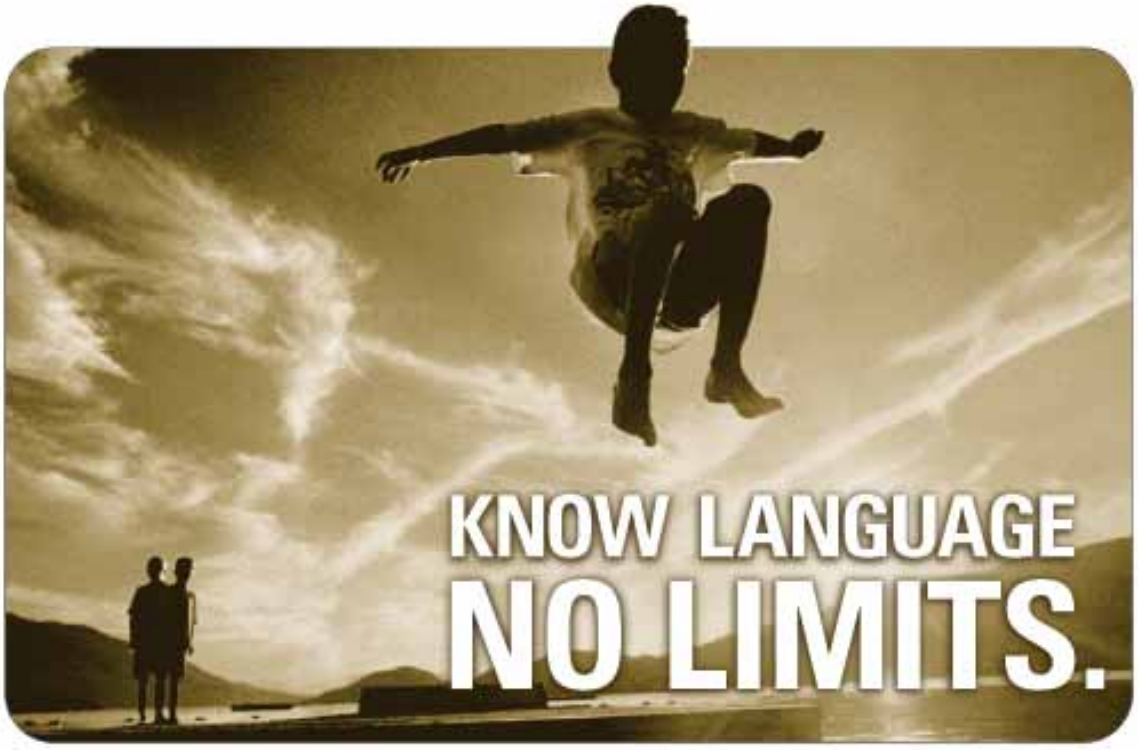
Becoming More Autonomous Parents and Educators



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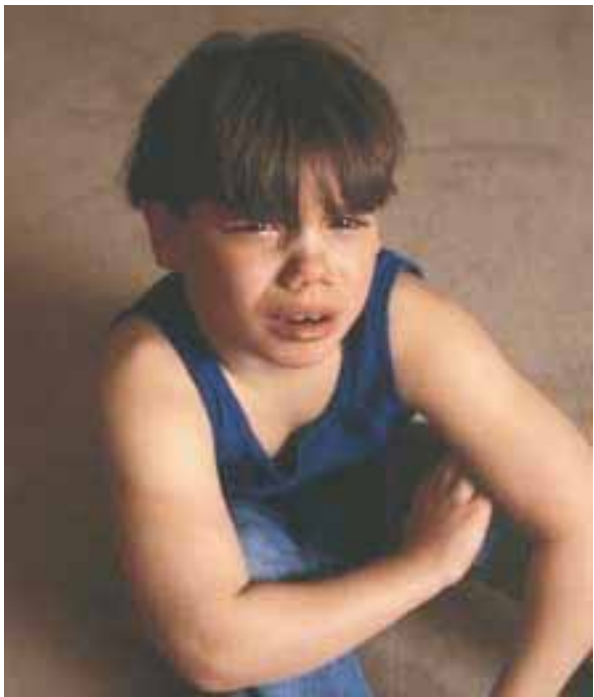

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The Editor's Journal

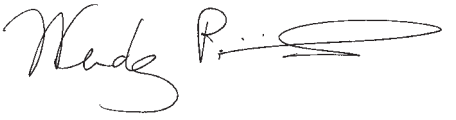
Examing the Roots of Education

Over the 35 or so years that I've been writing and talking about home-based education and self-directed learning, I've often been called "radical", sometimes "too radical". Perhaps the first few times, my late-20s rebel persona didn't mind what was really meant as an epithet. But the criticism quickly wore thin, because the way our daughters were living and learning felt quite natural and normal to me, not at all extremist or fanatical.

Fortunately, my late-20s were also my gardening years. And one day, I realized that the word "radical" has a botanical origin. It comes from the Latin words radix meaning roots. And thus comes the botanical term "radical leaves", which refers to leaves that arise from the root or crown of so many of my favorite plants (and some of my not-so-favorite plants, which we call weeds!). So, for me, being called a radical became a positive thing because it aptly describes me as someone who examines the roots of issues. A radical solution to a problem is one that arises from that examination, addressing what we sometimes call the root cause, rather than the more superficial symptoms.

I suppose that focus on fundamentals is why radical views, opinions, practices or proposed changes sometimes seem extreme. It is also why I prefer to examine how people learn by living, rather than to isolate self-directed learning as just another homeschooling method or style.

Back when I was first called a radical, I had already decided that what was wrong with our education system wouldn't be fixed by tinkering – by adding more subjects, more equipment, more teachers or more funding, or, in fact, by changing the location of where the teaching took place or the content of the curriculum that was used. I realized then, and believe it ever more passionately now, that what's needed is the sort of radical examination of the problem – and the radical solutions that life learning families are living every day. Your thoughtful feedback continues to communicate your enthusiasm for participating in this challenging, wide-ranging and, yes, radical discussion about how people of all ages can educate themselves in a way that's fit for the 21st century. Keep in touch and have a great summer!



Read Editor Wendy Priesnitz's online weblog at www.lifemedia.ca/wendy/blog.html

Feature Writers

Beatrice Ekwa Ekoko

Beatrice Ekwa Ekoko is an unschooling mother, visual artist, writer and co-producer of Radio Free School, a weekly radio program by, for and about home-learners. She lives in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada with her husband and three daughters, who are ages six to nine. Her writing has appeared in *The Hamilton Spectator, View Magazine, Home Educator's Family Times, Home Education Magazine* and *Edgycating' Mama.* Her article "Learning Love of the Natural World" was published in the March/April 2004 issue of *Life Learning* and she reviewed Herbert Kohl's book *Should We Burn Babar* for our November/December 2002 issue.

Roland Meighan

Roland Meighan now works as a writer, publisher, broadcaster and consultant. He has been researching home-based education in the UK since 1977 and is owner of Educational Heretics Press, Nottingham, UK. He was Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Birmingham and then Special Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham. He is also an acknowledged "educational heretic". His article "Restructuring Education" appeared in the November/December 2004 edition of *Life Learning* and "Some Educational Superstitions of Our Time" was published in the March/April 2005 issue.

Tammy Takahashi

Tammy Takahashi lives and learns in California with her supportive husband and three children (Cameron age 7, Allison age 4 and Megan age 20 months) who have been life-learning since the day they were born. She volunteers for the Homeschool Association of California as the editor of their magazine, *The California HomeSchooler*. She has also written for several magazines, is active in the California online homeschooling community and teaches yoga and step aerobics. This is her first contribution to *Life Learning.*

Your Feedback

We encourage reader feedback. Write to the address on page 3 or send an email to editor@LifeLearningMagazine.com. We reserve the right to edit letters for clarity, grammar and length; all published letters will be accompanied by the sender's name and city.

Confirming The Purpose

Dear Life Learning;

I am a new subscriber. I would like to order some back issues.

I must tell you, I had given up on subscribing to anything. Too many good intentions became piles of disappointment and guilt. A friend recommended a back issue of your magazine when she learned I was considering homeschooling my four children, and I was hooked. Never before has a magazine so confirmed and inspired me in my purpose as a parent. I read every issue in its entirety, and re-read and refer to them regularly.

Like Ken Wilber's "Theory of Everything", *Life Learning* pulls everything together for me, and more importantly, demonstrates how to apply my beliefs and values and begin living my vision. Thank you!!!

Bonnie J. Reyes,
Walnut Creek, California

More on Dyslexia

Dear Life Learning;

I was disappointed by "Dyslexia - A Gift?" in the May/June 2005 issue of Life Learning.

It reads like a promotion for the book, "The Gift of Dyslexia", rather than an essay by a proponent of life learning. References are made to techniques discovered by author Ron Davis, yet not a single explanation of these techniques is listed for those who might like to try them on their own. The article ends by mentioning a benefit of going through Ron Davis' training, furthering the idea that a dyslexic is someone who must be fixed in order to function in society.

The article states that dyslexics may have trouble with math because it "is composed of order (versus disorder), sequence, and time". Children who "do not possess these concepts" must memorize rather than understand math. While there may be times that a person would choose to use memorization to reach a specific goal, it is hard to imagine a "life learning" child in a situation where they must memorize something they are not yet ready to understand.

In the sidebar, The Davis Dyslexia Association says, "Dyslexic people … excel at hands-on learning. Because we think in pictures, it is sometimes hard for us to understand letters, numbers, symbols, and written words." Doesn't everyone do better with hands-on learning? Aren't symbols pictures?

In my search for information on dyslexia, I've yet to find anything written by an unschooling parent or a grown unschooled child. This leads me to suspect that dyslexia only exists where children are pressured to accomplish arbitrary goals in reading and math.

The books and articles that I have read about dyslexia have all referred to the low-self esteem suffered by dyslexics because they are unable to meet the educational standards of our public school system. Many homeschoolers also hold their children to these standards, especially in reading, writing, and arithmetic. Among the few families who have allowed their children to approach these skills at their own pace, and in their own ways, there do not seem to be any "dyslexics". Mere coincidence? It is likely that some of these unschooled children are strongly visual-spatial thinkers, but perhaps this way of viewing the world is only a disability when outside forces attempt to mold the child to fit into the school paradigm.

Mary Ellen Gates,
Richland, Washington

Editor's Response: From time to time, Life Learning publishes readers' articles about books or other things they have found important. The Dyslexia article is such a review and not meant to describe a set of techniques. We're glad it has continued this ongoing discussion about learning and behavioral issues, school-related or otherwise. Definitely, the constraints, demands and arbitrary goals of school are bound to affect the self-esteem of children with dyslexia and other challenges. But as columnist Jan Fortune-Wood noted in that same issue, people who exhibit dyslexia also live in unschooled families such as hers. The difference, as you note, and as Jan and book reviewer Lillian Jones both have pointed out, is that life learning supports different ways of viewing the world rather than trying to fit everyone into the same mold.

How to Stay Home?

Dear Life Learning;

I am writing as a passionate supporter of your magazine and as a single mom in need of some advice. I am in the process of adopting a wonderful 11-year-old boy from foster care. He has been with me since January. Of course, absolutely, my primary choice for his education is self-directed learning through homeschooling.

However, I am a clinical mental health counselor with many, many barriers to having a private practice, namely, many of the insurance boards are closed to individual providers. I tried unsuccessfully to go out on my own last summer before I had Robby come to live with me. Because I have no choice but to work full time, I knew I would have to put him in school, due to the state's requirements. I currently have my son in a beautiful child-centered school which offers a great deal of freedom, joy and positive social connections for Robby. However, he is still struggling. He suffered a history of abuse and neglect, but also several years of public school before I took him in. Because he is so indoctrinated with the public school prison-like philosophy, he is not showing self-motivation at his new school and is not doing well "academically" because he appears to not be able to initiate any task – this all

despite the school's patience and gentle approach to him.

I feel guilty for my frustration that he is "sabotaging" his placement at the school because of his apparent inability to function within the freedom they offer. I know at home with me he could just relax and do whatever he needed until he discovered something to motivate him. Of course, I know what he needs. He needs to be home with me, detoxing from the years of abuse and forced schooling. However, I literally, after researching and banging my head against every idea, cannot figure out realistically how I can make a living and keep him home with me. Unfortunately we have very minimal family support, so no one is willing to help out financially or with child care.

I know there are no simplistic solutions, but if you or your readers have any ideas, I would be deeply appreciative. I know what my son is crying out for, and it kills me to have to deny him of the intense one-on-one with me that he needs.

Laurie A. Couture
New Hampshire

Diverse Community

Dear Life Learning;

Just a note with my renewal to let you know how valued your work is. I value your presentation of such a diversity of ideas, opinions and perspectives, at the same time as you have created a community of people who are dedicated to the relatively unusual path of helping people to follow their own paths of self-education. Thank you and keep up the visionary work.

Terrence A. Lapus
Toronto, Ontario

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Hey Everyone, Let's Clean!

Tammy Takahashi

In response to the recent controversy over Naomi Aldort's column from a few issues ago on whether or not to expect small children to help with cleaning, I was inspired to write of our own family's approach to cleaning without tears.

Encouraging our young children to help with cleanup around the house has had its ups and downs. But overall, the kids are quite helpful and we work together to keep the ever-growing amount of toys and books that we own from taking over our living space. These are some of the strategies that have worked for us.

Everything has its place. Our kids have a deep fascination with "where things belong." Incrementally, we've worked with this by establishing a system of organization so when it is time to clean, it is clear where everything lives. We have a bin for LEGO, a bin for paper, a drawer for dress-up and a series of shelves for games. We also have an oversized bucket for all the toys that don't seem to have a place, which we empty out and weed through a few times a year.

We have fallen into a routine. For most of the day, keeping things neat is not a major concern for us. Then, after bath and before story time, "it's time to clean." My husband and I make the announcement, then he and I start to tidy up the living spaces. While we clean, we ask the kids to help and remind them that story time will start sooner if we can clean the house quickly. If they help out, then it will be finished in a snap, and we can read stories. Our routine evolves over time, reflecting our natural life rhythms.

We give specific instructions on which things are available to clean and where they go. Smaller, easy tasks are less daunting than the general concept of cleaning a whole room. (That goes for people of any age!) We have found that if we say, "Help us clean the living room," the kids get frustrated at the idea that there is so much to do. If we say, "Please

Working with kids' fascination with "where things belong" helps this family learn how to "clean up without tears".

put this car back in the car drawer," we are much more likely to have a few helping hands. Sometimes, if the kids are just a little tentative, we'll ask them to pick up as many things as their age. Half the fun of cleaning this way is counting how many toys they have in their arms. And ultimately, it really isn't about how much they put away, it's the spirit of helpfulness and being a part of the group cleaning effort.

We appreciate when they help out. When the kids help us clean, we show an authentic appreciation for their help, without making a big deal out of it. When cleaning time is done, we give them a hug for helping and thank them. If someone chooses not to help, we suggest that tomorrow they might be more willing to participate and that we would appreciate their help then.

Sometimes, we make it a game. Every once in a while, for a change of pace, we'll make cleaning time into a game. How fast can we clean? Who can carry the most toys? Can we clean while hopping on one foot? Can we clean without making any noise? Can they get by the "tickle monster" on their way to the toy bins?

When I clean the kids' stuff, I do it with love. During the day, I tidy things up as I go. When I make the choice to pick up something that someone else has left out, I do it with a loving heart, not a bitter one. The kids can sense the difference even if I don't say a word. The same thing is true with cleaning after my husband. I ask them to keep things clean, but when they don't, being bitter or angry with them doesn't motivate them to want to clean in the future. If I cannot clean their stuff with a loving heart, I don't clean it, and let it rest until our pre-story time clean-up.

> "It really isn't about how much they put away, it's the spirit of helpfulness and being a part of the group cleaning effort."

We try to see it from their perspective. If they refuse to help out, I ask myself what is the real reason that they don't want to help. Is it bad timing? Are they in the middle of something? Do they not understand the reason that I'm asking?

Am I asking them to pick up a project that they have put "on pause" until later? Are they tired? Hungry? Is it my approach or maybe my timing's off? Getting to the root of why they aren't helping out gives me perspective to think of a solution that is acceptable to everyone.

We give them a choice. Would they like to put away their dolls, or their trains? The engines or the caboose? If we're all cleaning together, it can feel like they don't have any say or choice in what's happening. To help them not feel like a victim to what the adults want, I like to help them have a way to be in control and make choices.

We have a conversation with them about possible solutions, and sincerely listen to their suggestions. In the book *How to Talk so Kids will Listen, and How to Listen So Kids Will Talk*, Adele Faber suggests that instead of making requests of our children, to make an observation and then work together to find a solution. This works well with our seven-year-old, and is starting work occasionally with our four-year-old. If there are scissors on the table or puzzle pieces left on the floor, I might make the general comment, "I see dangerous scissors on the table," or "The puzzle's on the floor where the baby can get to them and eat them." When there is disagreement of whether something needs to be dealt with, then I might ask my oldest, "So, I'm frustrated and I really don't want to clean up the mess I didn't make. How can we handle this?" We go back and forth and eventually come to some kind of conclusion. Often times, he just feels overwhelmed and wants me to help him.

We give them fair warning and give them a chance. Our kids seem to respond to advance notice that we're going to clean something up. If I tell them that after their chess game is over, I'd like them to help me pick up their Chutes and Lad-

ders before moving on to the next thing, they usually are willing to do it.

We help our kids clean. I like to clean right along side them and give them the message that it's not that I expect them to do everything, but that keeping our house clean is a team effort, not any one person's job.

We also sometimes try a little negotiation. My four-year-old is a negotiator at heart. I have a feeling that as she grows up, she will become very adept at inspiring others to do work that they might not otherwise want to do. For example, we were both sitting on the couch reading, and when she finished her drink, she said to me, "Mommy, take this into the kitchen please? I'm sitting down."

I thought for a moment and responded, "I'm sitting down too. Maybe you can put your own cup in the sink when you get up next?"

Without hesitation, she replied, "No, you take it to the sink when you get up next." After a few more minutes of discussion, my daughter agreed to put her cup on the dining room table, which wasn't nearly as far away as the kitchen. Clearly, negotiating is the way to go with her when she and I disagree on whose responsibility it is to clean up her stuff.

I realize that keeping the house clean is not all about me. There are five people living in this house, and there are five opinions on how tidy the house should be. The house is not mine, it's ours, and the cleanliness of our house is not a reflection on me, but a result of our entire family's effort and perspectives on cleaning. Keeping this in mind helps me avoid being attached to the idea that the house has to be a certain way.

If all else fails, and the president is coming over to dine, I clean the house myself. Without resentment. I just do it. There are times that it's the most efficient way to get things done. Overall, though, we work together as a team and everyone knows how much I appreciate the effort they make to keep our house in order. And at the same time, I don't feel like I'm being taken advantage of. For us, this approach works out pretty darn well. **- LL -**

Contribute to Life Learning

You are invited to share your thoughts and experiences about self-directed learning with our readers.

If you would like to contribute, please read our guidelines online at www.lifelearningmagazine.com/write.html or call us at (800) 215-9574 and request that they be sent to you by mail. You need not be a professional writer to contribute!

An Education Fit for a Democracy

Roland Meighan

In a democracy, schools are a bad idea from the outset, but in a totalitarian society they are an excellent idea where the purpose is to produce a particular kind of people. They are those who are conformist, fatalistic to the will of the elite, gullible to the dictates of the rulers, ageist in attitude, and who, generally "know their place" in a clearly stratified society.

This raises a few awkward questions such as, "Why is a totalitarian-sympathetic learning system operating in what likes to call itself a democracy?" Does this mean that this is really a rudimentary form of democracy and may even be merely pre-democratic, constantly regressing to non-democratic formulations? Or, that the leaders do not want more than a very primitive form of democracy? (Or, as [British politician] Tony Benn suggests, they loathe democracy and its ideas of power-sharing.)

There are a few clues that this might be the case, for such a society might, irrationally, maintain a monarchy, or have a non-elected second chamber of government, or run a special set of schools specifically to reproduce members of an elite with strong authoritarian tendencies. Its state schools may suddenly decide to make uniforms compulsory, and institute drug tests for the inmates.

In my earlier book, *The Next Learning System*, the ten or so time switches of change that will move learning systems into more fluid patterns are given. Five have been noted as of major significance:

- We now have an information-rich society with direct access through information communications technology. When mass schooling was established, people lived in an informa-

"A radical change is going to be needed to get a learning system fit for a democracy. It needs to get away from domination and its endless stream of uninvited teaching. It needs to recognize that, in a democracy, learning by compulsion means indoctrination and that only learning by invitation and choice is education."

tion poor-environment. Since then, radio, TV, specialist magazines, computers, videos, etc. have provided the means of making most of the products of the knowledge explosion readily available to anyone who wants them. This is just one of the reasons why home-based education is so successful.

- We now know much more about how the brain actually works. The new technologies allow us to watch a living brain at work. As a result, most of the assumptions of behavioral and cognitive psychology are in question. The brain, amongst other things, is better at pattern-making than pattern-receiving.
- We now know of thirty different learning styles in humans. It follows that any uniform approach is intellectual death to some, and often most, of the learners, and is therefore suspect.
- We now know of at least seven types of intelligence. Howard Gardner in his book *The Unschooled Mind* (1994), reports his work on multiple intelligences. Seven types of intelligence (analytical, pattern, musical, physical, practical, intra-personal and inter-personal) are identifiable. Only the first is given serious attention in most schools. Yet, we now know that so-called "ordinary" people are capable of feats of intellectual or creative activity in rich, challenging, non-threatening, co-operative learning environments, and that the narrow competitive tests currently in use to achieve "the raising of standard" just prevent this from happening.
- Home-based education has proved to be remarkably successful. There is a clutch of reasons why this is so, but a significant one is the use of purposive conversation as a learning method, in substitution for most formal teaching. Self-managed learning is another to replace teacher-directed instruction. A learner-friendly setting, efficient use of time, toleration of different learning styles, multiple intelligences, are amongst others.

In 2004, Professor Ted Wragg from Exeter University proposed that we do away with standardized tests (including SATS). A bolder, more radical approach is to phase out mass coercive schooling altogether. It is, after all, a learning system from last century devised in the previous century to cope with an information-poor society and the needs of industrialization. Even during the last century it was described as "compulsory mis-education" (Paul Goodman), "the tragedy of education" (Edmond Holmes) and the "betrayal of youth" (James Hemming). It was devised for totalitarian rather than democratic societies, which is why it was so popular with leaders such as Stalin and Hitler.

A radical change is going to be needed to get a learning system fit for a democracy. It needs to get away from domination and its endless stream of uninvited teaching. It needs to recognize that, in a democracy, learning by compulsion means indoctrination and that only learning by invitation and choice is education. So, it needs to be personalized in the sense of being learner-managed, based on invitation and encouragement and, if we actually believe in life-long learning, non-ageist. It needs to be democratic in at least three aspects – its organization for participation rather than imposition, its monitoring procedures for the celebration of learning rather than incessant and stultifying testing, and in its adoption of the learner-directed, more natural

approach.

For the benefit of those who claim that this is all just impossible dreams, we already have a democratic learning institution in our midst based on these principles. It is called the public library system. There are others, such as museums, nursery centers, home-based education networks/cooperatives and community arts programs. So we already know how to make such systems work. I even know just a few schools that are attempting to work to these principles, as far as the mass coercive system allows. The most successful form of genuine education available for children at present, however, is home-based education, and, unsurprisingly, these families usually make a bee-line for their local democratic learning institution – the public library.

"We already have a democratic learning institution in our midst based on these principles. It is called the public library system. There are others, such as museums, nursery centers, home-based education networks/cooperatives and community arts programs. So we already know how to make such systems work."

It was in 1977 that I first began to look into home-based education with my own young son in mind. My wife Shirley, who a few years later died of cancer, was probably the best teacher of infants I had seen in my travels around schools. Then, my own teaching, first in secondary schools and then in teacher education, was well rated by others. But as two "successful" teachers, with our insider knowledge, we knew the severe limitations of school-based education. So we began to look into the possibility of educating at home, only to stumble on the birth of Education Otherwise and its founding group of a few other parents thinking along the same lines as ourselves.

Soon after that I found myself in court as an expert witness supporting Iris and Geoff Harrison and their family, and their right to home-educate using the autonomous approach of "I will do it my way – using the help and support of others as necessary" rather that the authoritarian approach of "you will do it our way – or else" of the mass, coercive schooling system.

So, I became an "educational double agent" and for about 15 years, some of my time was spent in teacher education, preparing post-graduate students for a career in schools, and some of my time was spent researching and supporting families who chose to educate their children at home.

Since I have always argued for a more flexible, diverse and personalized learning system, I saw no necessary contradiction in the double agent role. But some colleagues, wedded to the orthodoxy of the mass coercive schooling system, were disturbed by it.

Partly, this is due to the fact that home-based education tends to expose, rather starkly, the severe limitations of the schooling system and the damage it inflicts. This damage starts with forcing the surrender of the influence of the family to be handed over to a group of so-called "professionals", whose training and awareness is frequently limited to the crowd instruction and crowd control form of education. The damage continues with the second surrender to the tyranny of the peer group. The system requires that the constructive approach of those families seeking to create a better world is gradually replaced with the fatalistic "toughen them up for real life in the nasty competitive world" philosophy. Only in home-based education does the family begin to strike back.

Despite my social scientist's cautious approach to appraising the home-based learning I was seeing, the distinction between the two learning systems – school-based learning and home-based learning – became clear. The contrast between school-based and home-based education has been likened to that between factory farming and the free-range option. The consequence is that young people educated at home are usually far more mature than their schooled counterparts. I realized after a while that I could spot the difference within minutes of meeting a young person for the first time. Home-educated young people did not treat me as if I was a potential enemy and conversed with me ease and poise, on serious as well as trivial matters.

Recently, I was present when panels of young people who have been educated at home and are now adults have been telling audiences about their experiences. It was a cheering and positive event. One young person told of how he decided perhaps he should do some examinations and try university, since the message all around him in society was that this was worthwhile and the way to go. After a term of low-level misery at university, he reflected that what he really enjoyed was his part-time boat-building activity at weekends in a friend's business. So he told his tutors he was leaving university. There was plenty of protest about how well he was doing in the courses, and disbelief that he wanted to have a practical career, not an academic/professional one.

Others on the panels came to university late as mature students after trying various activities and occupations before selecting their careers, one as a nurse, another as a lawyer. Another declared that the only examination she had ever needed was the driving test since she ran her own successful business. If ever she needed more, she would settle down and work to get them.

The contrast between the two learning systems is also illustrated by research on the experience of those who go into school as teens. Just as there are many reasons why people opt for the

Learning by doing at home and in the community is superior in many ways to coercive instruction at school, and is a model for future education.

home-based education alternative, there are also several reasons why they may choose to opt into school later on. Some express a desire to spend additional time with friends or to make new friends, or become involved in organized sports – particularly important in the USA where sports scholarships may be on offer. Some say that the academic work is a draw by working with experts and also the facilities in science subjects. Some are drawn to the challenges of meeting peer group pressure, meeting different types of people and having their ideas challenged. Some see personality as a factor, especially if they are extroverts who want to develop communication and leadership skills.

However, the available research does not give much of an advert for schooling and shows the inmates are likely to have been kept artificially immature and somewhat brutalized by what Holt calls "the long practical course in slavery" that is school. A study by Michael H. Romanowski, reported in *Home School Researcher*, Volume 15, number 1, 2002, shows how most of the students' hopes are dashed in reality. Students had to adjust to the time frame of school with its rigid timetables, structure, habits, rules, customs and expectations. Next, the learning process was quite different. Students had been used to one-on-one learning situations or self-directed learning but now had to cope with large classes, multiple teachers, different teaching styles and nightly homework.

The respondents in the Romanowski study reported that they learned to cope, but they paid the price of finding their interest and motivation in learning declining. Although most indicated they thought the academic work might be difficult for them, in the event they found the opposite to be true. But they paid a different price: "…there was no room for creativity or individual thinking."

Earlier researchers (e.g. Smedley, 1992) have proposed that home-educated people were more mature than their schooled counterparts. The respondents in the Romanowski study found this to be the case. As a result, the aim of making new friends was largely thwarted.

The peer culture caused many value clashes. One centered around cheating. Fighting, sex, drugs, alcohol and stealing presented other value clashes. The emphasis on materialism and appearance also came as a shock.

But can we imagine a world without schools? Gerald Haigh, former head teacher and now a journalist, thinks we can: "Fanciful nonsense? Don't be so sure. My grandparents knew about workhouses. An accepted part of the social landscape for centuries, they now seem impossibly inhumane and counterproductive. One day, school will be seen like that – a transient phenomenon, destined to fade gracefully away as the forces that created them gradually lose their impetus." (from "Goodbye to today's workhouses", *Times Educational Supplement* 21/1/05)

If we want a learning system fit for humans in a democracy, we have to face up to the stark proposition that school is not the solution, it is part of the problem.

Adapted from "Comparing Learning Systems: the good, the bad, the ugly, and the counter-productive" (2005, Educational Heretics Press). **- LL -**

Living Unschooling *with Sandra Dodd*

Beatrice Ekwa Ekoko

Sandra Dodd is a writer who is frequently invited to speak at unschooling conferences all over the U.S. She lives with her three teenaged children – Holly, Marty and Kirby, who have never been to school – and her husband Keith in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Beatrice: You have a fascinating concept called "strewing." Can you talk about that?

Sandra: One day, someone who was very skeptical of unschooling said, "Well how do you get all those things in front of your children?" and I said, "I just strew it around. I just strew their paths with interesting things." And the concept stuck. The idea is to just have things around your house that are interesting enough to pick up and turn over and mess with; and that can cover a whole lot of science and history and math all my itself. I find things at thrift shops: magnets, maps, books. I just put the things out there and periodically switch them around. I also think it's worth looking in catalogs of things that you can't afford because then when you are at the thrift store and you see them, you know what they are.

I got that idea [strewing] when I was studying education in the early 70s, which was the height of the school reform days; New Mexico was a hot bed of school reform. There was a book called *The Open Classroom* written by people in New Mexico. One of the things they taught us was that it doesn't make sense to drag a class of 30 kids through the same activity – just point the interesting things out and they'll discover them and they'll show each other, and they'll ask you questions. I did that while I was teaching and it worked. And I did that with my children and it worked.

But before we had children, my husband and I were together for seven years and we did that with each other. We were involved in a medieval studies club. We made costumes, he made armor, we made tents together; that took geometry but we didn't say so. Trying to go from historical paintings and trying to figure out with triangles and rectangles how they had made a tent with one center pole. So we had a lot of activity like that between ourselves. We had a lot of friends who were artists, interested in history, interested in music and when you have the information swirling like that you start to see that everything is connected.

Some of the things we have from when we were younger are in our house and the kids just pick it up. And they know things about that item or they will say, "How do they keep the patterns

straight on those Indian print bedspreads?" I'll say, "I don't know. Let's go find out." But we can pull up a sample of block printed cloth from the house. I know that some people live in houses that look like motel rooms and I don't know how they do. But it's been easy for us to just rearrange the things in our house so that the kids can always discover something new.

Beatrice: That's what I was going to ask next. The idea of the home as a sort of museum.

Sandra: I think everyone's can be. We went to a friend's house and he pulled out a bunch of pictures of a place that we were about to visit. People don't think to ask or pull off a book from a shelf and say, "Oh you know that author? It's autographed!" People think of museums as other buildings far away that belong to the state. And their house as just a house. But sometimes that word just gets in the way of seeing the possibilities and how rich each thing and each place is.

I don't ever say, "Alright! Attention everyone! I'm putting out the castle blocks!" They just appear. And then castles are made, and then people talk about things, or they talk about particular castles they are trying to do. And after it's not getting any attention, it goes away and something else might come out. I have a bowl of rocks, which look different when they are wet than they do dry. Sometimes when people are sitting around talking it's worth just getting a bowl of rocks and sticking them in the bowl – doesn't interrupt the conversation, and they can play with it or not as they want to.

We have jigsaw puzzles…for example, two are of the history of the kings and queens of England, and we've worked them not with the intent to learn anything but just to work them; but everyone involved in that, adult or child, learned something they hadn't known before. And as we were working them, we talked, not about kings and queens but about what was going on in our lives. I think there's an advantage to not saying, "We are going to work this puzzle because it's history." We just worked the puzzle. Some history came, some current social stuff, some personal stories, some questions totally unrelated. And if there's enough swirl of information and exchange, all kinds of things will come up. They don't need to come up linearly.

So we find that it's fun to discover things but it's easier to discover things when they are there to discover. Maybe strewing is a bit like hiding Easter eggs but not to that extent. There just might be three things out and about. It's like a conversation piece. It's like putting out a pretty book on a coffee table, or an arrangement of flowers, only it's more likely to be a puzzle.

Beatrice: Incidental learning!

Sandra: And although it's incidental, the core of my method if you want to call it that, is to just keep our lives so busy and so varied that incidental learning happens all the time. If friends of mine, my own age that is, come over and visit, they sort of get caught up in what's happening and if the adults here are being curious and playful and open, then visitors are more likely to be that way too. We do things that are just fun. You can hardly walk by with out picking it up and messing with it too.

Sandra Dodd's three teenagers – from top, Holly, Marty and Kirby – having fun in the backyard of their home in New Mexico.

Beatrice: Can you talk a bit more about what makes unschooling work?

Sandra: Almost any piece of routine damage school can do to a child, parents can do at home. Parents can make their kids hate math. They can make them never want to read a book again. They can make them want nothing more than to grow up and get away. So with unschooling, when people ask me what I think makes it work, I tell them the kids have to have a choice. There's a learning curve that I see with unschooled kids and that is that they seem to be ahead [of their peers in school] for the first few years and then there's a period of time, roughly from about nine

"People don't learn very well when they are sitting still, not moving their hands, not moving their feet, someone talking at them. That's the optimal condition for taking a nap!"

to 12 years of age, when they can seem behind. And then after they are 12 or 13, zoom! They look ahead! They seem to be ahead again. In school, there is a period when children are 11 or 12 when they've just been crammed full of math facts, and geographical facts, and science terminology, and they just seem full to bursting with knowledge, and the kids at home might still be playing with Pokémon or coloring books, and they look up and the school kids are naming places and things that they don't know, they're reading text books and doing long division or writing in cursive – things that you can see from across the room. "What are they doing? I don't know what they are doing. I can't do that!"

But then what seems to happen with the unschoolers I have met and talked with, is that when their kids got to be 13 or 14, a kind of maturity comes upon them and they say, "Oh! I guess if I want to learn cursive, I'll just practice it. Is this it?" And they do it! They look at something and they say, "Is that all?" And they figure out on their own how to do math. They start to develop their own map of the world and history of the universe and stuff; all of their facts are starting to gel into a model of the universe. They are understanding a lot of things and making a lot of connections. And about that time the kids at school get all burned out and realize that all the facts they are learning are only leading to another year of facts. It's like Rumpelstiltskin: "Oh you turned that straw into gold? Next room. Bigger. More straw. Oh and by the way, you don't get to keep the gold." While the unschoolers are saying, "Oh yeah! This is cool. I'm glad I didn't go to school!"

Another thing I've noticed is that when they get to be 13 or 14, they've either gotten a job, gotten a really cool volunteer position, become involved in a hobby they have so that they are in a position of teaching whether it's karate, or horseback riding, or ice-skating. They've gotten to the point where they know enough that they are a senior student and they are given a position of responsibility. If they are given something real and they are given the kind or responsibility that is given to an adult, in a way, it makes them an adult. They feel that shift of not being one of the kids anymore. And you see a change in their posture and their bearing and the way adults treat them.

And so, at a point when the kids at school are told, because they are just barely in high school and they are the youngest of the older kids, being bullied, their hope is to get good grades so that they can go to college. They are at the point of greatest dismay with public schools while the kids their age who are unschooled are saying, "Hah! I wonder if I should go to horse camp or if I should take a college class. I wonder if I should go to karate three times a week so that I can get a black belt or if I should go work at the gaming store." And the kids in school don't have any of these options. So at the same time that they are made small, the unschoolers have been made large.

If families can make it through that rough hump of, "Oh my kid doesn't know anything. He doesn't have cursive, he doesn't know the times tables and he's 12 and starting to get whiskers,"…. Because it's just before a lot of the kids in school are saying, "This is crazy. Why am I doing this?"

Beatrice: Learning for fun?

Sandra: One of the studies on how people learn done in experimental schools in the 60s and 70s was what is the optimal state of mind for learning? Schools try to get everyone very still and very quiet. And that's not optimal! People don't learn very well when they are sitting still, not moving their hands, not moving their feet, someone talking at them. That's the optimal condition for taking a nap! But the optimal condition is also not when you think a tiger is going to bite you and you're running away screaming and you get so full of adrenaline you want to puke. Somewhere between those two is the right place.

One way to get that mental state of alertness or curiosity is to hum or make music, have fun. And school can't afford to do that. Because if 25 kids at the same time think something is really neat and cool, they start to make noise. So school is set up to keep everyone at a low mental wavelength so that they can't really learn. But at least they are quiet. So at home, if things can be fun and interesting and cool, then it's easier to learn!

I know for sure that you can't pour information into people. I know for sure that you can't command that somebody learn something right now and have that work. Fear doesn't work. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is something that all teachers learn

and then they promptly forget. Maslow's hierarchy of needs says that you can't learn unless you feel safe, loved, fed. And yet there are still schools and families where kids are told, "Do this or you can't eat lunch. Do this or I'll hit you."

Some threat and some deprivation…learn first then reward. Oh, they're going to learn. They are learning a lot. They are learning to get the heck away from there as soon as they can. They are learning to sneak food under the table, they're learning to tune out adults, they are learning to cheat and lie. I don't want my kids to learn these things. So I keep them happy. I keep them fed. I let them sleep when they want to sleep, I let them say, "I don't want to do that right now," when they don't want to do that right now. And it makes a big difference because then the level of arousal when they are excited about something is real. They don't have to fake being excited; they really can get excited. Because they know they really can say no. That level of freedom and choice is unusual in our society.

"I just keep our lives so busy and so varied that incidental learning happens all the time."

Beatrice: What is spiritual unschooling?

Sandra: I have a page on my website called spiritual unschooling. People don't become really good at unschooling without changing the way they see themselves and the world. At the core of it, I think there is a philosophical shift that has to happen. Because if people want to overlay unschooling on same old business-as-usual life it doesn't really fit very well; you have to remodel the house a bit.

What do the new building parts have to do with spirituality? It's just being aware of what your child actually is doing, not what the book says he ought to be doing; look directly at the person you're dealing with. But then some people would say, "Okay fine. I don't need to know anything about child development or cognition. I'll just look at my kid." You'll look at him with *what?* There needs to be a balance of both. I think people who are going to take responsibility of their children's learning life, need to know what stages people go through – Piaget's stages of development are very helpful for people who know it but that doesn't mean they should live by that in a moment-to-moment way.

There are no hours in which we are teaching and there are no hours in which the children are not learning. So it changes the fabric of our life. Sometimes when I have described unschooling , people have said it sounds like unit studies and I said no, no. Because although we might go on a binge with a week where everyone really cares about Monty Python or whatever, then we get tired of it and we are done. It wasn't a unit study because no one said, "Starting next Monday we are going to do China. And on Friday we are going to be through with China."

When people plan a unit like that, not only is it artificial, but you don't get that excited joy and curiosity which makes it work. But what if you are studying Japan and a hot air balloon lands in the vacant lot behind your house. Are you going to shut the window because it's not about Japan? That's the danger of unit studies – you doggedly move along the path that you've set regardless of what's happening in the world. And if someone wants to learn about Japan, what's the hurry? If they are going to move there, there are some things they really need to know now. If they are not going to move there, if it's just something they are interested in or even if it's their burning passion and they collect Japanese art, and they decorate their house Japanese, still what's the hurry? They'll be learning about it for the rest of their lives. The more they like something the more they will never stop learning about it until the day they die or Alzheimer's takes them. I don't think there is a hurry and I don't think telling children, "Come on! Come on! There's more about Japan that we haven't learned yet, hurry," helps them like Japan, or learn more. It's counter to all that.

Where the spirituality comes in…that is partly the trust that your child is an organism that wants to learn, that that's how people grow. There is physical growth that takes water, food and rest. There's mental growth, which takes input – ideas, things to think about, things to try, things to touch. And then there's spiritual growth and that takes more and more understanding. And awareness that it's better to be sweet to other peo-

"It's not much of an investment in two or three generations down, to teach your kids that the powerless lose, that older or richer people get their way."

ple than not, it's better to be generous with your neighbors than hateful , better to pet your cat nicely than to throw it around. At first it's a practical consideration but later on , as the children are looking at the world through older eyes, they start to see that, no matter whether the neighbor noticed or not , it made you a better person. So I think there's a spirituality of respect being given to the children and being passed on.

As for spirituality and unschooling , the relationship a parent builds with the child, if it's going to be a really good one, a really close one, has to go by a different model. Because our culture says basically that the parents own the children, that the children will be obedient, that parents can do what they want to and when the children are 18 they can leave but until then it's the parents' house and the parents' money and the parents can say what happens. That's an extremely adversarial relationship. And it really can lead to no good except the future justification of other adversarial relationships. And it's not much investment in two or three generations down, to teach your kids that the powerless lose, that older or richer people get their way. If the parents can say, "Well this is your house too. What do you want to do?" Or give yourself a range of choices to offer the child. If your child is bored, you could offer her three or four really cool things to do. Whereas, my mom and millions of other moms would say, "If you are bored mop the floor. If you're bored, you can go and pull weeds." That is punishing a child for communicating with you! I see my children as whole people whose lives are unfolding now. They may have memories as vivid as mine. And what I do and say now will be part of their lives after I'm dead. And do I want to be the wicked witch? Do I want to be a stupid character that they grow up and live in reaction to and avoidance of? And so if I see them us whole, then I see that as they grow bigger, I grow smaller in their universe.

There's a traditional put down which is, "You're not the center of the universe." And I think, well then what is? Are you talking astrological universe or personal universe? Because I am the center of *my* universe. I see it out of my eyes. I remember it from my memory. And when I die, my universe ends. And each of my children is the center of his or her universe. I see that as a spiritual difference in how you define your child in relationship to yourself. I see spirituality more as a philosophical stance. Some people who ask me for advice, I ask them to pretend they only have 300 "no-s". They have a little ticket they have to spend every time they say no. And they better save some because some people use them up before the kid's three years old.

What if your kids grow up and you still have 150 tickets left that you can throw in the trash? That's pretty cool.

You can read Sandra Dodd's articles on her website at www.sandradodd.com. She will be speaking in St. Louis, Missouri in October 2005 at the Live and Learn Conference. She plans to talk about the unexpected benefits of unschooling. **- LL -**

Ask Naomi

Take the struggle out of living with children

With Naomi Aldort

The Fear of Tears

Q: *My nine-year-old daughter is jealous and refuses to understand our response to her younger brother's needs. He cries when I leave with her; he doesn't want to stay with his dad. We take him with us but she is upset. Yesterday we interrupted our visit with friends because he cried and wanted to go home; it was too much for him. She cursed and whined. She calls him "King James," and wallows in self-pity. How can I help her accept her brother's needs, and how can I help my son be less needy?*

A: I understand your inclination to prioritize your crying son. Yet, your daughter is also crying, only without tears. You cannot change how she feels; instead you may want to understand her. Any time we try to oppose a child's feeling or behavior, we miss our own lesson; our children shed light on what we cannot see or hear on our own. When you follow your daughter instructions, the issue will be resolved for both children.

This difficulty arises when we believe that something is wrong with crying and that tears are to be stopped or prevented. No matter how much we try to meet our children's needs, they do experience frustrations and wants that cannot always be fulfilled. They can handle natural life experiences but, sometimes, we cannot handle our feelings about their feelings.

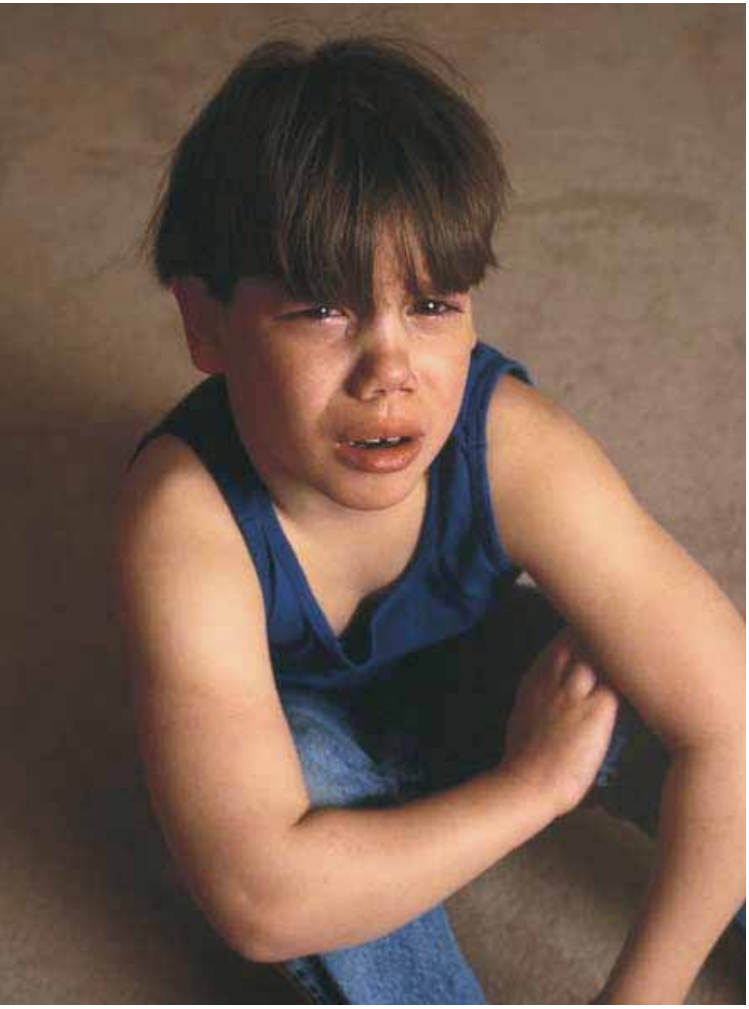
Children can become powerful in the face of reality if we don't rush to stop their tears with quick solutions, compensations or distractions. They can handle not getting what they want (outside of basic needs) when we are responsive to their feelings. Responding to feelings does not mean getting rid of them by supplying the impossible or by compensating or distracting. Instead, it means listening, validating and understanding. Sometimes the wish can be granted, other times it cannot. The child can handle it, if you don't fall apart.

Children become needy and dependent when they learn to fear emotions and to expect their magical parents to shape reality for them. Yet, true power, freedom and joy do not come from having whatever one wants, but from the ability to find joy in whatever shows up.

Any time you wish your daughter would feel other than the way she feels, you are missing the guidance that will solve your dilemma. Stop yourself and reconsider: You want your daughter not to be jealous; you want her to understand that her brother's needs come first when he cries. This is impossible! Her way of being is the proof of the only way she can be. Instead of trying to fix her, listen.

Failing to live up to your expectation, your daughter may be in great pain and confusion. She does not see the reason why her brother's need overrides hers. She has not adopted the belief that tears are something to avoid or to stop at all costs. She only observes that avoiding tears is more important than she is, or that her brother is the priority. She could start crying too and test your philosophy, but she stays true to herself. Unwilling to compromise her own integrity, she tells you that you are missing her while caring for her brother. Indeed, both children will feel relieved when free from the tyranny of tears.

Search in your heart and find how and why your daughter is right. When you do that, you love her unconditionally and you give yourself an opportunity to grow as a parent and a human being. Our judgments of others are always lessons for ourselves. She cannot change how she feels, but you can change how you perceive tears and how you experience



your children.

So search for your own wisdom: Do you really want your daughter to feel happy while having to give up what she wants because her brother cries? Wouldn't you then be worried about her self-esteem? Her persistence indicates that she knows how much you love her and that you will listen. She is right – you are listening and searching for a solution by asking this question. Notice that when you want her to be other than the way she is, you feel anxious and unable to find solutions. Yet, it's not even what you want. If you don't expect your daughter to understand your actions when she doesn't, you may realize how happy you are that she persists in telling you what she needs. You want her to be how she is – authentically.

If you can plan your outing with your daughter at a time that your son is engaged with a happy activity elsewhere, do so. But when not possible, give him advanced notification, "Sarah and I are going for an hour or so this afternoon and you and Dad will play at home." If he cries, validate his feelings, "I know you would prefer to come with us." After you leave, dad will validate his feelings and listen to his protest (if any is left). Most often the child is actually overjoyed to stay with dad, and he only needs our clear action to know that he can enjoy himself. Sometimes he may think that it would please mom if he doesn't want her to leave, or he may be caught in other confusions, which are resolved with our clear and peaceful action.

The same with your visit with friends. You are asking your friends and your daughter to cut the visit short for the sake of one child. Why not empower your son to make peace with being there, or discuss it with the others and find a solution that satisfies everyone? It is scary for your son to have power over other people. He doesn't want it. Power over others is really helplessness and dependency; getting what he wants at the expense of another is not the lesson you are trying to pass on. He wants power over himself, which comes with the ability to move with reality and not against it.

I am not suggesting "an answer" but a principle that is not rooted in a need to escape from tears; otherwise no one has freedom since all three of you are simply the victims of tears. Indeed, your daughter is just as capable of making peace with the reality of going home earlier or including her brother in an outing occasionally. Often the children themselves will solve the problem or a family meeting will bring good will or creative solutions. Allowing tears to be, but not to dictate, the children have freedom to find kind solutions.

A mother who consulted me by phone about a similar difficulty said, "But I cannot refuse my child when he cries. In fact, I always say to my children that if someone is so sad as to cry, we take care of him first. Isn't that teaching compassion?"

I invited her to explore her thought and asked, "Are you sure that your child shouldn't cry?"

"I think I do believe that," she responded.

"Yes," I said, "And how do you feel when he cries and you believe that he shouldn't?"

"I feel anxious, panicked, and I rush to fix everything."

"Yes," I said, "we act based on our thoughts, even if they aren't valid. Can you be sure that your child shouldn't cry?"

"No," she said, "obviously he does cry often."

"How would you respond to your crying child whose need cannot be met, if you didn't have the thought that he shouldn't cry?"

"I would feel peaceful about the crying and hug him."

"That's unconditional love. When you act from your own anxiety you don't really respond to the child's need because you are too occupied with your own need to have him be happy all the time. When you love the child as he is, you notice a need for a hug, validation and understanding. Sometimes a specific solution may arise, other times a good cry with a hug is all that is needed for the child to feel powerful and capable of embracing reality."

Two weeks later this mother told me that since she had stopped devoting herself to making her son happy all the time, he had became much more confident, assertive and happy. He doesn't use tears to manipulate, and instead he asks for what he wants. He cries a lot less (naturally) and when he does, she is there for him.

Many of us learned the lesson, "If I cry or if I am miserable enough, I can get whatever I want." We are familiar with feeling like a victim, and thinking that our happiness depends on someone who would rescue us from our miseries.

Instead of raising a child to expect a life in which reality shapes itself for him (impossible), and in which he tries to change people to fit his dream (hopeless), allow each child to experience that she has the power within her to live with reality and to shape her own life.

The fear of tears often starts with the way we treat our babies. Many parents wish to see their babies happy all the time – even when the baby wants to cry. I know this sounds strange because the desire for another to be happy is considered such a nice and caring thing. Yet, if your baby wants to express sadness or rage over the many helpless and speechless moments of his life, then your desire for him to be happy is, surprisingly, selfish. Does this mean you are not a good parent? Absolutely not. Children are well designed to withstand growing up side by side with their human parents. It is a learning path, not a performance. You are always doing the best you can.

When we stop and prevent emotional expressions of sadness, fear or anguish we create what I like to call emotional constipation. The body and mind will find another outlet for emotions, through stuttering, aggression, bed-wetting, whining and other behaviors and symptoms we often consider normal in children.

I am not suggesting to create reasons for tears or to ignore your child or baby's crying. On the contrary, respond to all his needs, including the need to cry. When he wants to change reality, notice how you are the source of his worldview. When you model wanting to change how your daughter feels, your son learns to want to be at home when he is not. When you want your son not to cry when he cries, your daughter learns to want attention when she cannot get it. Wanting what isn't always hurts and weakens us. Teach through modeling by loving the way your children are, and you will respond in ways that empower them and allow them to retain more of their emotional freedom.

Naomi Aldort is a parenting counselor, writer and public speaker. Send your questions to: naomi@aldort.com. She leads workshops for parents and offers counseling by phone. Her articles can also be found in "Mothering" magazine, the McGraw Hill university text book "A Child's World", "The Journal for Family Living", Taking Children Seriously", "The Nurturing Parent", "Mother-Tongue", "Kangaroo Kids" and more. Visit www. NaomiAldort.com. **- LL -**

Life, the Universe and Everything

Learning and living without schooling and coercion

Jan Fortune-Wood

What's the Big Idea?

How changing our ideas helps us to be more effective autonomous parents and educators.

When many people think about living lives of consent, they assume that the obstacles to always finding solutions and to both children and adults getting what they want will be practical ones. We don't have enough time to think through every issue innovatively, or we don't have enough money to satisfy our children's wishes, or we're simply not that good at problem solving. It is easy to rationalize further and tell ourselves that our children are too young to be reasonable or that they have sugar allergies or soft teeth that mean that we can't just let go of the controls on their diet.

Yet the truth is that all of these practical problems are solvable. It is not practical difficulties that block our way so much as our own ideas and assumptions. Let's be clear: Practical problems do not stop us from helping our children to get what they want. The problem is the way we think; our resourcefulness, our ideas.

Imagine Paula. She is at the airport with her five-year-old daughter, Zoë, half an hour away from boarding her flight from London, where her parents live, to Texas, where she lives. Suddenly, Zoë announces that she has left her favorite teddy bear at Grandma's house and she wants to go back to fetch it. Most of us in this situation think that the problem is one of time: We can't retrieve the bear and board the plane and it's obvious to any adult which of those things has to happen. If Paula is a conventional parent then she is probably willing to offer comfort to Zoë, as long as Zoë doesn't make too much noise in a public place, but Paula will also believe, like most parents, that Zoë has to learn that some things just can't be changed; some things just have to be done whether we like them or not; some things are simply not negotiable.

The real problem though is not the conjunction of practical factors – an airplane departure at 8.30 a.m., a bear that is a 40-minute round trip away and a distressed child do not add up to an impossible situation in which someone has to lose. The real problem is Paula's inability or unwillingness to think that there is a solution. The solution might very well involve a later flight. It is not actually an immutable law of nature that Paula and Zoë must get on *this* plane. Although, as parents, we often present our decisions as though there really is no choice, as though our doctor's appointment or need to do some grocery shopping was written into the universe, the truth is that there are choices – as many as our resourcefulness allows us to envisage.

On the other hand, the solution might include Paula's initial wish that she and Zoë board their flight on time. Perhaps there is a story that they could invent together to make the bear's absence an extra stay with Grandma so that she doesn't have to say good-bye to them all at once or a story to make the time it takes for the bear to be sent to Zoë by mail an adventure. Perhaps a new toy from the airport shop would make all the difference. Perhaps a call to someone at Grandma's house or to a courier service could get the bear to the airport in time. Perhaps Zoë simply needs more information – information about how much extra new plane tickets would cost, using up money she might like for other things; information about how Daddy will be waiting at the airport in Texas and will be sad not to see them for another day – not information that is used to manipulate Zoë with guilt

and sentimentality, but real information that she can choose to take into consideration, knowing that the final decision has not already been made.

If Paula wants to live by consent with her child, she will tell Zoë that she really strongly prefers that they make this plane. She will tell Zoë why that is what she wants – things that she hopes to be able to do by being home at a particular time; people who are meeting them at the other end; extra expense and what that might mean to their family; effects on their tiredness and ability to enjoy an already long journey. She will make suggestions about alternatives – stories about the bear, a new toy, a trip to the ice-cream shop at the airport, the possibility of someone bringing the bear to the airport for them and how they will deal with it if the bear doesn't arrive on time. Zoë, knowing that her mother wants to find a mutual solution, a way in which both of them can win, will be able to listen and consider without feeling brow beaten, knowing that she doesn't have to sit on the airport floor and cry her heart out to get listened to.

Let's imagine that Paula wants to find a consensual solution. They decide to phone Grandma and ask her to mail the bear, but they also ask Grandma to take some pictures of the bear at Grandma's house, the bear being packaged, the bear being handed in at the Post Office. Zoë and Paula take pictures together of their journey and decide to keep a scrapbook of things they do when they get home until the bear arrives so that they can make their own picture narrative of the days of the bear's adventure. In the meantime, an ice-cream, a large cuddly Dalmatian toy from the airport gift shop and the thought of Daddy waiting to meet them at the other end mean that Zoë happily decides that getting on the plane now is actually what she wants to do.

A couple of years later, Paula is home with Zoë and her new baby, Jacob, when Jacob suddenly develops a high temperature and begins to convulse. The hospital is close to their home and Paula knows that she can drive there quicker than an ambulance would take to reach them and get back again. Zoë has just got a new play station game and Paula knows that Zoë really doesn't want to leave the house today, but neither is Zoë comfortable alone at home and Paula has noticed that both sets of friendly neighbors, who might otherwise sit with Zoë, have gone out today. Paula tells Zoë that this is an emergency, she doesn't have time to talk this through right now, and Jacob needs to get the hospital. This is a very rare moment for Zoë; she knows that her mother doesn't lie to her, that Paula doesn't decide outcomes before discussions, so, despite not otherwise wanting to go to the hospital, Zoë has no qualms about accepting the genuineness of her mother's fears for Jacob and leaves her game without a backward glance.

Ideas, not practical problems, are the real building blocks to living by consent. Solutions are out there, but we don't always find them because we don't always have ways of thinking about them. We all have inner voices that say "you can't always win" or "but teeth have to be brushed no matter what children want" or "if Jimmie watches too much TV he'll

"We all have areas in which our assumptions are poor, often because of the compulsion we have experienced ourselves or because the ideas that we learned and imitated are, in fact, false. These ideas can become so strongly held that they are ingrained in us and no amount of reason seems to shake them."

become aggressive". We all have areas in which our assumptions are poor, often because of the compulsion we have experienced ourselves or because the ideas that we learned and imitated are, in fact, false. These ideas can be so strongly held that they are ingrained in us and no amount of reason seems to shake them.

These deeply rooted ideas are well recognized and the scientist Richard Dawkins has given them a name that conveys the way these ideas reproduce themselves from brain to brain. Dawkins calls such ideas memes and although these ideas are deeply embedded, we are not slaves to memes, we can work on them. So what is a meme?

Dawkins talks about memes as being ideas that, like genes, self-replicate.

> "Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as gene types propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via process, which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. …
>
> Some memes, like genes, achieve brilliant short term success in spreading rapidly, but do not last in the meme pool. Popular songs and stiletto heels are examples. Others such as the Jewish religious laws, may continue to propagate themselves for thousands of years, usually because of the great potential permanence of written records." (From *Selfish Genes* by Richard Dawkins, Chapter 11)

So memes are simply the building blocks by which culture and ideas spread from one person to the next in learned behavior or imitation. Dawkins uses the word memes to show how ideas re-produce in a similar way to genes. Memes exhibit the features of evolution. They are inherited in that they are copied; they vary in that the copying is not exact, but is subject to subtle and larger mutations through imperfect copying and there is a process of selection in which the memes that survive will tend to be those which are highly memorable, useful or provoke an emotional response.

In the arena of socio-biology there is a lot of argument about what memes mean and whether or not the theory of memes could mean that we are not free, but Dawkins himself and many others insist that we are free people.

The human arena of parenting is full of memes. Most of us have sworn never to be the kind of parents that our own parents were to us and yet most of us soon acknowledge that many of our most deeply-rooted parenting ideas come from the way we were treated as children. Whether against our better judgment or not, we will often discover that many of our deepest held parenting assumptions bear more than a passing resemblance to those of our families and to the dominant theories of our particular culture, but that doesn't mean that we have to remain stuck.

Dr. Jan Fortune-Wood is a freelance writer and parenting adviser, who home educates her four children. Jan works as editor at Cinnamon Press and edits the poetry journal Coffee House Poetry. She is the author of five titles on home education, autonomous education and non-coercive parenting. Jan's new book "Winning Parent, Winning Child" was published in May and is now available from www.home-education.org.uk or from www.cinnamonpress.com (in US or Canadian dollars). She can be contacted at jan@autonomouschild.co.uk. **- LL -**

Grown Without Schooling

Adult unschooler Peter Kowalke interviews his peers to find out what they are doing and thinking now.

Chatting with . . .
Laura Brion, age 24
Providence, Rhode Island

Music Director

I'm one year out of college, working part-time as the music director for a small Episcopal church near Providence, Rhode Island. An anonymous member donated money to hire a music director for eight years – m – to develop the currently small music program and make it an exciting part of the community, something the church might be known for. So, I'm in the wonderful and difficult position of being hired to shake things up, to rethink things, to get people excited about new ideas.

Music was a major part of my life for most of my childhood. I started piano when I was nine, and I began playing a small organ for a small church when I was 16. I didn't actually know how to play organ when I was hired to do this. They just knew that I was that kid in the area who played nice piano. I figured I easily could learn, and they were willing to put up with my learning process. So, I played with them for three years before I went to college. Then, halfway through school, I switched from piano to organ formally.

Learning Again

Towards the end of my four years in college, I remember telling friends that I was looking forward to graduating so that I could start learning again. In part, I was joking – I certainly learned a lot in college, and many of the debates I'd had or witnessed in classes were much more informed, probing, and productive than they might have been if I weren't in such an intentionally-created educational setting. But I certainly meant part of what I said, and since I graduated, I've been trying to grab hold of the loose ends that college forced me to leave hanging and return to a more haphazard, let-me-drink-from-the-fire-hose approach to learning.

The main advantage of the fire-hose approach was how alive I felt, living that way. Everything was allowed to be exciting. I might not have delved very deeply into many of the interests I developed in childhood, but I could at least enjoy them to some degree rather than being told that I just couldn't fit it into my semester schedule.

I want to do a better job of combining the approach I learned from my childhood as an unschooler and the structured one I learned during my time in college. Neither one alone will get me where I want to go in terms of intellectual or career development.

Diverse Interests

As amazing an experience as it was, college forced me to define myself—or made it easier for others to define me based on the four or five classes I chose every semester. Although my school is known for encouraging students to explore diverse subjects and take an interdisciplinary approach to learning, too many students considered themselves to be "science people" or "humanities people," and thought there was a vast divide between the two camps. As an unschooler, I hadn't grown up thinking I was an "arts person" or a "humanities person." I just was me, Laura, the bot-

Laura Brion (center) with her sister Meredith and mother Alison.

any-loving, piano-playing, Morris-dancing, newspaper-reading me. Now that I'm not constantly being told "You – yeah, public policy and music girl, you," I can get back to being me again. I feel silly that I let this get to me.

Right now I'm volunteering at a community/student radio station, working on a show about children's books. I'm playing in a gamelan (an Indonesian music ensemble). To continue learning about traditional Western music, I've joined a local choir that presents concerts with a small orchestra every few months. I'm also starting to get involved in urban/community agriculture, which is something I'd like to stay involved in long-term; so far, I've done a little volunteering for a local land trust that runs several urban agriculture programs, and for that work I'm starting to study calculus and review the botany and geology I learned in college.

Free Time

I feel incredibly lucky that I can have my cake and eat it too as far as my job is concerned. I'm not making loads of money, but I'm making enough to meet what I consider to be my basic needs. And, the time that I gain from only having a part-time job is worth an incredible amount to me. I have the time to be me, to read, to think, to talk to friends for hours, to walk instead of taking the bus, to turn my wall into a ridiculous collage of a frog (well, I haven't done that yet – I'm still collecting green, blue, and brown paper).

Having a job where I only work 20 to 35 hours per week is central to my plan of rekindling my unschooler perspective. The lifestyle I had as an unschooler was too good to give up. So, by both luck and design, I'm returning to that lifestyle now.

Columnist Peter Kowalke grew without schooling and is now a journalist and the producer of "Grown Without Schooling", a documentary about grown homeschoolers and the lasting influence of home education. For more of Peter's fascinating interviews with grown homeschoolers, visit his website at www.GrownWithoutSchooling.com. **- LL -**

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