

OAKTAG AND EYEBALLS:
THOUGHTS ON CHILDHOOD, EDUCATION,
AND SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

SCHOOL DAZE: MOSTLY A MEMOIR

When I was ten or eleven, my mother told me about a newspaper article which had caught her attention and which, so it seemed to me, she'd felt was pertinent to our family and its way of thinking. The article was about a sixth grader, around my own age, who was working on some project (a giant collage, perhaps, or a construction paper fairy village with quarter-inch houses and stores taped to sidewalks drawn on a cutting board swiped from the kitchen, much like the one my sister and I were making at the time). Whatever it was, the girl was so absorbed in it that she insisted on working on it through all her waking hours. In the throes of inspiration and energy, she neither could nor wanted to get away from it, much as an adult artist or inventor might be. So important was it to her that she refused to go to school.

She would resume her normal activities, she politely explained to everyone, when the project was finished; in the meantime, this project took priority. And the adults in her life listened to her. Her parents and teachers held a conference, or two, and decided to allow her to stay out of school for the duration of the project. From the way my mother described the article, I had the feeling that her parents and teachers might have been something like my own parents and teachers who, as my mother later told me, had already agreed with one another to "leave Marion alone. She's a different kind of child". In my case, it was a matter of looking the other way when they noticed me daydreaming, or working on a math problem in history class. I like to think that, if I had been like the girl in the newspaper article and had pulled the same ultimatum, the adults in my life would have acted similarly.

I do remember growing up with the vague feeling that, if anything vital in my life or work were ever to conflict with school, it would be school that would have to go. Over the years, this feeling has carried over into my adult life, and especially into my life as a parent with school-aged children. I have always kept school in a kind of perspective. Even before our family began home-schooling, and even after we were no longer home-schooling, we have always kept to the mindset of that long-ago article which my mother so long ago shared with me. School is not the only way to live and learn. In fact, it might not be the best way and at least at times, it runs the risk of *preventing* living and learning in the best ways, or any other ways.

The history of the world's accomplishments and breakthroughs includes numerous examples of artists, writers, scientists, inventors, and so on dropping out of both school and employment, or out of any set pattern of life, temporarily or permanently. I believe that it would be a good thing if creative, and perhaps also non-creative, people were free to evaluate and decide *when* to drop out, as well as when to not drop out, or when to drop back in – and if society could be able and willing to support these informed and serious decisions, as it did for the girl in that newspaper article.

At this point I would like to address any readers who might feel that all this sounds “spoiled” or “privileged”, or who might be thinking “But what about responsibility?” Yes, responsibility is important. In fact, responsibility is precisely what I’m talking about. Responsibility is a word that will be appearing quite frequently throughout this book. And by responsibility, I mean *ultimate* responsibility. At this point I’ll throw out two questions: What is responsibility? And: responsibility for what? It is my belief that, to a large extent, responsibility is meaningful only when it is responsibility for things which we have chosen ourselves, in an informed and, yes, responsible manner. For example, many would agree that to talk about a slave’s “responsibility” to his master makes no sense. And so, perhaps, would it make no sense to talk about the “responsibility” of the girl in that article towards her school and her schoolwork. Indeed, she felt, perhaps correctly, that her responsibility was to her project. And perhaps everyone’s first, and ultimate, responsibility is to determine what her responsibilities are – and what our projects are. Is it spoiled, privileged, or irresponsible to choose what has not been chosen for us?

Getting back to the girl’s project, I’d like to throw out a few more questions: Suppose that she had needed, not weeks, but years to work on it? And suppose that project had been something like a cure for cancer? Or suppose, on the other hand, the project were a small thing, not a specific project at all but a thought, a vague idea? Or perhaps the germ of an idea, which school had prevented from reaching even idea-status? Or suppose that girl had been a woman, and school were replaced by her job? Would it be too much to expect society (at least the way it is right now) to completely accommodate everyone who thought she might be onto something that might save the world?

Well, it would be asking a lot of society. But society could try. It could partially accommodate. It could *feel* accommodating. It could *want* to accommodate. It could have an accommodating mindset. It could, again, try. And if it was unable to succeed, it could be respectful and non-punitive. It could believe that, even considering reality, the right mindset could make a difference. To me, the memory of this sixth-grader invokes my belief in a citizen’s right to give society what she has to give, to cultivate what she is able to and needs to cultivate in order to be able to give it – and to be respected, listened to, and permitted to give – maybe even paid. It’s about a citizen’s right to do her part, even if her part isn’t as obvious as going to school or a job, even if her part isn’t the same as what society thinks it is.

In fact, it might be said that this is *society’s* right, also. At the very least, it’s a nice dream, a nice thing to keep in mind, to put to use if and when we achieve our Utopia.

PARTIALLY ABOUT HOME-SCHOOLING

This book is about how people relate to children, and therefore to one another. It’s about both the bad and the good ways in which they relate, and about how relations can be improved. However, you’re bound to notice that in these pages home-schooling is

mentioned, to put it mildly, quite frequently, even though home-schooling is not the actual topic of this book. Here are some reasons why:

- 1) For the same reason that school is mentioned so frequently – namely, it’s a kind of lifestyle. And both home-schooling and conventional schooling take up a very large part, both time-wise and energy-wise, in any child’s and any parent’s life.
- 2) My own two youngest children home-schooled for eight years and, now that they have also been in school and college, and that I teach in college (albeit courses which I developed myself), I still believe the same things that I believed while home-schooling. These “same things” are what this book is about.
- 3) The experience of home-schooling enhanced, sharpened, and added to these beliefs. That is, it was deeply incorporated into the process of writing this book.
- 4) In fact, I believe that certain ideas, often associated with or inspired by home-schooling, are necessary (though not sufficient) to the care and maintaining of a nice society. (Yes, I mean to use the word “nice”.)
- 5) But I also believe that much of what home-schoolers do has the same dangers as what conventional schoolers do. So in this book, I analyze home-schooling as it is often practiced, and make suggestions.
- 5) Thinking about home-schooling leads to thinking about many other ideas. As I’ll elaborate on later, questioning school can lead to questioning everything – including practices common to many home-schooling families. Indeed, while home-schooling I got to know a lot of home-schooling families and to read a lot of the home-schooling literature. And I noticed that some home-schooling practices and writings seemed wanting. Home-schooling families, in particular home-schooling parents, often fall into the same trappings that conventional schooling adults exhibit. That is also a large part of what this book is about. Thus most of the questioning and warnings in this book have, as its object, both conventional school and home-schools. However, some of it is about only conventional schools so, much as I’d like to maintain “parallel structure”, I can’t always. I will, however, try to be clear as to who and what I’m questioning and warning about.
- 6) To be honest, I envision as my readers parents and educators who are either involved in home-schooling or thinking seriously about home-schooling, whether pro or con.

Many home-schooling parents, and parents who are considering home-schooling for their families, recall their own school “daze” with loathing, or more loathing than fondness. “I hated school,” many say. Lorraine Clark, one of the first home-schooling mothers that I met, says of her impressions upon starting kindergarten, “all of a sudden there was this all-encompassing thing called school. There was never time for anything else after that.”

What follows in this section are my own memories of “school daze”. My impressions of school are subtle. I did not hate school. In fact, I remember liking it. Not do I remember

being conscious of it preventing me from doing anything else; indeed, my friends and I did many of the wonderful and autonomous things that home-schooling kids do now, and my teachers often praised for and encouraged me with for my “projects” (like the girl’s project in that newspaper article?).

But I also remember liking Fridays. Along with the end of June. Indeed, feeling thoroughly ecstatic, as though relieved, though temporarily, of a heavy burden. Also, my memories of school are different, somehow, from my other childhood memories. They’re cloudier, hazier – indeed, more like a “daze” as in the popular expression, “school daze”. That is, each remembered incident is shorter. It’s as though it rises briefly and then sinks, perhaps like a repressed memory of abuse.

I sometimes think that school was so long, so many hours away from home, away from other things – just away. Perhaps, to the child me, it was as long as a lifetime, or as long as the time the Narnia Chronicles children stayed away from their homes and lives. Or perhaps school was, in some quiet way, traumatic, so much so that I now block it out. Perhaps, even – allow me to ad-lib -- that’s why some parents and other adults are so resistant to home-schooling ideas and to questioning school. Perhaps they need, emotionally, to keep blocking out their own childhood “school daze” memories.

Remembering school also brings to me the feeling of being in a roomful of kids, as opposed to only my sister and me or a small group of neighborhood kids. The feeling of all of us sitting in a matrix of desks instead of on the front porch or around the kitchen table. The feeling of being under the care of a teacher instead of somebody’s mother. The feeling of the teacher being a kind of “Klimt’s mother”, all of us clutching, perhaps even balancing on, her robe.

Was there something nightmarish about school? I remember the spring before starting kindergarten, the visit my mother and I made to the school, my mother and I sitting with the principal in her office. The principal (whose name, Mrs. Welsh, stands out, as names associated with school often seem to stand out) probably spoke kindly to me. She probably said something like “This is where you’ll be going next year. Would you like to come here next year?” My mother probably nodded and smiled; she probably touched my shoulder or put her arm around me and I probably, vaguely, thought, “How far off is next year?” or “Will I be going all day?” Maybe even “How come my mother’s so anxious to agree with the principal?”

I remember the way the chairs in the principal’s office were arranged, along with the feeling that my future, or something, was being plotted. I might have realized that it was no more my mother’s choice than it was mine. I might have recognized a complete lack of control on everybody’s part.

I remember my first day, walking to school with the other kids. Some of those kids were different kids from the ones I usually played with. And I remember the brick outside wall of that school, Pinegrove, and the steps, two of them, and a door, *the* door. But the memory of my first day of school does not go in that door. More clearly I remember the

second day. Lunchtime. Or was it recess? I don't remember *wanting* to go home; what I remember is *setting out* to go home. A teacher, or somebody, asked me, "Where are you going?" "Home" I answered. "Oh," she told me, probably kindly, "you're not allowed to go home." And I wonder. What am I *not remembering*? What are these screen memories of?

We were allowed to bring our toys to school, but we had to leave them on the table by the door. I remember hoisting my Janey doll by her legs and flinging her onto what to me was a very high surface, up to my shoulders. Only vaguely do I remember the feeling of relinquishment, the slight worry that the dolls would get mixed up, that someone would take Janey by mistake. The loss of control was a couple of rungs higher than that associated with childhood in general.

It was kindergarten. Most of the time we played. Or so my mother later told me. So why do I remember the blackboard? Why do I remember so much sitting? And "make three red balls"? And me left row back seat, Jackie right row front seat, and the bully, Steve, somewhere in the middle. Why don't I remember playing?

With a photographic memory I can re-create the mats on which we napped, though not the napping itself. And the story hour corner, though none of the stories. I remember pretty songs that I still hum quite often. "You Are My Sunshine" and "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine". It's different from other childhood memories. It feels like a guided tour of place – no time, no action, just place.

School was the beginning of what I came to call "my worries". They didn't really start until fifth grade, but the first one was in kindergarten. I call it "the Venetian blind incident". The teacher had asked me to do something and I had said "no." Just no. "Sit in the corner," I was told. "No."

I had decided that, no matter what she said, I could, as the saying now goes "just say no". But when she suggested sitting by the window, that somehow appealed to me. I played with the Venetian blind cord. I pulled and twisted it and eventually tied it into knots. Soon it became like biting my nails. I didn't mean to but I knotted much too much. I couldn't unknit. I kept trying.

I didn't tell the teacher. And when I got home I didn't tell my mother. All that evening and the next morning I worried. I was afraid I'd done some horrible impossible-to-undo thing; the blinds would never work again and the whole school would somehow be broken. I'd never tell or maybe I would; either way I'd always, forever and ever, have been a very bad little girl. I was not brought up Catholic, or even religious, and I didn't know about hell, but I felt that I'd committed a sin beyond horrible. Kids feel that way a lot, but it's worse when it's associated with school, something away from home.

When I got to school the next morning I glanced from my desk over at the Venetian blinds and saw that the cord was completely free of knots. But I don't remember thinking "whew"; I just remember "oh".

I skipped first grade. “Because of your age,” said my jealous friend Frances. “Because you already knew everything they were teaching,” said my mother, years later. Everyone had been very cautious and considerate about skipping me. My parents, teachers, and principal had held at least one meeting. Would I adjust? Would it go smoothly for me? We had recently moved. This was probably the best time to skip, since I hadn’t yet formed my friendships except—and this was a plus—a girl I liked was in the second grade and would be in my new class. That was Frances. Who would my childhood best friend have been if I hadn’t skipped first grade?

Sometimes I still feel that I *miss* first grade. I had only two weeks of it, with a very nice teacher named Miss Williams. I remember, the next week standing outside the auditorium doors. The fifth grade was putting on a play; the kids were dressed as flowers; beautiful pastel colors took up the entire stage. I wanted very badly to go through those doors and watch the play. But it was the first grade’s assembly day, and when it had been the second grade’s turn, I had been in first grade. I would never see that play. I’ve always felt that skipping first grade meant skipping a year of my *life*. If I hadn’t skipped first grade I’d’ve had one more year without changing classes and men teachers. And one more year at this school, one more year without all my friends wearing lipstick and stockings, and smoking and talking about boys. I’d be one year younger, even now. Grade was more important than age. School was more important than life.

I wanted very badly to please each teacher. I was in truth sensitive, quiet, sweet, creative, and also school-smart – “a different kind of child” – so pleasing the teacher was quite easy to come by. I called it “creeping into the teacher’s heart”. Every year when I started a new grade with a new teacher, my mother would jokingly ask, “Well, did you creep into the teacher’s heart yet?” And I usually had. I wrote stories and drew pictures for “extra credit (not even knowing what the term “extra credit” meant; to me it simply meant doing work that wasn’t assigned or done in class). And I played the piano.

I was already getting all A’s. Further, neither my parents nor I particularly cared about A’s. Apparently, however, I wanted or needed *more* than A’s. Perhaps what I wanted and needed was the attention—the heart – of the teacher. Perhaps what I wanted and needed was the same kind of attention from my teachers that I was getting – or wanted to get – from my parents. If, six hours a day, I couldn’t have my mother, I’d settle for the teacher.

But in Junior High – seventh and eighth grade in a traumatic new school – it was a lot harder to creep into the teachers’ hearts, because I was less of a child. In high school it was even harder; I was even less of a child. But I went to a new and great music and art high school, and the teachers there had more heart, especially for the writings that I dished out and the theorems that, miraculously for high school, I proved and sometimes invented. But college was impossible. I was supposed to be all, or mostly, grown up; it wasn’t a matter of hearts. It was a matter of brains. Well, I had brains, and I *was* getting more grown up. And I had won my first husband’s heart. But sometimes I think that, to this day, I try to creep into, and stay crept into, people’s hearts. Maybe that’s what my writing and publishing is all about.

Can I blame that on the institution of school? Who knows? There are other institutions of childhood, and of the family, and of society, that I also question and will talk about later on in this book. Libraries, programs “for” children, camp –I think of them all as school-like, in not-good ways.

The other day my husband and I saw the film “Boyhood”. It was basically about childhood, or one boy’s childhood -- everything seen from a child’s eyes. My husband remarked, “During the movie I kept thinking that adults are always *bothering* children. Always wanting things from them. Like ‘did you do your homework?’ and about things like sports, ‘there! I *knew* you could do it’.”

“And,” I added, “various projects in school that the teachers sick on the kids.” Papers, performances, and so on. I remembered and told my husband about the way I, as a kid, dealt with these projects. What I basically did was try to “out-creative” the teachers. Do the projects my way, sometimes tweeking the assignment. If, for example, our writing teacher asked us to write about “my mother’s positive qualities”, I began my paper with “I don’t know too much about my mother’s positive qualities, but I do know that my mother often seems to be so positive that she’s right” and I went on to tell of an incident where my mother was proven wrong, by me, and she admitted it. Teachers usually appreciated this tweeking, praising me to the skies as they allowed me further into their hearts. Once, though, a teacher wrote on the paper “C. Not the assignment” and that hurt. But this M.O. helped make me a survivor of the adult intervention into my life and time.

Kitty Anderson, who coordinated the support group Center City Home-Schoolers with me, has an interesting memory of her sixth grade year. Her school odyssey was different from mine, but school still gave her a definite impression of what the world expected from her. Like me, she liked school, was a model student, both grade-wise and behavior-wise. But one day she misbehaved, for the very first time, and was reprimanded. No mention was made of her prior, and future, perfect behavior. “Oh, I see,” she thought, at the time, with the power of conscious revelation. “They want *all* of me. They want it *all*.”

I mentioned my “worries” that for the most part began in fifth grade. That’s when we started “changing classes”, meaning different teachers and different rooms for different subjects. They began to give us more responsibilities, things to keep track of. We had to remember to bring notes home, bring lunch and money for school trips. Reports were due every few months, on specified dates. I’d worry about it all, the way adults worry about dentist appointments or job interviews, and the way I did not at the time worry about anything at home. If something was due at school on a particular day, I’d divide all of time into before and after that day. And I’d be relieved when that day was over.

I actually called them “my worries”. And usually, as soon as one worry was over, another had already begun.

MY KIDS' SCHOOL DAZE

When my son Arin was in first grade, he came home from school one day and handed me a spelling test. “SIG,” it read in bold letters. “RIG. THIG. SIGIG.” A proud, perhaps naïve, mother, I smiled to myself and thought, “My little Arin! He actually knows these words, or almost knows them. Ring, thing, singing – he’s actually writing, and I can read and understand what he’s writing!” But my joy quickly turned to heart-thumping when I saw what had been written in red at the top of the paper. “VERY VERY POOR.”

What school does, I sadly reflected, is take perfectly adequate, which is what most kids and most people are, and divide it into petty little categories. First, from VERY GOOD to VERY VERY POOR, then 1 to 5, then A to F. It all seemed so unnecessary and harmful, and again, petty. RIG, SIG, and SIGIG was a step towards ring, thing, and singing. It was a step which would obviously eventually, if not soon, be taken by Arin. I couldn’t, and can’t, see what all the fuss and worry was about. Arin did learn to read and soon enough, and now he reads a lot. He reads because he wants or needs to, and having once written SIG, THIG, and SIGIG posed no problem that I (nor any of his later teachers in school) could discern. In short, school – and school-type things – make too much of a big deal about little nonsenses. Everyone seems so nervous – almost, sometimes, as though they want to be nervous. When, I often find myself facetiously asking, are they going to grow up?!

Over the years similar incidents, and similar reflections concerning these incidents, caused my then-husband and me to be very strong believers in what is now called home-schooling. We felt that consciously trying to teach children things which they would probably eventually learn anyway, or which they did not necessarily need to learn, did not seem to be the optimal way to go about living with children. It seemed complicated, negative, and unnecessary. We read books by authors like John Holt and Nancy Wallace, and subscribed to various home-schooling newsletters like Growing without Schooling (nicknamed GWS). As we continued our lives as the parents of school-aged children, we asked ourselves questions: If a student fails a test, and then passes a later test, why can’t the later and better grade count? Sure, in adult life, there are situations where you don’t get a second chance, but there are also situations where you do. And school isn’t adult life. Do kids need to go overboard in “getting ready for” adult life? Doesn’t the approaching of adult life, all by itself, help them get ready for it? What difference, we asked, does it make if a kid learns third-grade material at fourth-grade age? If school is “preparation for life”, why is one year considered so important? And how is a beginner supposed to distinguish between the math motivation and the math itself? And why is reading considered a separate subject, when kids are constantly reading in their *other* subjects? Isn’t a history book a book? Aren’t *all* books “reading books”?!

Marielle’s kindergarten teacher would tell us about her reading. “She CAN do it; she just doesn’t.” Later we’d overhear her say similar things to the other parents and, four years later, about Arin. I realized that, when I was a kid, that’s what some of my teachers said to my parents. I also recalled the psychological tests I was given because I wasn’t

“functioning up to capacity”. Just because a child has “capacity” or “potential, we’d ask ourselves, does that mean she *must* produce? Produce, moreover, immediately, and continuously? Can’t it wait; must the ability to perform instantaneously become performance itself? Can’t there be some “practice time” or “rest time”?

We had several meetings with the very accessible and accommodating principal, Mr. Brown, concerning Marielle’s kindergarten teacher, whom many of the parents perceived as being too strict. During one such conference Mr. Brown looked slightly wistful. “You know,” he began, “I see them come in as kindergarteners and they’re so cute, so happy, so open. And then I see them go out as eighth-graders and they’re so different, so angry-looking, so hostile, so unhappy. And I wonder, what do we do to them?”

“Do you want me to answer that?” I asked.

“Sure,” he shrugged seriously.

“Well,” I began. “Well of course, they grow up; they become adolescents – confused, scared, etc., just because of their age. But also – “ I looked up and he nodded “ – what we ‘do’ to them is send them to school. School is... well, school is school. It’s something they have to do. It’s compulsory, it’s often degrading, it’s every day, it’s... it’s school.”

I was probably not explaining very well but Mr. Brown (remember, the principal) answered, “You’re probably right.”

Why was I not yet home-schooling? Partly because I knew I would have to ask permission and I was afraid to, didn’t know how to go about it. And partly because I thought home-schooling would be time-consuming. I thought it wouldn’t leave me time and space for writing and math. Also, perhaps, for the same reason that Mr. Brown was continuing to be school principal. Schooling was/is the norm, the status quo. We would have to break the inertia in order to stop schooling. The burden of proof was not on schooling but on not-schooling.

Indeed, there were and are many people who believe in home-schooling but who are not, for some of those same reasons. In fact, during my first year as the mother of a child in school, the kindergarten parents used to congregate in the school yard. I wasn’t the only one who felt a general discomfort around the idea of sending a child off to school for the first time, and with the idea of school in general. I wasn’t the only one to remark, “The teacher seems so military” and “Can’t she just say ‘good morning’ to the kids, instead of right away ordering them around, telling them what to do?”

But I was the only one to ask, “WHY do we send them to school? Couldn’t they learn just as much at home and do just as well?”

At this the other parents were at first silent. Then one of them said, “Well, school is GOOD for kids...” She left her sentence trailing and sort of shrugged. Then another began, “They get a chance to meet other kids...” She also gestured helplessly as I

answered, "Have they been lonely up to now?" and as I concluded, "I think we all know darn well that we send them because it's the law, or we THINK it's the law; actually, I know several people who DON'T send their kids to school." I paused. "Maybe we send them to school only because we somehow feel we have to, because that's status quo; it would be hard to NOT send them."

The parents in the group looked downcast. One of them said, "I'd like to talk with you some more about it." Nothing came of that particular encounter, but I do remember all of us looking down, in silent thought.

HOW AND WHY WE TOOK OUR KIDS OUT OF SCHOOL

Even as I got used to sending my kids to school, even as we sent two other kids to school, I always wondered whether it might be better if we didn't. It seemed there were always little incidents happening in our kids' classrooms; mostly I noticed that if, at any given moment, we walked into the room, we almost always found the teacher scolding or reprimanding someone, if not the entire class, usually for something that would not be considered forbidden outside the classroom. I would feel guilty. I should, I'd think, march right into that classroom and yank my kid out of there. I should stand up for my kids and for my beliefs.

But the school was what is usually referred to as a "good" one. The teachers were dedicated and, at least when we held parent-teacher conferences, seemed to know what kids are about. If there were any peer group problems, they understood the issues, as well as the dynamics, and were usually quick to solve the problem. The principal was even better at this. So since it was a "good" school that my kids attended, it was very tempting to let well enough alone. The incentive to make any change wasn't as great as if the school had not been a "good" one. Besides, again, I was busy with writing and with my part-time career of adjuncting in various math departments at various colleges.

But in winter of 1985, sitting at "the goat" statue in Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square with my youngest, two-week-old Devin, one of the other mothers whom I knew only casually came up to me. "Are you the same Marion Cohen who's listed in *Growing without Schooling*?"

"Oh, you read *Growing without Schooling*?" I answered.

Yes she did. We began talking. She had a two-year-old son whom she was planning to keep out of school. This was before the 1988 passage of what's known as "the Pennsylvania home-schooling law"; at that time people in Pennsylvania who wanted to home-school either went "underground", simply not registering their children for school and hoping that neighbors wouldn't report them, or else they asked permission of the local school district (and, to my knowledge, they usually got it), or else they used a recognized correspondence school, usually Calvert, which was perfectly legal, although more structured and school-like than many home-schooling families would like.

Merilee and I became friends; we often talked about home-schooling and we decided to form a support group for parents who were considering home-schooling or who already were. At first it was only she, I, and another neighborhood parent who needed support in her decision not to send her pre-schooler to daycare. Her concern was that, in her experience, kids changed completely once they began regularly attending such a place. "It's the peer group thing," we agreed. "Once they're separated from their homes and have to fend for themselves, to some extent at least, they need to develop defenses. And kids that little haven't the resources to be in control of the situation." This was perhaps a generality and an over-simplification, but it was a good start.

We soon picked up new members; Merilee had a friend, Janis had a neighbor, we advertised in local home-schooling newsletters and local newspapers, and posted flyers. We met every two weeks, usually in my kitchen (since my then-husband, Jeff, who had multiple sclerosis, was a wheelchair user, and I was often his caregiver). Besides, Jeff wanted to be at the meetings and most of the other houses weren't wheelchair accessible. In our household the conversations were often about home-schooling, and the ambiance was pretty "home-school-y". We got more and more used to the idea of actually home-schooling; home-schooling began to feel like the norm, almost like the status-quo. In time, the Pennsylvania home-schooling law was passed. And so, when Bret's peer group problems at school became aggravated, and when the education itself began to grate on him (He was particularly angry about homework. "They have no right to tell us what to do at home, TOO," he said and we agreed), we gave serious thought to simply taking him out of school.

We decided that Bret would finish out his fourth-grade year, take the summer to think it over, then have made a decision by September. Certainly, we realized, Bret wasn't the first child to be stressed by school (which, to me, is part of the point) or by peer group, nor is he the first person to be stressed, period. But every psychologist knows that there are at least two kinds of "stressed"; one means stressed because of inner conflicts and psychological baggage, and the other means stressed because of the situation itself. There comes a point, or there should come a point, when we cease to say "That's life", when it's our responsibility as human beings and citizens to say no. There are times when "sticking with it" is not the answer and when "quitting" is. Sometimes it's more subtle than others, and sometimes it's more controversial than others.

I often think of the less subtle examples. Like Hitler Youth. Think of a kid not taking to it and of the family dilemma whether to allow the kid to drop out. And think of neighbors saying "But that's life" or "that's part of being a citizen" or "it's called responsibility".

What happened in September was exactly what Jeff and I guessed would happen. Bret, like most kids, caught the "back to school" bug and chose to go "back to school", complete with "back to school" clothes and school supplies. And two weeks later, when "back to school" had become back *in* school, Bret decided that he wanted to not be in school at all. We said "okay", and it *was* okay.

We found it fantastic! More than okay! Life became simplified. Not *over*-simplified, just simplified in a good way. No tests, no homework, no criticism, or judgment, no unenjoyable or meaningless or unnecessary work, no negative self-images, no all-too-temporary positive self-images that come from a single A, no battles over homework, no waking up at 7:30, no going to bed early on “school nights”. And no revolving our lives around “dinner hour” because that was the only time the family had to all be together. There was, instead, the time and the freedom to get involved in long-term all-day projects, and for Bret to baby-sit for his little brother during “school hours” and earn a little money for himself. Earning money gave him a sense of control, which went a little way toward counteracting the loss of control we all experienced from Jeff’s illness and disabilities.

And since Bret was home, not necessarily more hours, but more *varied* hours – and not away every weekday from 8:00 ‘til 3:00 -- he could notice more of what our home was like; he could notice what needed to be done, and act accordingly. Our whole family was, and felt, more together.

I don’t mean to sound one-sided nor “rah-rah-home-schooling” but it is true that, for us, not doing the school thing felt great. It was really empowering to finally be doing what we’d believed in for so many years – and not having, every evening, to say things like “We don’t believe in homework but have you done your homework yet?” We liked and valued ourselves more.

SUMMARY OF THE REST OF THIS BOOK

As perhaps readers can tell by now, some approaches to home-schooling excite me more than others. Also, I don’t believe that home-schooling in and of itself is going to solve all problems, either of individual families or of the world. In fact, serious questions can arise from what I’ve come to call uninformed credos and practices associated with home-schooling (and sometimes with school-schooling as well). As I will try to show in Chapter 1, “what’s wrong” can happen in the home and out in the world as well in schools. And as I will try to show in Chapter 2, “what’s wrong” is often associated with bowing to authorities of various kinds, not only school-type authorities. To me what I call “questioning everything” is at the crux of childhood, education, and societal issues; it’s not only a matter of whether or not children go to school. School is not the only institution, and therefore not the only thing to take with a grain of salt. The home is another example of an institution. Chapter 3 will describe several institutions, which I call authorities.

Being uninformed about the many possibilities of home-schooling can lead to serious problems and disturbing questions. There are many examples of this, which will soon be described in detail. For now I will touch on only one:

Being unaware of the true power of home-schooling – in particular, that home-schooling doesn’t entail parents doing the same things that the schools do, and to the same ends -- can lead to problems within the family such as what is called “home-school burnout”, as

well as power struggles between parents and kids (often of the same ilk as when parents try to get kids to do “their” homework). This in turn causes society to understandably ponder whether parents “can” home-school their kids, and causes parents to feel that they have to buy expensive curricula which, in turn, leads to the risk of home-schooling as an institution being classist, among other things. Because of this, minority parents contemplating home-schooling but not informed about the full range of possibilities, often feel that home-schooling isn’t their cup of tea, or that their status in life precludes home-schooling for them, or that home-schooling would be oppressive for them. Thus misconceptions about home-schooling ignore its political significances.

All in all, home-schooling done in uninformed, apolitical, ways can lead to big problems, both political and personal. It is not only for reasons having to do with educational theory, nor even “for the sake of the kids”, that I advocate a “freedom and simplicity” style of home-schooling. Consider the slogan of INFACT: “Breast feeding is empowering to mothers”. In a similar manner, home-schooling is empowering to mothers. (In fact, it’s been called “the mother’s milk of education”.) Both empowerments come from being freed from dependence upon big business and other societal culprits.

However, to both slogans I would add, before the word “is”, “in a socially conscious manner”. The more consciously both breast feeding and home-schooling are applied, the more extensive becomes the empowerment. In the case of breast feeding: If mothers become persuaded, by government and by society, that for example their milk is no good, or not enough, or that they shouldn’t nurse in public, that babies should be “encouraged” to go without feeding for a particular length of time, and so on, then the “power of mother’s milk” becomes undermined. Analogously, the various societal qualifications concerning home-schooling reduce its empowerment.

To me, home-schooling means simply NOT SENDING KIDS TO SCHOOL. In particular, it does not mean staying at home. “Home-schooling” for me is a misnomer. It isn’t necessarily always home and it isn’t necessarily always schooling.

As for “the rest of this book”, here’s a synopsis:

The first chapter, titled “What’s Wrong”, is about just that. “What’s wrong” refers not only to what’s wrong in the schools but to what’s wrong in other adult-organized “children’s” activities as well, including some home-schooling ones, and in general in society’s treatment of and attitudes concerning children (and of humans). Examples of “what’s wrong” include the compulsory nature of learning, homework and other ways of controlling families’ lives, exaggerated peer group contact, over-emphasis on the “difference” between learning and not-learning, and “the potential trap”.

The second chapter, “Questioning Everything: The Many Subtle Faces of Authority”, is perhaps the crux of this book (and was most fun to write). Home-schooling parents and advocates often talk about “authority” in the form of schools, and about how we must struggle against internalizing that authority in our homes and in our minds. But few home-schoolers seem to take into the account the forms of authority which the *home* can

take, and how this can extend into what many home-schoolers call “out in the world”. Consider, for example, the various activities of which home-schooling kids and families can and often feel obligated to partake, and to which home-schooling parents, sometimes in desperation and need, turn: Girl Scouts, art classes, the Y, Little League. All of these, while often positive experiences, also share many school-like features with the schools. Libraries, performances, and books “for” children can also be suspect. It is not so much these phenomena themselves that bother me, as the authority status which they are so often given. These are also authorities within the home-schooling community itself, especially in the form of curriculum companies or home-schooling “experts”, but also certain practices and mindsets. It is in this second chapter that I caution parents, home-schooling or not, to be wary of and to question... well, everything. After all, this is a schooling society and, even if everyone were to discontinue conventional schooling tomorrow, it would very possibly remain a schooling society for a long time to come.

The third chapter, “Re-Thinking Creativity” is a chapter all its own because of its huge scope and because of the space when I needed to give it. But it’s really a part of Chapter Two. In our society, the word “creativity” has become so loaded that it often acts as an authority. For all parents, being a parent can be scary. And for home-schoolers there is an additional consideration, an additional sense in which the word is loaded: home-schoolers are pioneers, doing something which is different and apart from the bulk of society, so they’re understandably scared. So they often need to be able to say things like “Johnny can’t read but he’s creative”. And for this purpose Johnny needs, in order to assuage his parents’ fears and uncertainties (and those of the other adults in his life), to be creative *immediately*. Whereas true creativity – or rather, *proof* of creativity, in the form of paintings, poems, and so on -- often takes decades to manifest.

Businesses, including home-schooling businesses and “home businesses”, can play on all this, and other special interest groups cash in on what I call “the childhood creativity mania”. What is real creativity and what is part of that mania? How can we separate it all out? How can adults be more sensitive, and less nervous, about the phenomenon of “child creativity”, or lack of? What if a child, or a person, is *not* creative? Or not creative *yet*? In general, how do society’s attitudes towards creativity expose and reflect its attitudes towards children in general?

Chapter Four, “New Heights in Non-Structure” is a kind of corollary to Chapters Two and Three, almost an excuse to do even more subtle questioning. It describes the possibilities, the emotional “heights” that can be ours if and when we do this subtle questioning. In effect, it shifts the concentration from “what’s wrong” to “what’s right”, or what can be right. The chapter has a lot to do with giving ourselves and our children permission to feel, respect, and act on emotion. Permission to not-write in cursive, or not-read to your children – these can feel very liberating.

The fifth and last chapter is “The Politics of All This”. As we have begun to see, these ideas are not a-political. It’s not only a matter of education or child-rearing or even lifestyle. Modern issues such as minority, economic, abuse, women’s, and day-to-day life issues connect with these ideas. Although, for example, minority and women’s groups

often shy away from and/or are wary of home-schooling and home-schooling ideas, in actuality these groups, and individuals within these groups, have much to gain by dipping, or plunging, into them. Schools and school-type authorities are often oppressive to minorities, including women.

After the abolition of authority, society would possibly restructure itself gradually in many subtle ways. Certain words, such as “success”, “work” “play”, “teach” and “learn” might take on new meanings, or even cease to exist at all. Priorities might change. What we think of as “human nature” might change. It is my belief that—without authority – people would still “work” just as “hard”, or just as committed-ly, perhaps more. (We wouldn’t lose our doctors, nor our trash collectors.) But people would work *for different reasons*. They might work because they felt the need for their work.

Ah! What might it feel like to grow up secure! And to live secure!

CHAPTER ONE: WHAT'S WRONG

At first, I was planning to call this chapter “What’s Wrong with Schools”. Then, as I began writing it, I realized more and more that many or most of “what’s wrong” occurs in society as a whole, including home-schooling situations.

“What’s Wrong with Both the Schools and Home-schooling”? “What’s Wrong with Structured Schooling”? “What’s Wrong with Structured Home-schooling”? “What’s Wrong with Society”? “What’s Wrong, Period”? I decided upon the present title, which I hope says what I mean, and which I hope will become clear to readers.

Much of this chapter applies to all schools without exception, because many “things wrong” are inherent to the whole idea of school. But some of it applies only to *most* schools. What I hope the reader will do is read open-mindedly and honestly, to see what she recognizes from the schools and other situations in her own life. I’ve already talked about how, to my family, home-schooling has been an opportunity, not so much to do things that schools don’t do, as to *not* do things that schools *do* do. So home-schooling is an opportunity to delete, to get rid of, to house-clean.

Twenty or so years ago, when I first began to think about home-schooling, I just assumed that that’s how other people who were interested in home-schooling thought of it. I assumed, in the language of the next chapter, that they, like me, were “questioning everything”. I naively did not realize that many people were interested in the very opposite: home-schooling as an opportunity, not to omit, but to add on – to teach children more things, faster, with more structure and discipline, more “homework”, towards greater accomplishment and – again in the language of the next chapter – greater bowing to certain authorities. I didn’t realize that many people are interested in home-schooling because they believe that the schools aren’t schooling *enough*.

There are, I suppose, some situations, perhaps in “bad” or poor neighborhoods, where this might actually be a legitimate concern (although, as I’ll elaborate on later, more school-like school is very possibly the *worst* way to solve the problems of disadvantaged families). At any rate, that is not what this chapter is about. This chapter is about the things which schools, and some home-schools, do, things which I believe are wrong and harmful, and more harmful the more of it they do. I feel that schools, including many home-schools, make too much of a big deal about education. They often make too much of a big deal about anything involving children. That to me is the gist of “what’s wrong”. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the big deal is made about the wrong things, and in the wrong ways. The more money, time, and energy put into the wrong ways, the less money, time and energy is left for the right ways. In fact, the wrong ways often preclude the right ways.

In “The Hurried Child” David Elkind talks about “conspicuous concern”. This is probably a good concept to keep in mind when reading this book. “Conspicuous concern” is analogous to “conspicuous consumption”, which Thorsten Veblen describes at great length in his book, “The Theory of the Leisure Class”. As I understand it, “conspicuous

consumption” is consumption of material and intellectual products (including books and, as Veblen’s last chapter is titled, “Higher Learning”), not out of any real desire, need, benefit, or enjoyment, but out of a drive to *show others* – or perhaps, on an emotional and/or psychological level, show themselves – what they have, meaning what they can financially afford. Analogously, Elkind’s “conspicuous concern” refers to the drive to show our concern, genuine or not, for our children. That is, adults try to show, or prove, how concerned they are, via tangible evidence and symbols such as fancy toys, expensive schools, time consuming inconvenient extracurricular activities, certain kinds of parental involvement, and so on. This is often far too independent of how much *actual* concern, or love, that they have for their children.

So conspicuous concern is different from actual concern. Again, it’s the appearance of concern. It’s important to keep in mind that it is not only parents who are guilty of this conspicuous concern, but also the expensive, or “best”, schools, clothes, and so on – plus the authorities from which all these arise. Indeed, conspicuous concern seems to be *synonymous* with “big deal”, or perhaps with the authorities analyzed in the next chapter, or with the about-to-be-analyzed “what’s wrong” of the present chapter. What follows are examples of “what’s wrong”:

TOO MUCH TIME

School, as I’ve already said, takes up too much time. Kids go five out of seven days, starting very early in the morning and ending so late that there’s barely time to do much else before being called for supper, or reminded about homework. After supper, it’s either more homework or preparation for bed because, after all, unless it’s Friday it’s a school night (and Sunday is a school night, too – in fact, Saturday is the only one that’s not either a school night or a school day). And this goes on for thirteen or more years (after which, of course, the kids are now adults, with college or jobs).

Most people are so used to this state of affairs that they give it little thought. (Thus the above paragraph has no shock value for most.) Many people vaguely lament that they hardly see their kids, and some admit that when they do see their kids, things are pretty harried. They might sigh resignedly. But school and school-like activities seem a fact of life, almost biologically determined. Few people question it.

The situation could, of course, be worse. Kids could have to go to *work* every day at 7:30 (or earlier), or to war. Yes, compared to some situations (which unfortunately have existed or still do in some places), school isn’t half-bad, and far from horrible. But this is speaking *relatively*. The fact that something could get worse is no argument in its favor.

Does it really take six hours a day to learn to read? And if so, is it worth it? Adults often compare school to adult employment. One of the things they say is that school prepares kids for the world of work. Well, is *that* worth it? In fact, *does* it prepare kids for the world of work? Yes, schooling is *required* to get hired in many position, but does school actually make a person more qualified? In actuality, when kids grow up and go to work,

home-schooled kids have no more trouble than conventionally schooled kids, and maybe less (because, for example, they have a head start in deciding what kind of work they want or are good at, and perhaps they've had a head start in actually doing that work. Also, kids who don't go to school often learn responsibility and commitment in a more meaningful way than kids who do go to school. They also often learn *self*-discipline.)

Many adults feel that, because the adults in the household work, the kids should have something in their lives that's analogous to work. But is that so? Are kids miniature adults? Do kids have the same need, or the same motivation, to work? Do kids have the same control over the "work" they do? Do kids truly understand the need to "work"? *Is* there a need for them to "work"? (Do they earn money? Have they chosen their "job", in any sense of the word "chosen"?) Many adults say, as a form of pep-talk or as a ploy to get their kids to cooperate in the morning, "Mommy and Daddy are going to *their* work, and *you're* going to *your* work." Do the kids relate to that? Note the expressions on their faces next time it happens.

School involves not merely too much time; it's essentially *all* the time. Our lives revolve around school. Not only kids' lives but those of the entire family. And not only hours and days but years and decades. A mother I know, who with her husband owns and manages a small stand of ethnic clothes and accessories, and thus does a lot of traveling to the countries where these clothes are made, talks about her concern for her four-year-old son. "What're we going to do next year?" she asks. "We go traveling four times a year, two months at a time. What about his schooling?" Unless they decide to home-school, this family's life and work (not only six hours a day) will soon have to change drastically.

Because school takes up so much time, it takes away from people's time to do other things. The above example is obvious; conventional schooling would mean no more trips to Guatemala, no more family business. But every kid in school gives up huge chunks of his life – visits during the week, sleepovers, out-of-town friendships. Indeed, every family with a kid in school has its lifestyle pretty much determined by that fact.

Many parents might talk in terms of "commitment to education". Sometimes this makes sense -- graduate school, for example, where the student has truly committed to a particular field of study. Or a specialized high school (art and music, for example), or the first year of a formerly home-schooling child who has, indeed, decided to commit her energy to trying out school. But by and large, is "education" a commitment which either parents or children have actually *chosen*? Is it a commitment they even understand? Is it a meaningful commitment?

What does commitment mean, anyway? I'm reminded of that scene from "Roots" when the master sells the couple's daughter, justifying it by "As long as everyone follows the rules, I treat them well." Who has made the rules? And who has chosen to commit to them?

Is education a commitment? Or is it something parents “commit” to because everyone else does, or because they believe they’ll get in legal trouble if they don’t. Are they afraid they’ll get punished by “Master”?

Even if education is a commitment, is school the only place to get it? What’s meant by education? Must it take up our children’s entire, or almost entire, childhood?

I could cop out and say “everyone has to answer these questions for herself”. But in answering these questions, “everyone” would need to be completely informed, and not be swayed by status quo. Yes, everyone does “need to answer these questions for herself”, but first she needs to answer *other* questions, such as “what do we want our children’s lives to be *about*? What do we want *our* lives to be about? What do we and our children want to learn and do? How much time is really needed for what we have decided?”

“Too much time” can apply to home-schooling families as well. Certainly one factor would be the style of home-schooling, another factor would be how much, for a particular family and a particular kid, is too much. Either way, the issues would probably be more subtle than for conventionally schooling families. Complying with home-schooling laws, in particular record keeping, can take up time. And Devin has lost a “sleepover” or two with a home-schooling friend because that friend “had to do his math”. Gloria Malek, a home-schooling mother who, with her two kids, was hostess to Dev and me at a home-schooling conference near Pittsburgh, emphatically described this state of affairs. “I joined a home-schooling group so my kids could have kids to play with during school hours and you know what?! The other parents always say ‘Mary can’t come over today because she has to do her (home-schooling) work’ or ‘Mary can’t sleep over because we have to get up early tomorrow morning and work’. (It’s a “home-school night!”)

Moreover, as described more fully in the next chapter, many home-schooling families choose to lose their time, and their “freedom and simplicity”, to various adult-organized, non-school activities and to other non-school “authorities”. Home-schoolers, too, need to be wary of devoting too much time to “education”. Even without school, there are many pressures, temptations, distractions, and instances of conspicuous concern out there, all time and life taker-uppers in the name of “education”, or of “concern”.

TOO MUCH INPUT

A friend of mine was once contemplating the several day-care centers which she was investigating for her four-year-old. Telling me about one of them, she frowned and looked skeptical. “I don’t know...” she pondered “In the OTHER one they sang a new song every day...”

I felt bewildered. I hadn’t realized that it was important to “sing a new song every day” (or even every week). I hadn’t realized that it was important to learn a new anything every day. A day is 1/365 of a year, and a lifetime is so many years! What is this preoccupation with “every day”? What is this preoccupation, period? I think about the

songs I sang when I was a kid; if I'd been introduced to a new one everyday, I doubt I'd remember all of them, or any of them, the way I do.

And so it seems to go, from day-care through kindergarten all the way through high school and college. A new song every day. New story every day. "Read to your children at least 15 minutes a day." I know a home-schooling parent who every day asks her five-year old, "What did you do today that was creative?" Another home-schooling parent says, "Do SOMETHING every day." What is it that's fearsome about the sun rising and setting without something being "done"? Isn't the sun rising and setting enough, at least sometimes?

Kids who already love music are taught "Music Appreciation". Kids who already draw, or make collages, are made to do it again, and again, and not on their own terms. Kids have to memorize presidents' birthday, something they'll never remember nor use when they've grown up. Textbooks are large, and expensive. Quantity, quantity, quantity. Clutter, clutter, clutter.

Sometimes it's subtle; no memorization, no sitting still for long periods of time. But pre-schoolers who already move are enrolled in "movement" classes. Infants who are already stimulated go to "infant stimulation" classes. Somehow it seems to count more if the "movement" or "stimulation" is facilitated by a professional "mover" or "stimulator", rather than a parent, friend, or very self. How necessary is any of it? And how necessary is *so much* of it? What do so many parents, home-schooling and conventional schooling alike, seem to feel as though somehow they're not proper parents if they don't keep up this over-input?

Why must there be so much learning going on? Why is genuine love for children always channeled in these directions? Certainly there's enough teaching going on, yet somehow teachers, in and out of schools, seem to think that maybe, if they teach fast enough, they'll finally teach it *all*. There seems to be some kind of anxiety which they're trying to assuage. As though putting out time, energy, and money (or *charging* money) will succeed in assuaging that anxiety.

Teaching and learning seem to me to serve as a kind of *raison d'être* (reason to exist). Perhaps it's part of conspicuous concern. Devin at nine said to me "I want to know cursive but I don't want to LEARN it." One could laugh and continue teaching Devin cursive. But do people have to specifically learn things in order to know them? All things? What about the obvious counter-examples of walking and talking? And what about less obvious examples like Mozart, at four, suddenly picking up the violin and playing? What about all the very subtle things people do, things we take for granted, like looking up when another person walks into the room? What about societies where babies are "bound", or just not put on the floor or ground 'til they're older, and these babies still crawl and walk at the same ages and stages as in our society? And back to Devin and writing.. well, not cursive but printing, also reading: Devin actually did know how to both read and write without specifically learning, certainly without being specifically taught. He used to dictate his stories to me; he'd say them aloud, I'd write what he told me to.

One day – he was nine – he suddenly said, “Mom, that’s not what I told you!” And after that Dev wrote down his stories himself.

Perhaps some, or all, things aren’t a matter of learning but rather, a matter of when the time is right. Certainly trying to learn something when the time *isn’t* right is pretty inefficient, let alone difficult. It could also lead to learning incorrectly – that is, to not learning at all.

I remember advice from my mother when I was an adolescent about to break up with my first boyfriend, because he loved me and I didn’t love him. “Teaching someone how to kiss!” she exclaimed. “How preposterous! You don’t LEARN how to kiss. When a person is in love with another, kissing just happens.” Society would agree to that example. So why does it persist in believing that teaching someone to read, or add, before she’s ready isn’t preposterous.

But not everything is like kissing, some might say. But maybe it is. When “the time is right”, maybe everything is as passionate and as natural as kissing. I use the word “passion” to describe my feeling about math. And many people feel passionate about their work.

Being in therapy is a kind of learning and, as every good therapist knows, it’s usually a losing battle to force anyone to go into therapy, or to proceed in therapy too much too fast. Similarly, going through a grieving process is a kind of learning. We learn to reclaim life. And society has recently come to see that it can’t be rushed, or denied, or interfered with too much. Moreover, for someone who has just experienced a loss and is grieving/learning, we don’t recommend a death and dying *course*, but a support group. In Chapter Four I will talk about how a learning environment should and could be a kind of support group – that is, it could display the same sensitivity as a support group and proceed just as slowly and gently.

“The minute you teach somebody something, you’ve deprived him of the experience of learning it for himself.” I don’t know who said that, but it’s certainly true. Does it matter? I believe that it often does. Is it worth it, to be deprived of the experience of learning something for oneself? Marjorie Rice was never taught math beyond high school. She certainly was not taught tessellation theory. Yet after reading an article about it, she got all excited and came up with a few of her own classifications, moreover with original notation, useful to and appreciated by professional mathematicians. Yes, it’s an exception. But maybe there’d be more exceptions if people weren’t taught so much, if we weren’t given such an overload of input. Maybe, in fact, there *are* more exceptions, but these exceptions aren’t usually what society hears or thinks about, nor what the schools teach us. Maybe, in fact, accomplishment has somehow, in our society, come to be, largely, *defined* in terms of input. It’s almost as though if it didn’t result from conventional school input, it doesn’t count. If we didn’t learn it in school, it can’t go on our resume. “The Lord works in mysterious ways,” goes the familiar poem, and society needs to realize, on a more encompassing level, that *people* also work, and learn, in mysterious ways.

TOO MUCH TESTING, TOO LITTLE TRUSTING

I've made mention of this in the Introduction. But I don't mean testing only in the sense of actual written tests. I also mean subtle testing, oral testing, done continuously, moment by moment, throughout the day.

It isn't only school. Parents and other adults do it with preschool children, with babies. Home-schooling parents do it, too. People, with or without kids, seem to have the need to *prove* things. To prove, in the case of kids, and of teachers, that the students have learned what we've taught, in and out of school. And to prove it often, even constantly. Pointing to a sign on the street, parents ask their toddlers, "See that letter over there What letter is that? Or, reading to kids, "Do you know what that word means?" We're constantly asking them things. And expecting answers.

Why do people always need proof? Why do we need to always hear the proof, or see it? Why do we need to document? Why do we need so much tangible evidence? Results, accomplishments? And so early in our children's lives? Can't learning, and loving, happen without being documented? Can't we just trust?

Trust our kids, trust the subject we're teaching, and trust ourselves? Can't we wait? Can't we relax? There are, of course, many answers to that question, and what they are depends upon the people involved and the situation; probably there are psychological factors as well. Still, if we realize what we're doing, maybe we'll save testing for our own arenas and leave the kids alone.

As for actual tests, in and out of school, I believe that the reason behind them might be the same as for the more subtle daily testing described above. Namely, teachers and schools, and some home-schooling parents, feel the need to prove. To reassure ourselves. In the case of home-schoolers, this need is understandable, given the lack of confidence society conveys to them. But home-schoolers need to get a hold on these needs and fears.

Sometimes, unfortunately, the need to prove is based in reality, and in some sense justified. For example: For schools, state funding might depend upon what is proven (that is, things like standardized test scores). Also, teachers worry about losing their jobs, or not being promoted, or appreciated. They also worry that the students, and their parents, won't realize how well they've been teaching. Because, despite students' moaning and groaning about being given tests, they too have developed the tendency to assume that, until and unless they've passed a test, they haven't learned. Indeed, testing comes to be the most assuring, if not the only, way for everybody to know that the subject has been taught and learned.

Testing, then, tests *everybody* – teachers as well as students. Everybody gets nervous before a test. And the end result is that testing replaces trusting. One of the many harms

that come from this phenomenon is, the prospect of testing affects not only the manner in which the subject is taught, but the way the subject *itself* is developed in the course. Namely, it has to be developed so that testing can occur, and so that grading the tests can be reasonably simple for the teacher or grader. To me this seems especially evident when the subject is math. In *Growing without Schooling* Aaron Falbel (who has a Ph.D. in math) writes, “School math is very different from real math. School math is mostly about computation and symbol manipulation. Real mathematicians do not sit around all day doing school math. School has concentrated on this one tiny part of mathematics because it can be graded easily.” And I, preparing for a job interview (for a math teaching position at a university) in which one of the questions would be “What suggestions do you have as topics for a course in Discrete Mathematics?” was considering answering “Russell’s Paradox in Set Theory”, but then realized, “How could students be *tested* on it?” There are no problems to give, no specific examples; it’s just one fantastic idea.

Because the prospect of testing so often affects what is taught, it follows logically that what a test tests is this *altered* subject, and not the true subject at all. A special case of this is that many chapters in textbooks place the emphasis, not on the most interesting material of the chapter, but on the most easily tested. And this testing, in all its subtle forms, takes over the learning process and what is learned. Testing virtually *replaces* learning.

There are times when a student, especially an independent study student (home-schooling or not) might *choose* to be tested. This might be because of the influence of this testing and schooling society, or because of the genuine desire and need to test oneself. Indeed, testing could possibly be used to facilitate learning. It could be treated as part of the learning (not only as a way to measure the learning, or to “trip them up”.) For example, a test could encompass all the important points (“important” might even be defined, among other things, to mean the points which the student relates to best, or simply likes best) and none of the unimportant points. Or it could be made up such that the answers will read like a synopsis of the course; that is, going over the test would be a course summary. Problems could be put in chronological order, by which I mean not necessarily the order in which they were presented throughout the course, but the logical order (in math, we might say “axiomatically”). Thus testing could be used as *part* of teaching and learning, and not a compulsory part.

In my math courses I often don’t actually teach peripheral but nice tropics, but instead put them in the “Extra Credit” section of the test – which of course I have to give. I also sometimes give practice tests, seatwork, and crash reviews which might involve oral tests which don’t count. Also, I don’t, on the obligatory tests, “mix ‘em up”, meaning mix up the problems in order to “challenge” or trip students up. I also don’t get carried away with my own math research; this is not the time to think up interesting or inventive problems, which could freak students out and which seem to have little to do with what the course was about. (I do give such problems as extra credit, and I put the extra credit on a separate sheet of paper so that students don’t feel they have to even look at them if they don’t want to.) Home-schooling with Devin, we sometimes used to do “Spelling Tests”. But to me “test” meant that, if Devin didn’t know the answer, he’d ask me, I’d tell

him, and he'd write it down. So Devin *always* got 100% on tests; he didn't know there was any other mark (except, of course, what he heard from conventionally schooling kids and on TV.

I'd like to talk about the range of feelings people might have while they're being tested. Part of that is the feeling of not being trusted. I can at least speak about my own impressions. I remember tests in my own life. School tests were not difficult for me; I was school-smart, an A+ student in most subjects, and I possibly felt that it was not me being tested but some of the other students. Also, my parents were aware and made me aware of "testing issues". They basically didn't believe in testing. So I was a good sport and easily played along with the testing game. On the other hand, I do remember feeling slightly Kafkaesque; suppose this particular test would be an exception? Could I bear to see that D, even knowing that it meant nothing? A poem of mine titled "Test" described this Kafkaesque feeling. It begins "Suppose they give a test / on the theory that the two hours are typical? / And then suppose something happens to make the two hours not typical?" Somewhere in the middle of the poem I ask, "Suppose *none* of the above answers are correct?" The poem ends, "Maybe / before today / it was all / only / a coincidence."

More about the feeling of being tested: I remember more subtle tests in my life. When I was eight years old, my mother began taking me to the dentist. "She has great teeth," the dentist told her. "Then why," I thought, "do I have to keep going?" I had passed the test and I didn't understand why I was still being tested.

I now skip to age 34, and something more sober and vital. My third baby, two days old, had just died. I was suffering horribly. My mother tried to be supportive; "if this is a test," she said, "you've passed with flying colors." "Then why," I thought bitterly, "am I still being tested?" Being tested can feel like *having already failed*.

Indeed, testing implies the possibility of failure. Why should learning involve that mindset? Learning is always a success. Students always wind up learning *something*.

While we were home-schooling, I admitted to sometimes feeling the need to know for sure (only, however, because of the home-schooling law) and thus I admitted to the need to test and prove. So I gave Devin *one* multiplication problem. Or two. That's all it took to satisfy me. I don't need to give a test with 20 or more problems. If we must test, *how much* testing must we do?

I'd like to end with some thought about giving ourselves permission to make mistakes, and to keep making mistakes. First, research mathematicians are constantly making mistakes. They try out one wrong idea after another, often for months and months, even years. Then they end up with, basically, one right idea. And pilots: Why they fly their planes, they're usually going in the wrong direction (although in short little spurts); they spend most of their time trying to get to the right direction. Testing, true, can sometimes take this phenomenon into account but it's pretty if-fy. In fact I believe that often students truly absorb the material *after* the course has long been completed. Months, years,

decades. Par Henry, Assistant Chairperson of the Math/Computer Science Department at Drexel University (where I used to teach) once said to me, “Students don’t really learn the material until later, perhaps when they take the next level course.” For example, they don’t truly learn Calculus I, even if they got A in it, until they take Calc II. Testing often doesn’t *cement* knowledge, because not enough time has passed to use the knowledge. If we want to talk about testing, perhaps the most accurate test is the test of time.

TOO MUCH PEER GROUP

Most of this section (though not all) applies only to schools and not to home-schooling situations. In answer to that by-now famous questions, “What about socialization?” (upon which societal doubts concerning home-schooling seem to focus), I often answer, “I believe that school offers *too* much socialization.” Moreover, school imposes, even enforces, too much socialization.

In my experience, the kind of socialization imposed by schools is very different from the kind which kids would grown into if they didn’t go to school, and in fact very different from the kind which they do get during non-school hours. When I was a kid, I felt very comfortable among the neighborhood kids, and was probably quite popular and well-liked (and good in neighborhood sports). I was this way also when I played with my sister or visited cousins. But at school things were different. I felt more alienated from my peers. Moreover, the neighborhood friends with whom I played almost every day acted, somehow, different when we were all in school.

In what ways is school socialization different? It’s difficult to pinpoint. But for starters, school is every day, and a long day, mostly in the same room, with the same kids. And while the kids can choose with whom to play during recess, any real control of the social situation is not theirs. It seems that in school, kids are *put* together.

It has been said that kids at school are like kids at war. In many ways it’s like the army. Away from the home front, they’re fending for themselves. And fend they do. That could be how we get our bullies. And, on the other hand, the goody-goodies. Along with the school-smart straight-A+ teacher’s pet that none of the other kids can stomach.

What are they all competing for? Attention, perhaps, or admiration, or simply approval? Or survival? Perhaps as a substitute for love, or for that feeling of security? For a child there are many instances when a compassionate, understanding, and affectionate teacher is just not the same thing as a compassionate, understanding, and affectionate parent or doting aunt, or someone they know well, someone who is committed to them throughout the years.

It has been said that school helps the process of socialization, or at least that it’s a place where kids *can* socialize. Certainly, like in every other place, there is the possibility of

meeting people whom you might like. And in fact, when Bret at ten first started home-schooling, he said, “Well, I’ve already made my friends at school; now I don’t need to go to school any more.” Well?

School seems to “teach” socialization, in a way similar to how it teaches other subjects – namely, in a school-type way, often over-simplified, full of assumptions about children and human beings in general, and about the way in which we relate to one another. When my friend Kim Bresloe was in our home-schooling support group, she told us the story of her son Jade’s only year in school. He was shy, and his teachers kept saying to Kim, “I’d like to see him make a friend.” As the months wore on Jade did make a friend, a little girl sitting next to him. However, several days later he reported to his mother, “First the teacher tells me to make a friend, now she says I talk to her too much. I’m not going to make friends any more.” Indeed, do the schools give kids mixed messages about socialization? Perhaps other factors are at play here, but Kim and I couldn’t help but wonder: is the very structure and set-up of schools such that mixed messages can’t help but be conveyed?

I remember “gym”, from my own school days. It certainly wasn’t like kickball on my parents’ front lawn. Or tetherball over at the park. Both experiences exercised me (although the non-school experience exercised me more, since I got more turns “up at bat”). Both experiences involved teamwork, and both taught me whatever body coordination physical education is supposed to teach. But at “gym” I felt alienated. I didn’t have fun. And I worried. What if Barbara, for example, that tough girl who used to mock me and call me “baby”, landed on second base while I was guarding it?

Around the neighborhood I was good at baseball; I hit the ball all the way across the street, and often made home runs. In school, though, I usually couldn’t even connect. Maybe the reason I almost never made home runs in school was that “home”, both literally and figuratively, was too far around. In general, everything was too big. I remember the first time the gym teacher explained the game, which I must have already played many times around the neighborhood. I somehow misunderstood; I thought you were supposed to merely hit the ball and run the bases, without worrying about being tagged. And I remember strolling leisurely from first to second base while Donna Gardner strolled toward me, just as leisurely, with the ball in her hand, until she reached me and touched me with the ball. Everyone laughed – at me, I’m sure, but I wasn’t even aware of that.

I remember school trips. They weren’t like family trips. In fact, when I was on a school trip and a family wandered by, a few yards away from us, I looked at that family in envy. To me school trips meant worry. What if I lost my money? What if I got lost myself? What if no one wanted to sit next to me on the bus? School trips seem to have a lot in common with gym.

I believe that children, and adults, need periods of not being social. In fact, that’s part of socialization, knowing when it’s time to not be social. Teachers often do realize this, as do school principals, but the whole school setup doesn’t afford much opportunity to

choose when to not be social. My daughter Marielle was usually quite socially adept, but in fourth grade she went through a stage when she didn't want to go out to recess. Her teacher very nicely let her stay inside with her. Indeed, teachers (and everybody else) often have to work around the rules.

Peer-group, along with socialization, has had a variety of meanings throughout the history of the world. Not every culture concerns itself with whether or not its kids "socialize". In some cultures kids, and adults, are continually and automatically socializing, working and playing together, or in the company of one another, all ages, all activities. Often everybody has, moment by moment, the option to not socialize, or to not socialize very much – to "parallel play", as babies and toddlers do. In other cultures just the opposite occurs; families live far apart from one another, and kids associate with siblings only. If there are no siblings, they see no other kids. Maybe that's not even for the better, but it's also not the end of the world.

It is not necessarily a given that kids have to socialize, or to socialize in any particular way. To illustrate the vast range of socialization possibilities, as well as questions about these possibilities, I'd like to describe a game which Devin and his home-schooling friends Jonathan and Jade made up one afternoon, playing out in Rittenhouse Square when they were five or six years old. I call it "the threesome game". One person would sit down on the bench (next to me, the adult – which might or might not have been significant). The other two would go off together and walk around, hang out, or find something to do. The idea of the game was to see which "group" would get bored first – whether, that is, the one sitting next to me would get up to find the others, or whether the two who had gone off would come back to join us on the bench. At the end of the game they did *not* talk about who had "won". They merely very quietly noted what had occurred, then very quickly and without difficulty chose the one who would sit on the bench, and that would start off the next "round". I wonder whether this game was one of their ways of dealing with the threesome syndrome.

By the way, the one to hold out the longest was always the bench sitter. The other two always wound up coming back to the bench. Perhaps it's easier to sit on a bench by yourself and wait than it is to hang out with one other person. Or maybe that's only when a mommy is also on the bench.

With my other three kids, and with most kids and adults, threesomes are often bad news. But Devin and his friends have never had problems with threesomes. For example, even when I would catch two huddled together, while the third was on the side, it wasn't a situation of being, or of feeling, "left out"; I had asked and investigated. Indeed, "left out" seemed to be a concept which Devin and his home-schooling friends didn't know about.

If adults didn't make such a big deal about socialization, perhaps it wouldn't be such an issue. People might worry that kids who *did* go to school weren't being socialized! In an issue of *Growing without Schooling*, Jeanne Ferrari-Ams wrote, "My son is eleven and my daughter is ten and they... are the best of friends... My husband and I are the same

way – we are each other’s best friends – and sometimes I think I should have more friends. Actually, I do have a wide range of friends. It’s just that I prefer my husband’s company, and the kids prefer each other’s company. People learn to be diplomatic to each other, to share. If this is accomplished in the home, it naturally extends into the community and into other relationships...”

The scenario can vary from person to person within a particular society. Some kids are loners; some are very social. And sometimes that changes from year to year. Most kids go through their ages and stages. My own kids have gone through what I jokingly call “the no-friends stage”. That’s an exaggeration but it’s a first-order approximation to a description of those less social periods, which can last for years. Probably most kids go through ages and stages when they’re not particularly interested in other kids, or when they just can’t seem to find other kids that they like enough to make friends with. And this would be all well and good except for the judgment that society places on being social: making friends is “good”; not making friends is “bad”. And also, as so many say, “what about school?”

Indeed, school makes things such that kids have no choice but to socialize. School makes socialization an issue. School enforces and re-enforces peer group pressure because it enforces peer group, period. Larry Shyers, a doctoral student at the University of Florida, did his dissertation on comparing home-schooling kids with conventionally schooling kids. Some of his findings suggest that home-schooling kids behave better because they tend to imitate their parents, while conventionally schooling kids imitate their peers. “The results,” said Shyers, “seem to show that a child’s social development depends more on adult contact and less on contact with other children.” All this is speculation rather than definite conclusion, but perhaps it helps to place the whole socialization business in perspective.

Although this section was a lot about schools, home-schooling parents also sometimes tend to enforce, or “encourage”, too much socialization – at home (as in “Now, play nicely with your cousins”), around the neighborhood (as in “Go outside and play”), and about town (Girl Scouts, karate classes, Little League...) And one of the fashions in home-schooling groups and circles is to organize what has come to be known as “field trips”. These trips have some of the pitfalls of school trips – over-crowding, confusion, lack of spontaneity due to that over-crowding and confusion, along with a kind of mania, or fixation, on making the trip educational or social.

In short, we don’t *always* need peer group, we don’t always need to worry about how to deal with peer group, nor do we need to create peer group situations and problems. Peer group is a fact of life, for us to partake of and enjoy and be grateful for, when we do need or want it.

THE “POTENTIAL” TRAP

When Marielle was in kindergarten and first grade, her teachers told us, “She’s a very sweet little girl, a very bright little girl, but she’s not living up to her potential.” And four years later, when my second-born Arin was in those same grades, I was told, “Arin’s a very sweet little boy, a very bright little boy, but he’s not living up to his potential.”

Both times I flashed back several decades, when I was described as a “very sweet little girl, very bright little girl, but...”

I was getting all A’s, drawing many pictures per day, writing several stories per week, playing the piano for assembly. How much potential did my teachers think I had?! It seems to me that teachers in school get the parents all riled up with this potential business. They get themselves all riled up, too. And everyone working together gets the kids all riled up. Home-schooling parents sometimes get into the potential mindset, too; it seems to be the way society is, school or no school.

Also, it seems to me that they keep raising the potential. “Their potential” seems to be *defined* as whatever level is just beyond their performance! My first husband used to talk about how, when he was a kid, he’d hide his potential. He didn’t want to let anybody know what he was capable of. Once, however, he slipped and said something brilliant in one of his classes and then, so he recalls, “they gave me a psychological test”. Similar in fact, to the psychological tests I was given when they were worried about me not living up to my potential.

It seems to me that living up to one’s potential is something one has done by the *end* of one’s life or, if one is lucky, towards the middle. Not in kindergarten or first grade. Whether or not someone reaches her potential in her early years does not necessarily determine whether or not she will in her later years. People’s lives aren’t homogeneous in that way. Moreover, it seems to me that “living up to one’s potential” means find out what to use that potential *for*. And though Mozart played that violin at age four, Gauguin didn’t paint at age four, nor much at age thirty-four. Indeed, not for the first fifty years of his life. He didn’t live up to his potential. Nor did he need to. And Handel wrote the Messiah in three weeks, but he probably never lived up to *that* potential again, not in three weeks.

If we’re going to believe in potential, I think we should also believe that there is a time for it. A time, that is, for it to be just that – potential. A period for it to lie dormant, or apparently dormant. Moreover, just because someone has the potential to do something, that doesn’t mean he has to actually do that thing. It certainly doesn’t mean he’s *emotionally* ready to do that thing. It also doesn’t mean he’s ready to do that thing *to its fullest*. Certainly not right then and there. What, I wonder, is the rush? And again, what is this need to see, this need to prove?

Having been brought up by the schools on potential, I sometimes wish I’d never heard the word. I wish I didn’t know that I have the potential to, say, finish this book in three

weeks, like Handel did his Messiah. Say, a chapter every couple of days. Once, in fact, I *did* write a book in three weeks. If I could do it once, I could do it again. I wish I didn't know all that. I wish I could stop thinking in those terms. I wish I had never heard the saying "do the best you can". Sometimes doing the best you can is very difficult, and very inefficient, especially if you do it as *quickly* as you can.

THINGS LIKE BOOK REPORTS AND NATURE JOURNALS

Things like book reports and nature journals are examples of testing, even if they're not called tests. And they often emerge, as do most tests, from the emotional need to prove. A book report proves that the kid has read the book. A nature journal proves that the kid has been exploring nature (whether actually exploring, or vicariously exploring through some book that's been assigned or through some rigged up "nature experiment".)

True, both the spoken and the written word are important tools in our society. Recording things – along with proving things – does have its place. But not, I believe, in the case of a person reading a book or taking a walk through a forest. Here's what Dori Griffin, a home-schooling kid, has to say, in an issue of *Growing without Schooling*, about nature journals: "I love to watch birds and observe plants and animals and draw what I see. I browse through books like 'The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady' and sometimes I draw, using the drawings in the book as a reference. A couple of years ago, we tried keeping nature journals in a more formal sense. We would have to have a drawing or an entry, as an assignment. This just wasn't the same as doing it because you wanted to. We put our nature journals away after about six or eight months of sporadic use."

Can education be such that kids do things only because they want to? I believe yes. Certainly, where that possibility exists, we should allow it. Especially since "want to" often means "need to" or "it's time to". And a kid who has an interest in nature will automatically choose how she wants to express it, as Dori Griffin describes above.

There is no need to prove this interest. There's also no point in feigning it. If a kid doesn't have an interest in nature, will keeping a nature journal help? I'd conjecture rarely. Why, anyway, are adults so anxious for kids to be interested in nature? Nature is wonderful, calming, and "good clean fun", but that doesn't explain the pervasiveness and the anxiety. Is it for the children or for adults? Are adults anxious for *adults* to be interested in nature? Is there anybody who's *not* interested in nature?

Right now I'm flashing back on that art class at the Y which I took when I was a kid. I used to wonder, vaguely, "What's the point of me making papier mache puppets when everyone else is making papier mache puppets?" Perhaps, analogously, a kid might wonder, "What's the use of me keeping a nature journal if everyone else in the class is also keeping a nature journal?" Indeed, possibly all the nature journals turn out to be pretty much the same, especially if they're all observing the same woods.

There seems to be something false, something contrived, in “having” the entire class keep nature journals, or do oral book reports, or even write compositions on “any topic you like” (even though all the compositions would not be the same). Perhaps in the back of the kids’ minds lurks the question, “What’s the point?” It was not their idea to keep a nature journal. It was not their idea to write or present a book report. It was not even their idea to write a composition on “any topic you like”. And for many people a large part, perhaps the main part, of the creativity is in thinking up the idea in the first place. In other words, there’s nothing creative or even spontaneous about the idea of keeping a nature journal. Nature journals just aren’t natural!

Being required to keep a nature journal is almost insulting. Being given a framework, even a framework as broad as “any topic you like” takes it away from the kids. For example, if a teacher had said to me, “write an essay on why ‘things like book reports and nature journals’ might be detrimental and unnecessary”, my enthusiasm would dim considerably. “Oh,” I might think, however vaguely, “she knows that already. It’s known already. I’m just supposed to fill in the boring details, do hack-work. My ideas aren’t needed.”

Just because a kid has seen or explored nature, that doesn’t mean she should keep a nature journal. And just because a kid has read a book, that doesn’t mean she should report on that book. Even if she loves the book, or has a definite opinion about it, it still doesn’t mean she has to document or prove it. Do adults report on books they’ve read? (without being paid book reviewers) Do they even talk about every book they’ve read? When they do talk about a book, do they always give a complete report? And do they begin their report by saying “Have you even been to a baseball game?” No; more likely they would “report” on a book about baseball only to someone who has happened to mention that she’s just been to a baseball game, or herself read an article or book about baseball. It would seem contrived and insulting to an adult and to a kid, to begin an encounter with “Have you ever been to a baseball game?” especially in order to work your way into giving a “report” on a book about baseball. Also, maybe the kid doesn’t feel like “sharing”.

Do book reviewers review every book they’ve read? (And when they do, do they begin, “Have you ever been to a baseball game?”) Does a writer write about everything that happens to her, or even every thought or idea that has occurred to her? Being a writer, I know that the answer is no. There are some things I write about and some things I don’t, or not just yet. Sometimes I write about something immediately after it’s happened and sometimes it takes years or decades. And sometimes I understand why I waited, and what finally triggered the writing down, and sometimes I don’t. Things are just not that simple, even if schools and other adult institutions try to make it that way.

When a kid is reading and enjoying a book, her enjoyment is often dampened by knowing that she has to report on it. Moreover, this knowledge can change the way she reads the book. It can even affect the choice of book. For example, if a kid is assigned a book report on “any book you like”, he knows that he has to like the first book he reads; otherwise he’ll wind up having to read two, or more, books. So he might wind up staying

with a book that he hates, only because he's already thirty pages into it. I'll never forget "Proud Destiny" from my childhood. Why I chose it, I'll never fathom (possibly because it was the only book left that day in the classroom library). "Proud Destiny" was three inches thick, small print, and boring from beginning to end. But I chose to stick with it, rather than cut my losses and begin another.

If I were a reading teacher, what I'd probably do is simply initiate a class conversation about the books we'd read (or about why we haven't read any books, perhaps about how we all feel about reading). If nobody said anything, I'd start the ball rolling by talking about a book I'd read, whether or not I'd liked it. I'd relate it to things in my own, and perhaps the students', lives. I wouldn't do anything as self-conscious and contrived as a book report. I believe that they would in this way learn something about books in general from this one class alone, without any assigned homework, without even the reading of any book. In general, I always try to teach so that the classroom sessions alone, without homework or even reading the text, will be enough; indeed, as I teach, I *assume* that no one does homework and no one owns a copy of the text. I don't necessarily encourage this; I just allow for it, and in a non-punitive and non-judgmental way.

But school and some home-schooling parents get so caught up in things like book reports and nature journals, and in proving, that they can't relax, trust, and think in terms of what's supposed to be happening, which is enjoyment and/or learning. In general, school, including some home-schools, does things in contrived, time-consuming, anxiety-producing (and anxiety-reflecting) ways. They give busywork, and the kids know it. Despite the lip-service given the word "potential", they seem to believe that kids can't, or won't. It seems to be the given that kids won't do anything, even something enjoyable like read a book or go on a walk (nature- or otherwise) unless someone makes them do it. Carrying that over to adults, society seems to believe that adults won't work at any job unless society forces them to. Thus *everything* becomes forced; nothing is chosen.

TOO MUCH OF A BIG DEAL

When my first child Marielle was several weeks old, I was a generally nervous new mother. One of the forms which this nervousness sometimes took was, I was extremely concerned ("Obsessed" might be a more accurate word) with things like getting her, not only to sleep through the night, but to fit into some semblance of a schedule, something that would jive with my own schedule and put me more at ease. I remember saying to my mother, "I'm going to start waking her up at 7:00 every morning; that way she'll get into the habit so when she starts school..."

My mother wisely interrupted me, as gently and as non-insultingly as she could. "Hey!" she said. "Hold it right there! She won't be starting school for another five years. She'll go through a million changes before then."

I immediately got her point, came to my senses, stopped tormenting myself with at least that idea, and decided to let Marielle, and myself, sleep as late into the morning as she would. So at least I spared us *that* big deal.

Both schools and home-schools often make too much of a big deal. “If they’re allowed to chew gum in class, they won’t learn respect.” “If they don’t learn responsibility and commitment now, how will they hold down a job?” “If they don’t learn karate, how will they defend themselves?” “Say ‘please.’ Or ‘say ‘thank you.’” Then, aside to any onlooker, “You have to start them early.” And, from a home-schooling journal (in fact, an *un*-schooler), “It is very important that kids be encouraged to accomplish something – anything – every day.” Everyone seems as nervous as I was with my first baby.

Society seems to think that the future will be an exact repetition of the present. We forget that as my mother put it, they’ll “go through a million changes”. And so, by the way, will their environment. So, that is, will what they’re supposed to do and how they’re supposed to act.

Of course, the future *is* some function of the present. The present does determine the future in some ways. But not, surely, in the over-simplified ways mentioned above. And yes, a child’s experience does to some extent determine how she’ll be in the future. But a child does not have to do now whatever it is that we want her to learn to do later. For example, a kid can see, as I like to think my own kids did, that her parents always say please and thank you; she doesn’t have to be required just yet to say these niceties herself. The parent doesn’t need to prod, nag, and annoy, “Whaddaya SA-AY?” every time someone hands the poor kid a cookie (sometimes even before the kid has even noticed the approach of the cookie). The parent can teach by example. Instead of asking my kids “Whaddaya say?” I would tell the cookie-giver, “Thanks very much. That’s really nice of you.” My kids heard that, whether or not they acknowledged it (other than by extreme enjoyment of the cookie), and were soon imitating and saying “thank you” without being reminded. Put another way: Whether or not they are proving it to you right then and there, they are learning manners, and it will probably show up by the time they’ve grown, more probably before then. Similarly, I don’t believe that we have to insist that kids actually read *now* or prove now, that they can read. We don’t have to get all worked up. We don’t have to make a big deal. Kids live in a world where people (hopefully people they like and love) read, if not books, then street signs. Reading is part of their world, and in general emotionally healthy kids want to imitate and join that world.

In one of the home-schooling periodicals a home-schooler wrote, “If you can read one word, you can read” – or at any rate, reading or learning to read is *in place*. Schools, including some home-schools, often make too much of a big deal about just about anything concerning children. In a previous sections of this chapter I described the big deal made about potential. In another section I talked about the big deal made about “things like book reports and nature journals”. Why are we all so self-conscious and nervous? What are we fixating on? What do we have to prove? And why? Indeed, adults often seem to forget that, just as kids normally, easily, and harmlessly go through their

“ages and stages” in emotional and developmental areas, they can go through their ages and stages with respect to learning.

At the library a couple of weeks ago, Devin and I picked up a flyer about a juggling act. April 17, 4:00 – 5:00. “That sounds like fun,” we agreed. But then we realized that April 17 was the day of our Treasure Hunt party. Devin had asked me, “Can we have a treasure hunt at my next birthday party?” He’d kept asking until I’d finally said, “Let’s not wait for your birthday; let’s just have a treasure hunt party.” Anyway, so of course, on April 17 4:00 to 5:00, we couldn’t do both. Besides, what was the point of jugglers for an *hour* when we could have treasure hunting *all* afternoon? We don’t need official big-deal entertainment for an hour when we can have just-plain entertainment all afternoon.

DEMANDING PROOF OF THE FUTURE – NOW

Expecting proof of learning to occur immediately upon being taught sometimes can be extremely unrealistic. An important part of learning usually occurs when one is *not* specifically being taught. Learning gestates, between lessons, overnight, weekends, summers, and once the course is over, sometimes years or decades later. This to me presents a good case against homework. Although there might also be advantages to homework, too much homework prevents this “between teachings” type of learning; it deprives students of that gestating unconscious part of the learning process, because it uses up overnight, weekends, and so on.

A lot of this carries over into college and into adult life. I’ve taught college math for decades, but it continues to appall me that kids are expected, via “the Final”, to demonstrate (again, prove) that they know the material *by the end of the semester*. The end of the semester is not always, perhaps not usually, the time when they necessarily would know it. The real test, if test there must be, as to whether or not a student has absorbed the material in a course is whether, when the time comes to use it, the (former) student recognizes this and either remembers it well enough to use it or knows where and how to look it up, or whom to ask. To me this seems to be what any course should really teach. It follows that that cannot be tested at the end of the semester, however convenient that might be.

Indeed, Marielle could not possibly “learn” to wake up in time for kindergarten until it was actually time, five years later. In just this way students cannot “learn” course material, not quite completely, until it’s time to actually use that material.

True, there is possibly some correlation between the ability to truly learn course material, in the sense that I’ve just described, and the course grade as conventionally and presently computed. However, I still think that what I’ve been saying should be taken into account (admittedly a very difficult thing for society to do). Here’s an example of a doctor who, I believe, learned his medical school course material well, even though his memorization skills were not perfect (as with most of us). At age almost four, Devin fell and broke his

wrist. At Children's Hospital the intern on duty began applying the cast. I watched the cloth wind, first, around Devin's hand (minus fingers), then wrist, next elbow, and... I saw the doctor hesitate -- a full minute, it seemed. He was grappling with something.

Finally he said, "I'm going in to the other room to look something up. I'll be back in a minute." "In a minute" he returned and told us, "It doesn't have to go past the elbow. No point making him wear it past the elbow." I felt very grateful to and impressed with this doctor and I told him so. "Thank you" I said, "for admitting that you weren't sure and looking it up, instead of acting all-knowing and putting the cast on his entire arm."

In any exam given at that time, he might have gotten that question wrong; yet he knew what he should have known, that it was a choice between two things, half-arm or full-arm cast, and he also knew where to look it up. Moreover, it didn't take him very long to look it up.

There are, of course, exceptions. Certainly there are parts of knowledge, medical or otherwise, in which time is of the essence. (And students could be tested conventionally on these parts, and only these parts.) But by and large, most knowledge is of the variety that we merely have to know *about*; we don't need to know it word for word, or number for number.

Colleges, high schools, and some home-schools make a big deal of "class participation". Sometimes such participation counts as part of the grade. But students are individuals; they have individual learning styles and individual ways, and degrees, of "participating". Just because a student isn't saying anything, that doesn't mean she's not participating. (Remember the Gettysburg Address, after which the audience didn't clap.) I usually teach using the Socratic method and many students ask and answer the questions, but some don't. Still, on every student's face (well, every awake student!), I see, if not hear, some reaction. I see nods, smiles, expressions of relief when some light has dawned, and so on. Also, a student can "participate" during one part of the lecture and not any other. I don't feel I need "participation", in the form of recitation on the part of students, in order to prove anything. Even if I see a student sleeping or otherwise turning off, I don't usually worry about it. In fact, sometimes a student doesn't participate in *any* manner (even silently); for some students participation isn't where it's at. I think of how my elementary school teachers knew darn well that I was daydreaming, and how they consciously decided to "leave Marion alone. She's a different kind of child."

Once a home-schooling mother called up our home-schooling support group, anxious and distraught because her six-year-old son didn't seem to be paying attention to "the lesson". (Huh? I thought. Lesson?) This mother believed much of what I believe but she had been pressured by friends and family, and they had played upon her doubts, as friends and relatives often play upon the doubts of parents, home-schooling or not. I told her, "You know how, sometimes, when you read kids a story, they appear not to be listening; they play around, even talk or yell or watch TV? And then, suddenly they'll catch one word, something that seems to them not quite right, or they have a question about the story, and they'll stop you and ask that question. Not only have they been listening, but they've

been listening to every word. Well, that's how it might be with the "lessons". Besides, even if they're not listening, they hear." This reassured her.

We don't have to make a big deal out of "paying attention", "class participation", or any other proof. Most of the time we can live and let live, and learn and let learn. We can relax. We can let the present be the present, and leave its proof for the future.

TOO INVASIVE

When I was in therapy, my therapist often used the word "invasive". I thought it was a meaningful word. My mother, for example, was invasive when, after praising the sonatas I had composed, she added, "Of course it isn't Mozart". My father was invasive when he insisted on sitting in the chair next to the piano where my sister was practicing, making constant comments despite her pleas. Both were invasive when, after I expressed some desire or inclination or protest, they remarked, "Freud would have a lot to say about that." It even felt invasive when, during my adolescence, they'd catch me with a downcast or moody look, and remark, "So what's wrong, Marion?" And perhaps I was invasive when, after Bret at eleven had remarked, "Gee, I'd like to know more about slavery," I jumped in with "Oh, I have a bunch of books about it. I used to be absolutely fascinated by slavery, too, when I was your age. My sister and I used to play Topsy and Eva, from Uncle Tom's Cabin, and I'd write about my fascination with slavery in my diary. I could read you some of the stuff I wrote...'

Bret interrupted my little reverie with "Mom, I'm not THAT interested."

But kids, too, are invasive with their interruptions or down-putting remarks, or when Devin snaps, "What's so great about [my beloved] fractions?"

"Invasive" seems to embody a range of phenomena, including interfering, interrupting, overkill, mocking, undermining, rubbing in, and so on. "Invasive" means invasive to our thoughts and feelings, not necessarily our minds or bodies. It's a word with subtle meaning. Certainly everyone is invasive – and invaded – sometimes. That can't be helped, since life is seldom black-and-white, and since it's not always possible for a person to know what might be invasive to another person. But some people are more invasive than others, and some situations are more conducive to invasive-ness.

Adult interaction with children is rife with opportunities for "invasion" – classrooms, adult-run children's activities, and teaching/learning situations within the home, such as helping with homework, and so on. I often wonder why some psychologists, who understand the concept of invasiveness, seem not to understand the extent of these kinds of invasiveness. I hope that what has already been said in this chapter has helped to illustrate this extent, as well as how unnecessary it all is. In fact, perhaps "making a bit deal" is synonymous with invasive. I made too much of a big deal about Bret's passing comment about slavery. My parents made too much of a big deal about Mozart and

Freud. And backtracking a little, certainly book reports and nature journals can be invasive, to a kid's true interest in a book or nature.

The focus on a kid's "potential", which often is potential only in some adult minds, is a very subtle and encompassing form of invasive-ness. It nips in the bud any gestation, that all-important phase in the history of any talent or genius, that period when talent is *only* potential, a secret kept even from oneself, very precious and fragile.

Continuing to backtrack, peer group is perhaps the cruelest of invasions, especially the snickers when a kid gives a silly, or an unusually serious, answer in class. And too much time is continuous invasive-ness. Also, too much input might be another virtual synonym for invasive-ness. Indeed, situations where education is the agenda can be hotbeds of invasiveness.

In his book, "Educating the Entire Person", Ron Dultz points out, "The most important idea to keep in mind when educating children is the fact that all children are immersed in sensitive, complex and critical, patterns of self-development. Their formal education cannot occur properly if it is inharmonious with their various patterns of self-development." Perhaps more important, neither can those "patterns of self-development" themselves "occur properly".

In some sense, any education-oriented situation has two agendas – the teacher's and the learner's. And those two agendas are often opposed, unless the learner has specifically and consciously agreed to be taught. Ron Dultz calls any compulsory education an "unnatural situation" and goes on in his book to say, "...demanding learning of children is inappropriate in a majority of cases. It humiliates children, frightens them, intimidates them, disorients them, and often establishes in them resentment and hostility toward learning. Demanding learning of children is also an unfair assignment for teachers. Teachers placed in the position of having to demand learning from children are themselves given an ignoble task. It can be humiliating, unrewarding, and demoralizing."

Perhaps teachers in schools who simply recognize all this, and who own up to it in the presence of the student, can at least partially break through that "resentment and hostility". Teachers in the home can do more than this. They can avoid invasive situations, and they can teach only when it's called for.

THE DISEMPOWERMENT OF CHILDREN, PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND EVERYBODY ELSE

I've already gone into some detail about how pervasive school can be, especially time-wise. How it can get into our lives, undermine relations within families, regulate (sometimes completely) a family's waking hours along with what gets done in those hours. And in many states, the home-schooling laws can do the same sort of thing. In general, society's general attitudes towards children and education often spell our disempowerment. Consider what all that does to a parent's self-image. "Society is chipping

away bit by bit at our children's childhood," said Kim Bresloe at one of our home-schooling support group meeting.

I answered, "Yes, and it's also chipping away at parents' parenthood."

In the next chapter, on Authority, I'll go into ways in which society acts, yes, as an authority, in particular over parents. For now, let me talk a bit about schools. Homework is, as I've mentioned, a prime example of this. True, in recent years some schools have been increasingly sensitive to and respectful of the feelings of parents. Over my own children's school years I've appreciate, for example, the booklet about homework telling us specifically that parents were not expected to help their kids with homework, but only to remind them to do it. Actually, I didn't like doing this reminding, either. But I also appreciated the attitudes towards parents of many of my kids' teachers. They didn't automatically blame or look down on them, nor hold them responsible if things went wrong. When one of our kids exhibited a behavior problem (at home, too, not only at school), several of his teachers told us, "I feel guilty. I worry that I'm not doing my part."

Still, parents might be aware that this kind of sensitivity and respect can be withdrawn at any moment – if only *for* a moment, and if only via a look or tone of voice. The main thread continues to be that our role in our kids' education and upbringing is at the bottom of the totem pole. We are instructed, maneuvered, talked down to – and not paid nor given much occasion to feel appreciated or empowered. We are, after all, providing our country with citizens, and workers, no less than teachers and other school authorities.

Do *teachers* feel empowered? Not the ones I've spoken with, both in my home-schooling activism and plain-old general conversation with teachers I've known as friends or in my kids' schools. Teachers are locked in by lesson plans, syllabi, city and state regulations, and the need to discipline (often genuine, given the school setup and sometimes the kids themselves – but then the question arises: why?). There is also the pressure to cover a certain amount of material by a certain time, and by the negative mindset of the kids (probably caused by the compulsory nature of the situation, as well as by society's attitude towards kids). Teachers don't get to decide whom to teach. Nor when. Nor where. Nor, to a very large extent, what or how.

Let us for a moment allow ourselves the luxury of imagining teaching without regulation. (Most of us have probably already experienced this, though in small doses – for example, how do people learn how to play chess, or cards, or how to fix things around the house?) It could be a whole different scenario. Everyone, not only those designated as "teachers", could teach if she wanted to, what she wanted, who, and so on. She could teach when and only when someone needed or wanted to know about something, something which she and not that someone knew. She could teach when the "students" were ready and willing to learn – when the situations naturally called for it. It could happen in isolated incidents or in spurts. Perhaps an entire course, with more than one student, could develop. When I was teaching at University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, one of the applied math professors decided that he wanted to learn topology. So he put out a call to anyone who'd be interested in learning with him. I was interesting in RE-learning topology so I

answered his call. Three or four other profs joined us. We met once a week and took turns lecturing on topology. We had fun! The guy was Indian and sometimes brought homemade Indian food. We talked before and after “class”, as long as we wanted; there was nothing stipulating that we had to start or stop at any given time. And think of Socrates, how truly empowered he and his students were.

But schools and schooling laws prevent that kind of empowerment. They perpetrate a myth that only “the teachers” can teach. (And that leads people considering the idea of taking their kids out of school to feel uneasy “Who’ll teach them math?”) They also perpetrate the myth that unless someone teaches you, you can’t learn, that you have to be qualified in some way in order to learn. College scholarships, SAT scores, entrance exams... our schooling society makes people afraid.

OPPRESSIVE TO POOR AND MINORITY FAMILIES

One argument against home-schooling has been its tendency, sometimes, to become racist and classist. Poor and working-class parents don’t have the same access to certain types of educational materials and opportunities as middle- and upper-class parents. Also, home-schooling parents who are racist are, perhaps, more likely to pass on their not-great attitudes to their children. In fact, some racist parents keep their kids out of school *in order to* keep them away from “the riffraff”.

However, schools also can promote racism and classism. Certainly children from poor families can’t afford, money-wise, some of the items that kids are asked to “bring in”. Nor, sometimes, can they afford to dress “appropriately”. Also, time-wise, they and their families have less at their disposal -- time for parents to volunteer, bring cookies to bake sales, and so on.

And some teachers are racist. When my kids were growing up, a Puerto Rican friend told us that teachers in one of the “best and most socially conscious” schools were favoring the white middle-class students (and un-favoring the others). Throughout history schools have carried out the will and attitudes of their country’s government; think of obvious examples like schools in nazi Germany.

Although many schools and teachers have gone out of their way to combat prejudice, racism, and classism, it remains a fact that all public school teachers have attended teachers’ colleges. They needed the money and time for this. (Nowadays there’s a lot of talk, at least in academia, about student loans leading to student debt, so things are not all that much improved.) As a result of having been students in teachers’ colleges, teachers’ values and personalities are usually different from those of the poorer students, and of the people in these students’ lives. These students can thus feel alienated, even if subtly. They very language used by teachers, and that which they encourage or force students to use, is often not the language with which they feel comfortable. When I was in sixth grade, our English teacher wouldn’t allow us to say “ain’t”, “well”, and “okay”. Even at

home we were supposed to keep what I now smilingly call “ain’t journals”, and record any instances of using these “bad” words (some of which have since been added to the dictionary).

School do provide, or try to provide, diversity, but on middle-class terms. In her chapter “Choosing Friendships” from her book “Child’s Work”, Nancy Wallace says, “School, we realized, would never have been able to bridge the gap between Ishmael [her then fifteen-year-old son] and his working-class classmates. Instead, it would almost certainly have *created* a gap where previously there had been none. School, after all, is where you learn to judge and be judged by narrowly defined academic standards. School is where you learn to stop seeing people ‘from all vantage points,’ as Ishmael would say, quoting the Sufi leader Pir Vilaya Inayat Khan.”

Indeed, Linda Goss, well-known black story-teller and author, and eventual home-schooler, has told me, “Miquon [the alternative school which her son had previously attended] TRIED to bring various cultures together. But it was, after all, in the suburbs, and it did cost money [so it didn’t attract very many minority families]. When I came to your [home-schooling support] group and saw everyone sitting around your kitchen table, and the kids and the cats, and all that food, I thought ‘THIS is great!’ You really made everyone feel comfortable. That was REAL diversity.”

And consider equipment. Is it affirmative action that poor kids get to use computers in the schools? I would imagine that at least some of the advantage to this “exposure” could be offset by feelings of alienation. When you don’t have a computer at home, when your father or aunt or uncle doesn’t use one in his job, when home life dinner-table conversations (assuming they exist) are not about computers, computers in school just don’t feel the same as when you’re from a middle- or upper-class family.

This tendency is aggravated by the fact that there are often not *enough* school computers. (In general, I’ve noticed that there never seems to be enough of *any* help or affirmative action.) So each kid waits in line. And feels cheated, and hurt if he didn’t get his turn today. And he waits, as I did next to the school bully on second base in gym. Or talks and laughs too loud, or pushes and gets into trouble. Or doesn’t get a long enough turn. Or worries that, when he gets his turn, he’ll somehow mess up, make a fool of himself, perhaps completely botch up his turn, and not get another ‘til next day or week.

But he doesn’t admit any of these feelings, but instead puts on a show of not-caring because sometimes it feels easier to succeed at failure than to fail at success. I have my own memories of both junior high and high school sewing classes. I came from a middle-class family, but we didn’t own a sewing machine. My only experience with sewing machines came in school. And there weren’t enough sewing machines. So because of the waiting, it took forty-five minutes to sew one seam. Once I sewed the wrong seam and wasted a whole week. I wasn’t poor or black but I felt alienated. Ten years later I had my own sewing machine and that’s when I really learned how to sew, and without a teacher. Also, I’d long ago taught myself to sew without a machine.

In the section on “Too Much Time” I talked about school’s pervasiveness, how school permeates, almost prevents, the home – or *any* life outside of school. How it can get into the relationships between parents and kids, in particular how it gets parents to hound, or punish, kids over matters like homework and grades. Poor and working class parents are particularly susceptible to that kind of thing, perhaps because of poor self-image. They bemoan their hard-working lives and “want better” for their kids. They believe that good grades, or making a good impression, will achieve better lives for their kids. What’s meant by “better” is another matter. Thus they are inclined to give too much respect to, and harbor too much fear of, authority. They, like the kids, try to “please the teachers”. They try to creep into the system’s heart. I think back to one day several decades ago. I was picking Marielle up from kindergarten. I found the teacher and a mother hovering over little Dwayne. They were shaking him and yelling, “You WILL read. You MUST read. You CAN read and you WILL.” To me it seemed no accident that the boy and his mother were black and shabbily dressed. And on many levels I was horrified.

In general, middle-class children seem to feel more comfortable in schools than working-class children. And, vice versa, schools seem to feel more comfortable with middle-class children. Even if a particular teacher is open-minded and allows, for example, slang in written assignments, she still possibly feels more at ease, or subtly different in some way, with the middle-class kids. It’s a mindset that’s hard to get rid of.

Because of this comfort thing, middle-class kids in school are more likely to socialize with other middle-class kids. As a high school student, I somehow felt that there were certain kids I was “supposed” to be friendly with. I thought of them as “the well-dressed kids”. What I meant, but couldn’t at the time articulate, was kids dressed a certain way, and looking and talking a certain way. Actually, thinking back, I see that “the well-dressed kids” were *not* necessarily well-dressed; that’s just how I thought of them, that’s the phrase I used. I did not associate with very many of these “well-dressed kids”, nor did my parents or teachers urge me to. Somehow, though, I felt that something was wrong, that I was doing something wrong in associating with “the non-well-dressed kids”. In a movie or TV special, the kids I did associate with would turn out to be unusually sensitive or display some great character, perhaps wind up saving my life. But this was reality. These kids were just people, and life was just life; no dramatic incident occurred to help me realize and understand what was going on, which was that I was socializing outside of my socio-economic group,

Is public school “equal opportunity”? Poor kids often have to work outside of school. They often not only have to “work their way through college”; they have to “work their way” through high school, or junior high. Sometimes this work is not merely outside paying employment, but in their own homes – taking care of a younger sibling, or cousin, or sick relative, or contending with alcoholic parents. Yes, middle-class kids have these problems, too, but it’s different somehow. And if you have more responsibilities and worries outside of school, you have less time and energy for, and more distraction from, school -- and therefore, pure and simple, less chance of getting good grades.

Sure, there have been examples of poor kids doing well in schools, but it's a lot to ask of them. Also, they're the exceptions – and it's not even necessarily a function of how “smart” or “determined” these kids are. It could be a matter of, for example, one exceptional teacher or other empowered adult, or some other exceptional circumstance. Is school “equal opportunity”? I'd say not.

When I was teaching at City College of New York a student came up to me after class. For starters, he was black. He was also a dwarf. As a clincher he said to me, “I have to withdraw from your course. I have to withdraw from school altogether. My father got sick and I have to take care of him.” Indeed, “equal opportunity”, along with “affirmative action”, will have to mean much more than anything our society has so far provided.

Then, too, many poor kids grow up knowing, or believing, that no matter how well they do, no matter how good their grades are, they very likely won't go to college. Many don't even think about college. Their families don't talk about college. These kids know college as a word, perhaps heard on TV, as some remote thing that means, in one way or another, success. And success is something they don't expect to achieve. Both “college” and “success” seem meaningless, perhaps alien, words for them. So they don't think at all about college, in fact, they see no reason to get good grades or otherwise do well in elementary or high school. School is irrelevant to their lives and to their futures. Their futures are work and as poor kids get older, school becomes for them more and more of something that *prevents* them from work. In other words, poor people are understandably less motivated to do well in school. And the advice “get an education”, often given poor and disadvantaged young people, is often easier said than done. Indeed, advice is not the same thing as a solution.

The closest I myself ever came – and this was pretty close, if not actually there – to being “disadvantaged” was during those six years when my husband's multiple sclerosis had progressed to the point where he couldn't transfer from wheelchair to, say toilet – when he couldn't move his body in any way, and he still lived at home. I lifted him with my bare hands, put him on and took him off the toilet, did whatever had to be done in between, and was awakened by him ten, twenty times a night. “Regular” people – that is, people who were not disadvantaged in that way – had no idea what my life was like, even though I told them. That, I often imagine, is how it is with poor and disadvantaged people. Perhaps that's one definition of “disadvantaged” – that society has no idea what your life is like.

In *Dirty Details*, my memoir about the above-described period of my life, and in its sequel *Still the End*, I wrote about how strongly I identified with poor people. I drew many parallels, among them the feeling of downtrodden-ness, that feeling that society was no friend of mine, and probably never would be. Indeed I often felt as though I wasn't part of society at all. “Am I even a third-class citizen?” I asked. “Am I a citizen, period?” And so whether or not to *join* society seemed like a series of daily decisions. It often felt similar to grieving, in that it seemed a huge effort to do ordinary things. I was, true, writing and publishing, but there were still certain commitments I was afraid to

make. I was afraid to take even a part-time teaching job; what if the home-health aide didn't show that day?

So yes, I feel that I can understand, at least to some extent, why disadvantaged people are not, as a social worker I knew once put it, "goal-oriented". Why they don't want to entrust (literally) four or more years of their lives to college, why they have trouble believing any promises that at the end of four years they'll get a good job. Why they don't trust in general. And I have not *always* been disadvantaged. "Nights, lifting, and toilet" are not *all* I've known, not by a long shot. I've had only a taste. I can only try to imagine how it would be if I'd had, not only a taste, but the entire meal.

Another consideration concerning minority groups in schools has to do with peer group. I've already talked about how school enforces, and exaggerates, peer group, thereby making it into something negative, or perceived and acted upon by children as such. In this same way, the "diversity" part of socialization (which in itself is a good thing) becomes, via schools, exaggerated and distorted.

And if and when classes in school teach diversity and tolerance the kids barely listen or relate. "Black Studies", for example, only means books by black authors to read and report on, and classroom "discussions" to "participate" in, and in which the conclusions, often over-simplified, have already been drawn. No white student dares, for example, to talk about any possible fears of or general discomfort around blacks. The kids' attitudes, conscious and/or unconscious, are probably on the order of "Oh, that's just something we have to learn in school". (And "learning in school" seems to be different from just-plain learning!) Thus tolerance becomes just another "school thing"; kids resent it and feel suspicious.

"Bad" schools are often in "bad" neighborhoods. The two go hand in hand. Is it the governments' fault? Do governments specifically *put* back schools in bad neighborhoods? (Well, they sometimes put badly-run bus routes in the poorer neighborhoods.) Or is the neighborhoods' fault? Do bad neighborhoods mess up their schools? Schools seems to be just one more way of *defining* what the "bad neighborhoods" are.

Schooling through the ages has been, in general, a classist institution. Considered within the perspective of the history of schools, schools have been formed by governments for various political reasons, usually different reasons from those given to the parents and taxpayers. "In school to learn" has always been the rationale but the actual reasons are basically two in number. One is to keep the upper classes upper, via teaching certain skills. (It used to be embroidery; now it's reading and computers) and then making schools such that only the upper classes could afford the time or the money and then, moreover, *declaring* those skills vital, and synonymous with intelligence, worth, and respectability. The other reason for the formation of schools has been to keep the lower classes lower by, conversely, creating schools for the lower classes, making them compulsory, and using them to indoctrinate, to keep people in line (homework, dress codes, and some actual subject matter.) Thus schooling helps society chip away at

children's childhood, parent's parenthood, and any minority's culture. As John Gatto Taylor describes in his book "Dumbing Us Down", sometimes these "lower class schools" were specifically designed to promote competition and division among the lower classes, thus nipping in the bud any solidarity that might lead to union activity or other rebellion, grossly offsetting any advantage in learning to add or read.

DEGRADING AND OPPRESSIVE TO WOMEN

It's an old story that mothers, more than fathers, often feel talked down to by teachers and other school personnel, and sometimes by home-schooling "experts", in much the same way as by doctors and other members of the medical establishments. In fact, I often wonder why feminists have worked towards change and autonomy in the health-care system and not so much in the educational system. More about that last will appear later on in this book.

When Arin in first grade brought home that paper on which the teacher had written VERY VERY POOR, I felt as though the teacher had graded my *own* work VERY VERY POOR. That was not only because I loved and empathized with my child, but also because I felt that I was being graded as a parent. I felt, not only that I was being handed the responsibility to see to it that Arin did better work in the future, but that I was supposed to define "better" according to *their* standards, and get him to achieve these standards via their methods. It felt as though my role as a parent was to do the school's bidding – that is, to do as I was told.

Schools sometimes refer to "the parent-teacher team" or even "the parent-teacher-child team". They go on to say that "we all learn from one another", which is usually true. But in fact, in this "team", it's not the parent or the child who gets to make decisions, and it's certainly not the parent or the child who gets paid! And that matters.

Once I did something about this getting-paid business which made me feel good. When Marielle was in sixth grade her class was working on a writing project. The idea was, the kids would write poems which would be set to music by a professional composer. It would all be put together and performed on stage, under the title "It Isn't Easy Being a Kid". Marielle's teacher knew I was a writer and he asked me whether I'd like to be involved. What he wanted me to do was attend a few meetings and give a poetry reading to the kids – as he put it, "light a creative fire under them". We decided that I'd read poems and prose that I wrote when I was a kid, maybe a few current writings by my own kids. It all went as planned. The kids, inspired by my reading and by the brainstorming afterwards, eventually wound up filling the program with poems about dreams and peer group. At one of the meetings with the teacher and three other parents, it came up that the composer was being paid at the rate of \$12 a song. The money would come from fund-raising, probably a sixth-grade dance.

I hesitated a second and then asked, "Are you paying for poems, too?"

All was silent. “Well, I continued, “I think that all of us here are working professionally and as long as you’re talking about pay, I think we should, if possible, all be included. In particular I, as a professional writer, would like to be paid.”

I was aware of the enormity and the possible inappropriateness of what I was asking, so I was pleasantly surprised when the teacher aid, “Sure, I’ll see what I can do.” He did however, add “We might have problems with the principal because, after all, you’re a parent..”

“Oh,” I thought half-facetiously “do I ALREADY get paid too much as a parent?!”

I did wind up getting \$10 (This was around 1980) of the sixth-grade dance money, and the teacher wrote me a long letter in which he apologized that it couldn’t be more. I felt pleased, and proud of both him and me; both of us seemed to understand my political position and my sensitivity about what seems like the demeaning brand of volunteerism which schools encourage and to which so many parents seem willing to be subjected. The mindset seems to be that mothers (more so than fathers) are not busy and have time to do work like baking cookies, work for which they get paid nothing, and which also doesn’t earn all that much for the school. Many parents enjoy this work, and the accompanying socializing with other parents, but many do not, and do it only because they feel pressured.

Along these same lines, here is a shortened version of an open letter which I once wrote to the parents at the day care center which, at the time, my son Bret was attending:

Dear Fellow Infant-Toddler Parent:

I’m writing this to let you know of my reaction to the latest communication about the Parents Meeting, which appeared in our boxes last week, the one about the bake sale and the raffle. I’m wondering whether any of you feel the same way I do. In a word, my immediate reaction to that latest note was: Resentful. Another word would be: Angry.

I am a working parent. I work more than eight hours a day. I know that the rest of you are in the same situation. I placed my child in day care because I need the time for my work. I don’t have the time to bake cookies or to sell tickets. Yes, sure, I could, as they say, “make the time”. On second thought, I COUDLN”T make the time. There are other things for which I have “made the time” – things like reading stories to my kids, taking them to the pool, and just-plain talking and interacting with them. I have already “made the time”, again and again, and there is simply no time left for cookies and raffles.

If there were more time then, to be honest, cookies and raffles would not be first on the list. Of course I do realize that many of us enjoy things like bake sales and raffles, this kind of participation in our children’s lives. However, I also know, from individual conversations with individual parents, that a lot of us don’t. A lot of us do it because we feel uncomfortable saying no, or because we’re afraid of being accused of not caring about our children (enough to “make the time”). Deep down inside, I believe the ultimate

fear (justified or not) might be that, if we say no, our children will be put out of the program.

If the baking of cookies or the selling of tickets were mandatory for the continuation of the program, then yes, I would try extra hard to “make the time” (I wonder how, though). But it isn’t. The thing for which the cookies and ticket-selling would raise money is, so I’ve been told, NOT the continuation of the program, but trips for the kids. Well, I simply am not terribly concerned about trips for the kids. I am, frankly, extremely satisfied with the program the way it is. The kids also appear to be extremely satisfied, not at all bored, or in need of trips. Sure, trips are often fun, but I don’t believe they’re necessary, and certainly not necessary enough to warrant that kind of time and energy. The kids have a large playground to play in, are often taken to the public parks, and I believe this is what they enjoy most. This is the way Bret would spend his day if I weren’t working, if I were with him all day.

It certainly is possible for us to care about our children and still not bake cookies. A lot of you know me personally as Bret’s mother. You’ve probably observed that I love my children, care about them, take time with them, and so on. Many of you heard me read my poetry at that meeting and you know how deeply my feelings go and how important my children are in my life. You know that I went through two full-term pregnancies to have Bret, and that I am still breast-feeding him. Yet I am saying no to both baking cookies and selling tickets. The point is, YOU are a good parent, even if you say no to cookies and raffles.

Actually, I look upon the activity of baking cookies as a DETRIMENT to being a good parent to Bret. If I baked the cookies, it would probably be during and/or before making dinner (since I’d be in the kitchen anyway). So the usual rush to finish everything would be doubled. “Get Bret OUT OF HERE!” is possibly what I’d be screaming.

I resent this pressure. I resent being treated as though my time weren’t valuable. I want to, and do, give time to my child, but not in this way. I want MY CHILDREN, MY HUSBAND, AND MYSELF to decide in which ways we spend time for and with one another.

Even expensive private schools, with plenty of money, hold bake sales and raffles because, they say, the kids need trips. Why is this? Why, emotionally, does everyone seem to need this sort of thing? I often wonder whether it’s guilt. Do, for example, day care mothers (and sometimes fathers) feel at least some degree of guilt for working and, as some thoughtless people say, “letting someone else raise your kids”. Perhaps many of us feel, subconsciously, that we might be able to ease the guilt feelings by things like baking cookies, and then being able to tell friends, relatives, and acquaintances, “Well, yes, I did go back to work BUT Bret’s going to a wonderful school, where they take the kids on all these great trips...”

If you feel the same, or similar, or if you would like to discuss all this, please get in touch. Leave a note in my box with your name and phone number And thanks for “making the time” to read this! -- Marion

Before putting copies of that letter in the parents’ boxes at the center, I showed it to a social worker at the center, and she agreed with me. But she suggested that I not “distribute” it. It was “too radical”, she said. Indeed, it wasn’t trying to *not* be radical.

My point is that both school – and home-schooling -- along with all of society -- is full of things like bake sales and raffles. And of “asking” the parents to contribute time and/or money. And of exaggerating the importance of things like trips. And of assuming that parents, especially mothers, truly want trips for their kids. And of *getting* the parents to truly want trips for their kids. Of laying guilt trips on them. Home-schooling mothers have talked to me about how they sometimes feel pressured to attend, and help out at, various home-schooling events – meetings, activities, field trips, and so on. “I feel like I might as well be a PTA mother” is a refrain I’ve heard more than once.

This is oppressive to women and families.

MORE WAYS OF INTERFERING WITH FAMILY LIFE AND LOVE

The other day I watched a mother help her first-grade daughter with homework. This is a child who is daily showered with love, by her mother, aunts, and grandmother. The family is fun-loving and dotes on her and her younger brother, especially on this particular holiday occasion. But suddenly the mother remembered that homework was due the next day. “Omigod,” she gasped. They got out the worksheets and notebook. The mother was kind and patient at first. But the longer her daughter took to do the homework, the more worried she looked, and the less relaxed and loving she became. At one point she told her daughter, “Don’t look at ME, look at the WORD.”

But Samantha wanted to look at her mother. She was used to looking at her mother, and she was used to her mother looking back. How sad, I thought, and how strange and confusing it must feel to Samantha.

It also felt strange and confusing to me. To think that some children see their parents *only* at homework-doing time. This is the only way they relate to one another. So besides parents and kids not having much time together, *how* they spend that time is controlled. How sad.

Non-school stuff can do it, too. Several weeks ago, in a thrift store, I couldn’t help but keep watching a mother with her two sons, who appeared to be ages around six and nine. She was constantly – literally constantly – criticizing and correcting them. “Let me teach

you something. Be still and listen. I want to teach you something.” What she wanted to teach them, it soon became quite clear, was adding up the prices of the items they had tentatively picked out.

They weren’t interested. They seemed aloof, withdrawn, and alienated. It was as though they had turned themselves off. Moreover, not only was their mother constantly correcting them; her corrections were just-plain wrong. For example, “how can you learn anything when you keep looking around?” Whereas in actuality, “looking around” is a huge source of information.

Again, how sad. The following sentence kept going through my mind: “It seems as though she doesn’t love them.” I had a strong urge to go over to her and quietly say to her, “It seems as though you don’t love them. And I know that you do.” Indeed, perhaps what it seemed was that she didn’t *like* them. At any rate, this family was not doing school homework; they were doing out-of-school work. In fact, they could very well have been a home-schooling family. And worry about learning was interfering in a big, and to me unnecessary, way in its life and love. Yes, how sad.

MAYBE IF WE DIDN’T TRY TO TEACH SO MUCH

By the time my daughter Marielle was two to the time my son Arin was four – a total of six years – they had the ideal baby-sitter. Edie lived three blocks from us and was “Grandma” to dozens of kids in the neighborhood. She charged on a weekly basis (to some not at all), was always available (breakfast, supper, overnight, weekends). She did this because, as she put it, “I just don’t feel comfortable without kids around.” *With* kids around, she did feel comfortable, and relaxed and happy, as she went about her own life, being available and affectionate to the kids, without displaying “conspicuous concern”.

But now she was moving on us. And there were no other neighborhood sitters of “Edie caliber (and price). So I began making the round of the day care centers. Our family had “been with Edie” for a long time and, outside of Marielle’s school at the time, this was my first experience with formal day care. I can’t help remembering how appalled I felt at some of the things I encountered.

One center seemed particularly formidable, condescending, and illogical. For example, I couldn’t help comparing its “intake procedures” to Edie’s “intake procedure”. The center’s intake procedure was written up in five or six mimeographed sheets. It described “three steps”, two interviews, and a waiting list. How different it seemed from Edie’s, which had consisted of a single visit in her living room where we also met the family with whom she was living and which included a mother, her two kids, a dog and two cats, with whom Elle immediately and easily began to play. “Just bring her over any time you want,” Edie had told us as we walked out the door.

“Well, we’ll call first,” my husband had said.

“Oh, you can call if you want,” Edie had answered, “but it really doesn’t matter.” Indeed, Edie, along with other adults, was always around.

But now this daycare center wanted birth date, and registration, and it required what they called “a gradual visiting period” for each child. “Because your child needs you,” ran page three of their write-up, “we ask that you be present for the first morning or longer, depending on his need.”

Further along, beginning in bold caps, it continued, “DO YOU SEE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A CHILD’S ATTENDANCE AND ADJUSTMENT? The center is open from 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM. So that every child can feel a part of his group and get the most out of Child Care, it is important that he be present for a meaningful part of the day. It is for this reason that pre-school children are required to be at the Center no later than 9:00 AM and leave no earlier than 3:00 PM. School-age children are required to stay at the Center at least one hour after public school..”

Anna at Edie’s used to go two days a week. Nini arrived every day around 7:00 AM. Beverly arrived around noon. Every month or so our Elle, now in school and involved in various after-school activities and get-togethers, would get to missing the gang at Edie’s so she’d come with me to pick up Arin and often wind up sleeping over, along with several of Edie’s other “alumni”. Edie’s grandchildren would also visit every once in a while. And every one of those kids, whatever their “Edie schedules”, most definitely, to paraphrase the day care center’s words, “felt a part of the group and got the most out of Child Care.”

Towards the end of the center’s write-up appeared what seemed to me to smack of propaganda. “While it is important for children to be involved in the many activities in their group, pre-school children can benefit from only so much. Too long a day is no better than too short. Thus, pre-school children should stay at the Center no longer than nine hours.”

On the first day that Marielle, aged two at the time, stayed at Edie’s we came to pick her up at 5:00. Elle was very happy to see us and came running with hugs and kisses and requests for a glass of water, but no way did she want to go home. “Everyone else gets to eat here,” she told us. And indeed there were all the kids, sitting around the table while Edie dished out the stew. We had to wait while Marielle finished her supper, and we were offered some too. After that if, for any reason, we had to pick Marielle up before their dinner, Edie would pack her a doggie-bag. And no matter what time we picked her up, she always wanted to know whether Debbie and/or Chrissie could come over *her* house now. Often we answered “yes”.

Indeed, at Edie’s, it wasn’t a matter of “the many activities in their group”. There were activities all right, but not so “many” as to make “too long a day” a concern. This was Edie’s *home*, and Edie went about her business (nothing “over-stimulating” or even just-plain stimulating, just housework and visiting with neighbors, who also doted on the kids). She never failed to tend to the kids when they needed her, and often when they

didn't, but she was not around *only* to take care of the kids. And this, to me, seemed more dignified and less burdensome for everybody.

Why, I asked myself, can't day care centers be just regular ordinary *places*, for kids (or adults) to eat, sleep, play, and stay ad infinitum like at home or at a friend's or at Edie's? There seemed to be a conspiracy or sorts perpetrated by all of society, not only the powers that ran the day care centers. The subtle and unconscious plot, so it seemed to me, ran something like this: First, make the centers over-stimulating, then write down in the "guidelines" that, because they're so over-stimulating, the kids can't stay there for more than nine hours. (And some parents' work requires more than nine hours.)

If day care centers weren't such a big deal, I conjectured, there could be more of them. If everyone weren't so hung up on intake procedures, gradual visiting periods, social skills, cognitive skills, vaccination verification, and pre-school education, it wouldn't all have to be such a big deal. At that time I had a semi-facetious "day care motto": Quantity, not quality. By "quality" I meant the procedures and other hang-ups described above. By "quantity" I meant simply enough day care. (And right now, writing this, I'm quipping "Quantity time!")

Reading that day care center pamphlet and other such literature, I felt discouraged. I had been feeling discouraged anyway. In those days even the feminist movement was assuring society that it did not condone day care centers as "mere baby-sitting". Huh? I thought. What's wrong with "mere" baby-sitting? That's what Edie had given us. That's what I gave my kids when they were home. "Mere baby-sitting" to me *includes* love and education, as does "mere living".

What's all the fuss about? Why does toddler day care seem, so often, to be equated with pre-school education? Why, just because a parent is working, must her kids be subjected to pre-school education? Why, for example, must the word "education" or something equivalent be included in the advertisement of most day care centers? Why, if it isn't, do the centers feel they won't attract customers?

Teachers often truly love kids. Many became teachers for that reason. In day care centers, nursery schools, elementary and high schools, teachers very often seem to genuinely enjoy and understand children. But maybe they'd like their jobs more if they didn't have to actually teach the kids! Or teach them *so much*. Or hover over them so much. Put everything else aside. Maybe teachers would like it better if they could "merely" be with the kids, teaching and doing custodial care only as called for, in the natural course of things -- or at least not so scheduled and required. If they could, at least some of the time, do what they'd be doing anyway -- read, play card games, watch TV -- if they could *be adults*. Maybe they'd really rather be an Edie, and get to know "real kids" and be, to those kids, "real adults". If they could get the same salary, benefits, and appreciation for being an Edie, maybe that's what they choose.

Sometimes it seems to me that people think they're somehow not "supposed" to be with kids unless they teach or hover over them, toting academic or life skills. It seems as

though everyone, meaning society, somehow needs to justify via “education” the very existence of day care centers (or perhaps the existence of childhood itself). And the bigger a deal is made about this education (and of the day care), the more comfortable everyone seems to feel. It’s related, I bet, to the conspicuous concern mentioned earlier. Certainly education serves as a convenient focus for conspicuous concern. Teaching and education seem to be a kind of *raison d’être*. Lining kids up and/or sitting them down and “having” them recite or work in workbooks seems, to some, to be the only way for them to get to be with kids. Or perhaps it’s the only way to, again, get paid for being with kids, or paid decently.

Maybe society would like to get out of this rut but doesn’t know any other way. But there *are* other ways. These ways have been and will be described in this book (and in many other books about, for example, home-schooling, and just about living with children). Indeed, most people do know about these other ways from personal experience. For example, “hanging out”, playing games (and not only “educational games”), parallel play, hugging, and so on. Maybe if schools (including, again, home-schools) didn’t try to be schools, or even day care centers, if instead what they tried to be was “mere baby-sitters”, maybe things would be better all around.

This seems to be a good place to say that much of this book also applies at the other end of life – that is, in nursing homes, adult day care centers, and other programs for elderly and impaired citizens. Over the years, many parents of toddlers have told me things like “I’d like to send her to a place where they just let the kids play all the time, but there isn’t any.” In this same vein, many well-spouses and other family members of ill or impaired people have said, “I do need respite care but... well, Charlie’s a former college professor; how would he feel about all that basket weaving and group singing?”

Why, indeed, does society have to have such a basket weaving mindset? Can’t we throw off the nervousness, the guilt, the potential, and so on and just take care of our citizens, old and young, in the true and literal sense of the term?

CHAPTER TWO: QUESTIONING EVERYTHING THE MANY SUBTLE FACES OF AUTHORITY

INTRODUCTION

Home-schooling parents and activists often talk about how important it is to try to overcome the fear and influence of authority. However, by this what they usually seem to mean is only authority associated with schools – teachers, principals, officials, rules and regulations, along perhaps with the subtle effects of the schooling they went through when they were kids. But often the very things which home-schoolers turn to in order to replace or combat the above-mentioned school authorities are, or are at risk of becoming, authorities themselves.

Many home-schooling parents are understandably scared; it's scary to do the opposite of what most people are doing. And because they're scared they need things to grab hold of -- for example, Girl and Boy Scouts, the Y, art classes or music lessons. Many parents (home-schooling and otherwise) tend to feel guilty if they don't partake of these offerings. Also, they know that they might be able to list them in home-schooling logs, or say, in conversation with relatives, friends, and other home-schoolers, "Johnny doesn't go to school but he does keep busy" or "he sure does interact with the world".

In fact, activities *within* the home-schooling community itself have served, or tried to serve, this same purpose – the purpose of assuaging feelings of doubt and guilt. These activities, however, often turn out to be like school in many ways, and they can play the same negative roles in children's and families' lives. In other words, they can become authorities. It is this authority status that, to me, is the problem, and not necessarily the activities themselves. (This can be true of conventional school activities, too.)

I'd like to define what I mean by authority, and to emphasize that authority in this sense is not good. For our purposes here authority will encompass anything that large numbers of people aspire to, imitate, or try to "get in good with" or find time for, and for reasons other than its worth, desirability, or enjoyment.

These other reasons for embracing authority might include reality (such as the testing requirement of some home-schooling laws), pressure, fear, habit, conformity ("safety in numbers"), bad self-image (not trusting ourselves) guilt feelings as well as the conspicuous concern described in the previous chapters. It often seems to me that parents, teachers, and society in general take the most difficult, rather than the best or wisest,

course of action, especially when children are involved. Parents in particular often do this in order to prove, to others and to themselves, how “concerned” they are.

Authorities usually have the properties of being structured, scheduled, and involving labels or degrees of some sort – in other words, further forms of authority. Authorities usually also involved the expenditure of time, money, and energy – that is, conspicuous concern. Because they arise out of the same elements and aspects of society from which school arises or even actually out of the schools themselves, authorities often share many of the pitfalls of school, and of some home-schools.

It is important to note that something can be an authority *and* have worth, simultaneously. Indeed, many authorities (perhaps those arising from schools) are in this category. It is when these offerings are *taken* as authorities, rather than as offerings, that they become detrimental.

Bob McDougall, one of the first home-schoolers I ever met, said to me, “When you begin to question school, you begin to question everything.” Adults need to be able to question, sift out, and separate authority from what we and our kids truly want or need. That often means – and I’ll go into this more later – separating out our kids’ needs from our own, or from society’s, before making decisions. It is possible to satisfy, clarify, and perhaps alter or adjust both parents’ and kids’ needs *without* the extraneous time, money, and energy expenditures created and perpetrated by authority.

In this chapter many of the subtle authorities which parents encounter are identified and analyzed separately as to their basic attractions, parents’ and/or kids’ motivations for choosing or continuing them, and how and to what extent, if at all, they have aligned with society to become authorities. Thus each family, for each kid, at each “age and stage”, at each moment, can make informed decisions as to whether it wants or needs any such activity.

The point of this chapter is not to argue about whom to “blame” – society? the government? big business? special interest groups? -- but to simply acknowledge the subtleties and pervasiveness of authority, in particular as it pertains to the interaction between adults and children. We adults, in our individual if not political lives, can then question, make choices and reject authority when it doesn’t suit us. We can *use* authorities such as dancing and art classes, rather than let them use us.

ADULT-RUN KIDS’ ORGANIZATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Many home-schooling parents, motivated negatively by insecurities, embarrassment, or pressure to “keep up with the Joneses”, or motivated positively by genuine observations of their children’s needs, make huge efforts to provide their children with some of the items that school would have provided them with. “At least SOME structure.” “SOME scheduled activities”. “A chance to meet other kids.” These are among the items sought.

With these in mind, many such parents enroll their kids in or encourage them to hook up with authorities.

Home-schooling publications abound in articles elaborating on and supporting this. There are, unfortunately, few words of caution. While the activities mentioned above can be interesting and fun, or even emotionally indicated at certain ages and stages, still, to me, most adult-organized kids' activities, including those created by the home-schooling community, seem like school in many ways, and they often display many of the pitfalls described in the previous chapter ("What's Wrong").

"Too much time," for example. Although usually not every day, these activities still tend to interfere with the lives of children and their families. "I can't come over your house" my own kids have too frequently been told by their friends, home-schooling and not. "I have to go to Gymnastics." Yes, they say "have to". The feeling I almost always get is, while the kid might have originally begged, pestered, and chosen to begin Gymnastics, after awhile it had become, more and more, another thing getting in the way.

At one "age and stage" Devin and his home-schooling friend Jerry loved to get together. Every Monday Jerry would sleep over here and every Thursday Dev would sleep over there. Jerry and his family didn't live close by, and the kids were too young to take public transportation by themselves, so transporting the kids wasn't easy. They could visit for only an hour or two. So sleepovers were the best way. In fact, they would have liked to spend several days and nights together, not only one night. However, Jerry had aikido on Saturdays and tap lessons on Tuesday. (This was one case where the often-wise "spreading out" of activities was a detriment.)

Is it "good" for children to have such commitments? I'm not sure. I'd definitely say not always. Not as a given. Devin didn't choose them. And, speaking "selfishly", I was glad he didn't. It would have complicated my own life too much. My gut feeling has been that, while commitment enhances living when someone, usually an adult, has already decided what's important in his life, children don't need adults to invent, or even encourage, commitments for them. Kitty Anderson, a fellow home-schooler, used to say, "Kids don't have to PRACTICE being committed. When they find something they're truly... well, committed to, they'll be... well, committed."

In "Child's Work" Nancy Wallace makes a similar point about, not commitment, but computers. Just as kids don't have to practice commitment, so they don't seem to have to practice computers – or not much. "The idea of using the Mac in the abstract made no sense to Vita... [but] once she came up with a project for which she knew the Mac would be useful, she was eager to learn how to use it... Vita only gave the computer the time of day when she had a specific purpose for it in mind." And so with commitment. Why give commitment in the abstract the time of day? Indeed, why give the time of day to commitment, if the commitment is to something one does not truly feel committed to (such as an adult-chosen or adult-enforced activity)? What's important is commitment to something really special.

I also wonder whether the motivation behind things like aikido, tap, ballet lessons, and home-schooling “field trips” is, more often than we realize, really guilt feelings, along with worry and, again, some kind of subtle fear or veneration of authority. And perhaps the appearance of being “organized” (or “committed”), and of “concern”, assuages (or seems to promise to assuage) these feelings.

May parents lament, “Kids don’t just play together around the neighborhood any more. They’re always either in school, being transported to and from school, or in various after-school activities.” Yes, parents do, if asked and sometimes if not, admit that it’s important to “let kids be kids”, and to be careful not to “load children down too much”. But there seems, sadly, to be great variety in people’s perceptions of what “too much” is.

Among my four children Devin displayed the least interest in organized activities. One weekend, however, the two of us went to our first-ever home-schooling conference and there were many workshops for children. Dev was interested. For the four time-slots he chose beginners’ chess, volley ball, Fun with Wood, and Science and Engineering. He was very excited at the prospect of these workshops and very excited afterwards. “I loved them,” he kept saying, and he went into details.

On the bus ride home I asked him, “Since you liked the workshops so much, maybe, just maybe, you’d like to take some kind of class, once a week or so...”

“No,” answered Dev. “I’d just like to come back next year to another conference.” Like me, he seemed to think of these things as the exception rather than the rule. Once a year was just about right.

One of the workshops at that home-schooling conference was “As the Brain Storms: Creative Writing Tips for Kids and Adults”. Now, Dev was extremely interested in writing. He spent hours a day at it. But he wasn’t at all interested in taking that workshop. “What would we DO?” he asked.

“Well, I began lamely, “you’d... well, you’d write!”

Dev and I looked at each other knowingly. “So?” he repeated. “So I ALWAYS write.”

“Well,” I tried next, “you’d write TOGETHER.” (I would always try to not let my own feelings about organized activities discourage Dev from them. And maybe that was a kind of authority.)

“So we ALWAYS write together,” insisted Dev, referring to his and my “parallel” writing sessions, as well as to the way he and his friends would write together and discuss “what should happen next” in their stories and comics.

I think Dev was saying that he didn’t need any more input into his writing just then. (Just as, come to think of it, I, in my writing life, don’t cultivate writing workshops or support groups. I pay attention to my *favorite* writers, a few writing friends, and mostly to my

editors and publishers!) All this brings us back to “too much input”. Adult-run kids’ activities are often infested with “input mania”. Why, for example, would Devin have needed “writing tips”? He was not, at the time, trying to be a “better” writer.

In her book “Child’s Work”, Nancy Wallace writes about how, at age eleven, her daughter Vita, “who normally spends several hours every day cutting, pasting, molding clay or folding paper in the art room... automatically stops working on art at home when she goes to even the nicest art class for any length of time... ‘What I like about art,’ says Via, ‘is figuring thing out.’”

Moving down the line as to “what’s wrong”, or what’s often wrong, with adult-run children’s activities – “too much testing”? Sure. The same need to prove prevails. Obvious things like Girl Scout badges, piano recitals, and sports competitions. And more subtle things like who makes the “best” papier mache puppet, or who get the “leader” or “facilitator” to smile. (Who gets to creep into the teacher’s heart?) And children in these situations are more visible, more exposed, than they are in school, and they are often more nervous. They *feel* tested, even if they’re not.

Kitty told me about her experience as coordinator of the Children’s Program at the Buddhist Center to which her family belonged. “The other parents seem to want to make everything into a play, or an exhibit,” she says. “Little things that catch the kids’ attention [for a moment] they want to mushroom into this big thing. [But] just because the kids like doing it doesn’t mean they want to KEEP doing it.” Yes, remember Bret with his comment about being interested in slavery, but ending with “I’m not THAT interested, Mom.” And Dev’s version of that is “Don’t KEEP ON GOING.”

And on to “too much peer group”. It’s often more a problem with non-school than school activities. A home-schooler recently said, “When I was a kid I dreaded summer. I hated camp far more than I hated school.” For me also camp was pretty horrible. (Fortunately, my parents didn’t force or even encourage me to go; I was my idea – three times.) Camp for me was *all* peer-group. Peer in the sense of same age. There seemed to be no cover, no refuge, just a bunch of kids who were not my friends thrown together and told what to do. Or not told what to do. It was almost all gym, very little arts and crafts. I missed my diary and “my” math. The one hour’s “quiet time” was used up by writing letters home. I counted the days ‘til I would *be* home. (Indeed, my parents at that time quoted other parents as saying, “The best thing about camp is coming home.”

At that home-schooling conference in Pittsburgh, there were several teen-agers; home-schooling teens tend, in general, to be less hostile, less distrustful of adults, more self-directed and motivated, and sweeter. Nonetheless, as I watched them interact, I had wondered: Would I, as a teen-ager, have felt comfortable with them? Would I have been interested in hanging out all day with them at a conference: Or would I, as during the school dances, Y meetings, and camp, have missed my diary and math? I don’t know.

Nancy Wallace talked to me about how Vita at fifteen felt alienated in Youth Orchestra. It just wasn't her thing. She felt more comfortable with her musical activities at home, and at her music lessons.

What about "the potential trap"? Attitudes like "You CAN do it, if you'll only try" prevail. And instead of teacher's jobs or promotions being at stake, it's the group leaders who have, if not money to gain, then a possible career or resume boost. Or it looks good on applications. Or funding is involved. Thus comes the need for tangible results. Instead of "things like book reports and nature journals" from the previous chapter, kids make, again, papier mache puppets, or pot holders, or miniature rafts out of twigs. I remember the feeling of it, when I was a kid. It somehow wasn't the same feeling as sewing dolls' clothes sprawled out on my bed, or making Dolly Dimple paper dolls around the kitchen table with the neighborhood kids, or doing summer crafts at the park with "Mrs. Q", or writing this book *now*. I didn't feel creative, and I something felt out of control. I wasn't necessarily among friends, and none of us had thought of the ideas by ourselves. It wasn't really ours.

"Oppressive to poor and minority groups"? Very likely. These activities are, for the most part, a middleclass phenomenon. They're less likely to be found in "bad" neighborhoods, and those that are situated in such neighborhoods are often different in flavor from, or (on the other hand) perhaps imitative of, the ones in middleclass neighborhoods. In any case, they often sport, and run out of, equipment. And, again, kids from working-class families are less likely to have this equipment at home. And again, the language and personalities of the leaders or facilitators is often of the middleclass ilk, not always what minority kids are comfortable with. Again, in some situations, minority kids are deprived of their culture, and maybe respect for their culture.

Are these activities "oppressive to women"? Well, the mothers sure aren't presented as the experts! In the "mother and child together" type of activity, it's not the mother who gets paid, calls any shots, or who gets to put the activity on her resume. Mothers dutifully bring in their kids, and when they stay, they're like students and perhaps feel like kids. And there often emerges the bake sale syndrome.

True, these activities are not compulsory -- unless, of course, the parents force the kids to go, which does happen. Or the parents simply enroll the kids and *expect* them to go. Or the kids *think* they have to go; it doesn't occur to them that they can tell their parents they'd rather not, just as it very often doesn't occur to kids to tell their parents if someone is molesting them. Or their parents seem so wrapped up in it, and after all they invested so much money, the kids haven't the heart, or the nerve, to say anything. Still, they're not as compulsory as school or as, sometimes, home-schooling lessons. And they do tend to be more child-directed, or at least the kids get more chance to talk and they don't, not as much, have to sit still. They're also more likely to be about things which kids have chosen and about which they might feel passionate, or at least interested -- at least when they first enroll.

But many of these organizations seem to subscribe to the credo that accomplishments should be made every day. And discipline is involved. After all, the ratio of kids to facilitator is usually more than 1 to 1. So “disruptive behavior” is on everyone’s minds. And in such situations, “regular” behavior is interpreted as disruptive. So adults have to discipline, however gently, in order to “get” them to do certain things. Judgment is given, if not grades. There is a difference between Girl Scout badges and report card A’s, but how significant is that difference? There’s a division between success and failure, usually via the equations: getting along in the organization = success; not getting along = failure. Bret used to say about karate class, “They treat us like kids.” In “Child’s Work” Nancy Wallace says, “Most schools, where the traditional teacher/student relationship prevails, are no different from hospitals, or any institution for that matter, based on the inequality inherent in a professional/client relationship.”

Kids and/or parents often get involved in such organizations because they feel, somehow, that they “should”. In this society it sometimes seems to make better cocktail-party, or park-bench, conversation to say “Johnny’s taking an art class at the Y” than “Johnny loves drawing pictures”. This is perhaps another way of saying that these organizations and activities represent authority.

Giving in to pressure is often associated with fearfulness, and sometimes this fearfulness is particularly obvious. “If they don’t take karate, they might get mugged.” “If they don’t take swimming lessons, they might drown.” “If they don’t take piano lessons, they won’t grow up to appreciate music.” It seems to be the same sort of over-simplified, and over-reactive, reasoning we see in schools. “If they’re not given homework, they won’t learn responsibility.” “If they’re allowed to chew gum, they won’t learn respect.” Fearfulness and distrust seem to lead to inflexibility, and to the feeling that informal karate, swimming, or piano lessons from a friend of the family is somehow less “real”.

For several years my mother forced my sister to take piano lessons because I, out of true love and interest, was taking piano lessons. My mother wanted Rosalyn to have, as she later put it, “the same opportunity as you, Marion”. At the time I felt it was stupid of my mother to equate “opportunity” with “obligation”, but now I understand the pressures that parents are under (especially 50s mothers). My mother didn’t want anyone to be able to say that she wasn’t providing Rosalyn with the same opportunity as Marion.

Another objection to these activities is, they’re hard to quit. This is part of their authority status. For the same reasons as they joined to begin with, parents and kids alike feel the pressure to continue -- especially, again, if they’ve already paid for the six weeks, or the year. Quitting becomes an emotional and painful decision. It took my mother a couple of years to discontinue Rosalyn’s piano lessons.

In general, the word “quit” has far too negative a connotation in our society. “Quitter” seems to have the same stigma as “chicken”, “nerd”, and so on. In actuality quitting is very often a positive thing. The very decision to quit can feel liberating. Moreover, quitting something you don’t like leaves time and space for something you do like. When my sister Rosalyn and I were little, she and several of her friends didn’t like their

Brownie troop leader and, over the course of several weeks, they decided to quit. I suggested they form a “Quit Brownies Club”. They had a Quit-Brownies motto, Quit-Brownies slogan, Quit-Brownies song, and in conversation often said “Quit-Brownies honor”. As I recall, they never held a meeting but they had more fun in Quit-Brownies than they’d even had in Brownies. Quit-Brownies became a beginning rather than an end. It lasted only a few weeks – it was soon time for Quit-Quit-Brownies! – but it lasted as long as it should have, and quitting wasn’t such a big deal.

If people, kids and adults alike, are made to feel afraid of quitting, they might be afraid to start anything in the first place, or to accept any offering such as membership in a club or organization. Indeed, organizations and activities could be seen as offerings, not obligations or authorities. In children’s lives I view them as exceptions rather than the rule, and I approach them with caution. And they, rather than their absence, bear the burden of proof.

My own kids have gone through karate and gymnastic stages, of their own finding choosing, and I’m always on the alert for signs of “pre-quitting”. When I notice enough of these signs, I suggest quitting and I’m supportive if they do quit, and if they don’t. Yes, there are probably situations where it’s better to not be so quick to quit but those are probably the exceptions. And it’s certainly not true that quitting is always bad. In fact, as a mathematician I can say: For every X there is a Quit-X, and Quit-X can be another opportunity.

THINGS LIKE ECOLOGY CLUB

What I love to see are *kid*-organized kids’ organizations and activities. Things like Quit-Brownies, the Button Club of my tenth summer, and my sister’s Have Fun Club, of which she was specifically the only member! Still, kid-organized stuff, too, I approach with caution. For kids imitate adults, which can mean they imitate society. This in itself is healthy; it’s part of loving their adults, and of being human. But it can also mean imitating adult-organized kids’ activities – which can also be healthy and harmless, but I still say beware. Also, sometimes so-called kids’ activities come about because the adults put the kids up to it. In this section are examples of kid-organized activities which have given me pause.

I remember the year my best friend (at the time) Frances organized a play. She was, at least in my perception, so bossy about it that I didn’t enjoy it and felt alienated. She seemed to be acting like a teacher. Eventually I quit that play. Also, the proceeds from the play went to the Polio Fund, and that gave Frances’s parents an excuse to call up The Spectator, our town newspaper, and get some coverage for the play. Possibly Frances’s name was mentioned and not mine, but I don’t remember.

Again, “kids” organizations are often inspired, encouraged, and interfered with by adults, to the point that they’re really adult-activities in disguise. The adults that have done the organizing often have their own agendas. Perhaps things to prove. A parent

who's a writer, for example, might not be able to resist suggesting, "Why don't you form a Writing Club?" (I never did!) Or a political activist. "Why don't you form an Ecology Club?" (Or me with Bret: "Why don't you form a Slavery Club?" Just kidding! I never said that.)

Such parents might fantasize eventually sending articles or letters about these clubs to their schools or home-schooling newspapers or a children's magazine. In fact, suspiciously many home-schooling magazines seem to be full of letters and articles about Writing Clubs and Ecology Clubs. It's almost like nature journals. And I have to admit that I'm suspicious. These are just too many of them. It seems to me that kids' clubs "should" have silly names like Kitty's daughter Joy's Blue and Green Club (for anyone whose favorite color is blue or green), or the Elle and Jill Club that Marielle and her friend Jill formed when they were both eight. (And Marielle wrote an angry letter to her brother Arin: "I am starting a Elel and Jill Club. I am not starting a Elle and Arin Club.") Kids' clubs should be more subtle, more varied and unpredictable – and, sometimes, more strange.

And the ways in which they're organized, or disorganized, should be likewise. Like Quit-Brownies. Kids' clubs could never meet, could be just something to talk about, or perhaps one could say they *always* meet. In general, when too many kids' organizations last long enough to be reported in a home-schooling newsletter, I get suspicious!

True, the clubs that kids form might reflect their own experiences, which might include their parents' interests and beliefs. But I would expect things to happen, at least sometimes, in less obvious ways. The home I grew up in was intellectual and progressive; over dinner my parents discussed stuff from the New York Times. The Cold War, Suez Canal, and so on. "Isn't it terrible that..." "Isn't it interesting about...?" But Roz and I didn't form a current Events Club or a New York Times Club. Instead we played it out with our dolls. We invented various "nationalities", corresponding to the various dolls we had, with names like Ginny and Joanie. All the "nationalities" were part of a land called O-by Land. They spoke a language called O-by, and their enemies were the Pi-Pi's (inspired by adults, usually woman, who were too snooty) and Roughy-toughy's (inspired by people, usually men, whom today we might call macho). During supper, as our parents discussed the Suez Canal "situation", we discussed "the Pi-Pi conflict" or "the Roughy-Toughy invasion". It wasn't a club; it was a way of life, eventually a newspaper, "O-by News", and a book, "The History of O-by Land", almost finished and of course never published. Similarly, our ever-increasing concerns about religion and the nature of good and evil got played out in another book, again almost finished, about a kid devil named Mischief and a kid angel named Angelette. And we referred to hell as Devilland, and it wasn't like the hell of some religions; it was more like an orientation for Heaven.

In summary, when things get too much like book reports and nature journals – too pat and too prevalent – I think "Authority alert! Somebody wants something from kids."

LIBRARIES

When I was a kid, it seemed to me that everybody was always wanting me to go to the library. School assignments increasingly involved trips to the library, to look up some reference in some mini-print maxi-paged volume. And my mother, who rarely pressured me in any other way, seemed to always be saying, in a kind of pep-talk-y way, “Why don’t you hop on your bike and ride on over to the library?” She might even have sported a worried look and tone. (And I conjecture that she was as anxious about the bike as she was about the library.)

Going to the library seemed to me almost a sport, the kind of sport I hated, like the ones in gym class at school. I was then, as I am now, more of a writer than a reader, and I just was not as enthusiastic about libraries as the adults in my life seemed to want me to be. In the back of my mind I often felt pressured, judged, worried, and guilty. In other words, libraries seemed to be an authority, for me and possibly for my parents.

In my early and middle teens I began to discover that libraries could be something I wanted to bike or walk to. On my own I discovered, first, the Nancy Drew and the Betsy-Tacy books, and then, in the adult section, I discovered William Saroyan, plus his ex-wife who had also been a writer, and two shelves of what I came to call “the prison books”. What drew me to this last were my own interests and emotional needs, and these books have since shaped some of my adult feelings, beliefs, and writings; in particular, they made me a prisoner sympathizer and a capital punishment abolitionist. One of the books was called “Prisoners Are People”. Another was written by a woman who had served three months for refusing to divulge names of members of a particular political organization (probably Marxist); what I remember is her stories of the other prisoners she’d met. One of them was a woman serving several years for killing her husband because he’d molested their daughter. “Why can’t you come home?” the little girl asked. Another woman was in for something like robbery. “When’re you coming home, Mommy?” asked her child and she answered, “The people in charge think I have to stay here ‘til I’m sorry I did what I did.” “But you’re ALREADY sorry,” said the little girl and the mother answered, “The people in charge don’t BELIEVE I’m sorry.” I learned about prison abuse, visiting restrictions, especially glass enclosures so they couldn’t hug. And at age twelve in the mid 50s, I learned, through the account of an ill-fated homosexual love affair in a maximum security prison, that homosexuality is neither a crime nor a disease.

I learned and I grew, and I realized that libraries could be an offering, not an authority. I was using them rather than them using me. They had become enjoyable, useful, and meaningful. I felt in control.

But too many people, especially when children are involved, look upon libraries as an authority, something to feel guilty, worried, and pressured about, something to fixate on. There seems to be a “library mania”. Summer reading contests based on the number of books read seem to take over when school is out, and the kids often cheat by not reading the entire book or by taking out books they’ve already read. Various businesses sponsor

the “program”. And just as my mother was made to feel worried when I wasn’t particularly interested in libraries, so I confess to, at one point, feeling worried at times about Devin not being particularly interested in libraries. At the very least, I was worried about being judged; what would other people think? Not only didn’t he go to school but he didn’t even go to the library. The fact that we were constantly buying books at thrift stores or yard sales, the same or different from those found in libraries, or that out home was a library, or that he was constantly *writing* books, didn’t sound as good at some cocktail parties, park benches, or home-schooling meetings.

Libraries are sometimes like schools. For example, a disproportionate percentage of librarians seem to be joyless, formidable, nervous people, not particularly filled with the love of books or of learning or of children. (They often look and act like teachers, I was tempted to write – and then I stopped myself: Is this a prejudice? But if so, why would I have that prejudice in the first place? Perhaps because libraries are like schools, and occupy a place in society similar in many respects to school. Consider the societal image of the librarian mouthing “ssh”.)

Consider also the metaphor of children’s story hour. I brought Devin, once and only once. Our local children’s librarian was well-meaning but she spoke as though her every syllable were rehearsed. The kids, aged three to four, were supposed to sit a certain way, behind touching the rug and not on their mothers’ laps. Afterwards I asked her why. Shrugging, she answered, “It’s partly to get them ready for school.” Hm.

Indeed libraries and schools sometimes seem to be sort of in cohorts. And although libraries can be and often are wonderful opportunities and adventures, too often they become, like school, a source of stress and a distraction from what is truly important in individuals’ and families’ lives. Taking it all in perspective, we might reflect that libraries are not the only way to gain access to books. And for contact with our world, they’re no more necessary than school, Girl Scouts, or music lessons. They’re *one* source of books, and a good one; I hope society will continue to offer them, though possibly with a different emphasis.

Here are some other sources of books: thrift stores, yard sales, flea markets, regular books stores, attics, the trash, and friends with whom to borrow and exchange. Reflect, also, that there are advantages to actually owning books (such as having them forever, or being able to write and draw in them – more about that last in another section). We need, I believe, to be sensitive and responsive to children’s perceptions and to let them, ourselves, and daily living be our guides, rather than worship of authority.

PERFORMANCES “FOR” CHILDREN

Many parents seem to be forever taking their kids to things like magic shows, story-telling, children’s theatre, and so on. What could be wrong with that? Am I going too far in my investigation into authorities?

Again, it's the prospect of authority status that seems wrong. Often these performances are just another thing to fit into a schedule (sometimes sandwiched between a birthday party and a baseball game), another thing that nobody really wants to do, another thing to feel guilty about if you don't do, another instance of conspicuous concern. Rushed, anxious, and guilt-tripping often seem to describe what's going on.

Does taking your kids to performances make you a better parent? And does not taking them make you a worse parent? And how much of it all is a function of economic, or some other, status?

One day a couple of years ago I was watching seven-year-old Devin and some of his friends as they watched a TV special over Jonathan's house. A children's guitarist was playing and singing to a small group of kids. I noticed the difference between the kids in Jonathan's living room and the kids on the TV. Devin and his friends were sprawled on a mat, alternating wrestling and playing with action figures, most of the time appearing to not be listening at all to the program but hearing it just the same. The TV kids, however, were not allowed to be wrestling or playing with action figures. Their eyes had to be totally on the performer and they had to be sitting relatively still. Probably the hope was that they'd sport pensive looks and in general react in a "model", stereo-typical way. I could only imagine the before-hand behind-the-scenes instructions and, perhaps, admonitions.

As a group, the TV kids seemed to display sufficient enthusiasm, at least in certain ways, and at least as a group. There were indeed *some* spontaneous shouts of joy and waving of hands. However, when I zeroed in on any *one* of the kids and watched her for a moment or two, what I saw was very often a bored, partially-withdrawn individual. In particular, there was one little girl who never smiled when the rest did and seemed not to want to be there.

On the other hand, the camera showed adoration in the eyes of many of the children. It was almost worship. Now, I understand that a performer can often deserve adoration, along with a kind of worship inspired by a magical feeling. But this scene seemed to go too far. I didn't, for one thing, know how much of it was real and how much had been coached. Or what the camera was not showing. In any case, it seemed to me that the image which the TV adults wanted to convey – the idea that it wanted to perpetrate – was that kids need adults to entertain them, perhaps to lead them around as Arnold Schwarzenegger did in the movie "Kindergarten Cop". It was as though kids prefer being led around or serenaded to leading *themselves* around or singing to themselves, or just plain playing, almost as though kids *can't* play without adults helping them along – as though without adults kids would sit around bored and unhappy.

It seemed to me that the phenomenon of performances for children is but one example of a more general phenomenon – the phenomenon whereby adults first tell kids to "play", "have a good time", "be uninhibited", "use your imaginations" (as though they wouldn't do those things anyway) and then (in the form of authority-things) turn around and tell them *not* to play (to sit still and laugh and sing and stare in adoration, as they're told,

perhaps subtly). And then, moreover, turn around once again and say, at these very same authority-things, “yeah, go ahead and use your imagination”. There seem, indeed, to be some mixed messages here.

I don’t mean to advocate the abolition of performances for children, but I am interested in the role they play in society’s shaping of the concepts of childhood and adulthood. And I’ve always questioned such performances (as in “question everything”). Linda Goss, storyteller, author of several children’s books, once a member of our home-schooling support group, and already quoted in this book, once told me that, in general, she doesn’t approve of the phenomenon of children’s performances.

I remember a magic show from my own childhood. I was about ten years old, watching this show with my mother at the school where she taught. My pleasure, as I remember, was in being taken somewhere by my mother, introduced to her co-workers and students, and in general being treated like my mother’s kid. I also remember how anxious I was to be called on by the magician (“to creep into his heart?”). And although I furiously waved my hand, it seemed a very long time before I was called on, and then it was for only a minute and only to tap the handkerchief three times. The other kids he’d called on had been given more interesting parts in the performance, things which involved talking, and which made the audience laugh. It seemed obvious that I wasn’t one of the *main* ones, nor one of the *first* ones. It wasn’t a matter of picking teams in gym but it felt a little like it.

In other words, the magician was an authority figure to me. Decades later I took six-year-old Marielle to a magic show. She seemed to enjoy it very much but afterwards, when she went up to him to compliment him, something happened that disappointed her. “I like your play” she told him and he answered, too automatically for her, “Thank you very much, dear.” Immediately afterwards, so Marielle noticed, a little boy about Marielle’s own age came up to him and said the same thing, “I liked your play”. And this time, for some reason, the guy turned to the boy, bent down closely, and said “Oh, thank you. And how old are YOU...?” Marielle was profoundly hurt. “And DURING the show he seemed so nice,” she later told me.

Another question that concerns me about performances for children is: To what extent is it the job of the performer to discipline the kids? To keep them quiet enough so that he can be heard, to keep them from becoming so inspired by the performance that they spontaneously begin performances of their own? And what happens when he does discipline? What happens, for example, to his audience’s perception of him, meaning the kids? To what extent is he a teacher?

In the midst of a recent Franklin Institute magic show the magician’s look, voice, and entire manner suddenly changed as he said, “Some of us need to stay in our seats.” And at a Borders Bookstore children’s concert the guitarist suddenly switched whom he was addressing: “Could you try to keep them back?”

Why mayn't the kids get up on stage? Why mayn't they get close to, maybe touch, the performer or the instrument? If that were allowed, would that be enough for the kids? At a recent library program about rain forests, the kids were allowed to touch the live iguana. But they had to stand in line to do so. And time was running short. The kids were told to hurry. Each kid had time for "only a pat". It seemed both funny and sad. Devin wanted me to take a picture of him with the iguana but time wouldn't permit. The librarian kept looking nervously at her watch. The parents also looked nervous. The kids shuffled along like robots, not especially interested in the iguana.

At the same program the kids had been shown three live animals: a boa constrictor, our ever-lovin' iguana, and a cockatoo. Devin and I liked the cockatoo. He seemed a happy animal, and there seemed to be a genuine friendship between him and the young woman presenting the program. But when it came time to let the kids handle the animals, the woman for some reason said, "We only have time for ONE animal. Your choice, what'll it be, the iguana or the boa constrictor?"

"What happened to the cockatoo?" Devin and I whispered to each other. But the woman's body language indicated that there wasn't time for us to ask. And so the show stays show, the performer stays performer, and the kids stay audience, within their bounds. The performer has been paid, or at least publicized, appearances of order have been protected, and if "using your imagination" is the purpose of it all, it's hard to see how that's possible.

Now, what about the *emotional* relationship between the performer and his kid audience? At a closed-circuit TV concert for kids the singer sang a song called "Hugs". It was a charming tune but the words were predictable, about how nice and vital hugs are. During the last verse they had the kids in the TV audience take turns running up to the singer and each giving her a hug.

I would not have wanted to be one of those kids. For one thing, each hug lasted two seconds. ("We have time for only one hug" comes to mind!) For another, after the fifth hug, the singer ran out of personalized looks and gestures. For yet another, I recalled reading somewhere that's it's not hugging that kids and other people need and crave but holding, or a reasonable length of time. Most people know about the kind of hugs so repeatedly demonstrated in the song. They're glorified "relative hugs", the kind kids don't feel quite comfortable with, the kind that are forced, or pressured, on them. I was also reminded of some kids' reactions when they're brought (often forced) to see Santa Claus and sit on his lap.

Kids want and need love, not only hugs, and they then want the hugs from those they've grown to love, or at least know. To me that song made light of children's need and capacity for love. In some way it was abusive. In fact, perhaps all performances for children are subtly abusive, or at least invasive. They might not force hugs but they force interest or attention. (As, ahem, do many other educational situations.)

Another question: If a kid is allowed to get up and leave, does it feel to that kid like failing a test? Does she feel like a “quitter”?

On the other hand, suppose children really do come to love or bond in some way with the performer. For me, a whole range of new questions arises. Do kids need a performer to bond with? Are they receiving “hugs” from the performer *instead* of from the people in their daily lives? Or are there people with them at the performance, perhaps already hugging them? And is this the *only* time they get hugged by these people, the only chance parent and child have to be together for a reasonable stretch of time? (Perhaps, at home, they’re always doing schoolwork...) Is a performance a kind of lullaby or bedtime story? If so, why? What does all this say about parents and children, in their individual relationships and in society?

I know, I know, it’s all part of life. But it’s also political. Societal. Existential. And food for thought. Mainly, children’s performances, and performers, need not be taken as authorities. Parents shouldn’t have to feel pressured to race around chauffeuring their kids to magic shows and “Hugs”. They should be allowed to feel free to make their own magic shows and hugs.

CHILDREN’S BOOKS

Like children’s performances, children’s books can often be wonderful, imaginative, “cute”, creative, and enjoyable. They also do a great job of describing children’s (and sometimes adults’) feelings, and perhaps they have the potential to put them and the adults in their lives in touch with these feelings. However, I still have several reservations, not so much about the books themselves as about the ways in which they’re used in this society. Namely, too much.

There seems to be a “book mania”. Understandably, many adults love children’s books, and sometimes to manic proportions. Parents often feel guilty if they don’t “encourage” their children to read books (or if their children don’t want to read them, making it seem as though the parent didn’t encourage them). Libraries, bookstores, and of course schools join the party, or initiate the party (although the books that schools try to get kids to read are often different from those which libraries try to get them to read).

Children’s books have, I believe, reached authority proportions. Everyone seems to want children to read, and spend a lot of *time* reading. In fact, everyone seems to think that reading is what children, and adults, do when they want to be alone and/or pensive. Reading is sort of *equated* with pensive, or “quiet time”. Perhaps reading is equated with *thinking*.

As a result, so much time and energy is expended, by both kids and adults, on books (along with homework, piano lessons, and performances), that there’s no time or energy left for the kid’s own feelings to surface. It’s maybe a little as though adults want kids to

be *told*, by the books, what their feelings are. A good book can be a catalyst, and affirming, but the way the phenomenon of books is overdone, there's often little time to develop anything to affirm.

CERTAIN RITUALS AND PROJECTS

There are numerous practices that parents, teachers, and other adults often sic on kids, and on themselves, which neither they nor the kids want or need. I'm talking about at-home stuff, not school or ballet class. Like many of the authorities described in this chapter, in themselves they can be fine and wonderful but as authorities they aren't. The practices described in this section are so ingrained in our society, and so endowed with conspicuous concern, that few people question them, and how they're implemented.

I'd like to start with birthday parties. Not so much themselves as certain rituals *within* birthday parties. First, I'll say that my family has had them, and continues to have them; Arin's 41st, my 70th. But back to kids birthday parties: "Party games". Many parents, and many kids, seem to feel that without these games it's not a party. And when kids get home from the party, they seem to need to be able to tell everybody, "I won THREE prizes." But that's not the same thing as having enjoyed the party. It's more like a proof of some kind.

In general, viewing birthday parties as continuous entertainment (like school or like performances "for" children), supervised activities going on every minutes, with no time for just play, is an example of such a ritual. My daughter Marielle and her friends still remember how much fun her birthday parties were because, as they say, "we played with the presents as long as we wanted."

Next on this program comes "the supper table". Many adults I know have *bad* memories of their childhood supper tables. The father would grill everyone on their schoolwork; both parents would spend every second enforcing table manners. My parents weren't like that. Still, as a kid, I often had certain secrets (such as a bad grade in a history test) that I didn't want to divulge and suppertimes were when I felt the most fearful. Indeed, the supper table can be the stage upon which a family's issues, imperfections, and dysfunctions (which sometimes include abuse) are played out.

The supper table can also act, or be treated, as an authority. I've heard somewhere of a study which resulted in the finding that in families with a supper table routine, the kids tend to go to college. The implication seems to be that a supper table routine produces more successful children. But is that true? Perhaps, simply, college and supper tables go hand in hand, are in a kind of cohorts. What is that college and supper tables represent? Love? Security? Commitment? Time and money? Perhaps the truth here is that "successful children type families" are also both "college and supper table type families". And what about societies which don't even have supper routines?

Next I'd like to talk about holidays. They, too, can be hotbeds of authority, as attested to by the fact that parents often can't wait 'til they're over. Holidays tend to fill the days and weeks with too many things that nobody really enjoys doing. Halloween is one example. It's full of beautiful children pretending to be things that they love to pretend to be. But I'm also thinking of parents who sew costumes, and of the question, do they really want to? Creative sewers come in all varieties, but the two that come to mind right now are: those who like to make Halloween costumes and those who don't. It can vary from year to year. And just because you're creative doesn't mean you have to make Halloween costumes. Nor do you have to make costumes to *prove* you're creative.

Nor do you have to make anything at all. You don't have to make all, or most, of your children's clothes, or toys, or whatever. Nor do you have to work *with* your children to make these creations, in order to prove that you share interests, or whatever. I call this phenomenon "the project syndrome". Projects, indeed, can be both fun and authority, from papier mache puppets to fingerpaints to Halloween costumes to scientific experiments. You don't have to do them. They neither make nor break a good parent.

Society seems to be full of slogans which to me smack of "project syndrome propaganda". "ENJOY your children." "TALK to your children." "PLAY with your children." "READ to your children." How can you "enjoy your children" when you're doing things you don't enjoy? I hate fingerpaints. I also hate Shrinky Dinks. Also scientific experiments. Anything messy.

When Devin and I used to do "health science" for his home-schooling log, I just *read* aloud about the various experiments; we didn't actually do them. "Okay, I believe them," I used to quip. Devin usually wasn't particularly eager to do the experiments, either.

I also hated mazes. I never did them when I was a kid and when Devin liked to make his own and wanted me to work them out, of course I did, or sometimes. But I didn't get involved in any big way, such as making my own and "having" Devin solve them. Mazes were Devin's projects, not mine.

Perhaps more subtly, I didn't particularly enjoy bending down to hold a baby's hands as it learned to walk. Perhaps I just wasn't all that anxious about babies starting to walk, or perhaps it was a matter of being tall and having further to bend down. Is bending down to hold a baby's hands as he learns to walk an authority thing?

I did sometimes grapple. One week Devin suggested twice that I make him a particular object. At the library we'd picked up a flyer for an exhibit on children's book illustrations. The drawing on the flyer was great, perfect for Devin's cat collection. A sign tacked to a tree read "Animal Orphanage". Under the sign lay a huge mother cat nursing her family. But the family consisted of a baby squirrel, baby raccoon, puppy, and lion cub; on top of the cat perched a kitten and the balloon emanating from that kitten read, "What kind of a family is this? Can a kitten belong to it?" Devin thought of the fabulous idea of making the stuffed animal equivalent of that illustration. He wanted me to help him make it. And I didn't feel like it.

Well, again, I grappled,, weighed all the variables. I was embroiled in my own sewing project, making pillowcases out of old ties found in thrift stores. But Devin did mention the stuffed animal project twice. Maybe that particular project wasn't *only* an authority. Maybe it was actually something I should do. How long would it take? Would it really cut into my energy all that much? Maybe I'd enjoy it more than I think. And maybe I could cut corners and make only the mother cat and buy the animal babies, of just the right size, in thrift stores. (It would be an excuse to go thrifting!)

So yeah, we did the project, and now have fond memories of it. And the cat and little animals are somewhere up in the attic or down the cellar. We sewed Velcro in the appropriate places, so that the nursing babies of all species could nurse or not-nurse, at Devin's bidding.

The last ritual I'd like to explore in this section is the bedtime story. Sometimes wonderful, sometimes bothersome, it can feel like an authority. Are we bad parents if we don't read bedtime stories? I once slept over a friend's house and observed her reading a bedtime story to her kids. It seemed to me like library story hour. The kids wanted to grab the book, play and wrestle as they were listening, and so on. My friend was tired and anxious to get it over with, plus she had school-like expectations as to what reading to kids "should" be. And every five minutes she'd stop reading, sit up straight with her hands on her hips, and ask, in a kind of moralistic tone, "Are you reading the story with US?"

In families where kids go to bed the same time as the adults, and especially where the kids sleep in the same bed as the adults, do the parents read bedtime stories? If so, do they have to do so every night? When the whole family arrives home from a trip at 2:00 AM, do the kids need a bedtime story? Perhaps if it weren't for bedtime, we wouldn't need bedtime stories!

In fact, does a bedtime story make bedtime easier? I once baby-sat for a three-year-old whose parents had instructed me to read her a bedtime story. This story did everything but lull her to sleep. It made her resistant. The closer we came to the conclusion of the story, the wider became her eyes, the more she wriggled around and the more questions she asked in order to delay sleeping time. And no sooner did I announce "the end" than she countered with "let's get another book".

I'd agree (and have experienced, plenty of times) that a bedtime story can indeed lull a kid to sleep, and entertain the bedtime story reader. But parents don't *have* to read them. They're just one idea. Singing, conversation, and just plain holding or massaging are other ideas. In general, children and adults can make up their own rituals, or traditions, and know when to not have rituals at all.

CERTAIN LOADED WORDS AND IDEAS

Patty, a home-schooling friend of mine, had just begun a career of giving piano lessons. She was telling me about a problem with one of her students; he has ADD and has trouble sitting still for more than two minutes. He had seemed interested at first, she said, but now the lessons weren't working out and would probably have to stop.

"Huh?" I said to her. "Why does he have to sit still? Can't he just mess around with the piano, the way John Holt describes, and your role as teacher can be to just be there for him to turn to when he has a question or needs other input. You say he was interested at first; why can't he just keep doing the same things that got him interested?"

"I know what you mean," Patty answered. "But then his parents couldn't call it a piano lesson."

Yes, how, then, could Patty justify charging the kid's parents? And how could she ensure that the designated half-hour, neither more nor less, would be used up? It seems to me that the problem here is the authority given the word "lesson". If "piano lesson" didn't have to involve the preconceived notions of, for example, sitting still at the piano for half an hour with the "teacher", then Patty could call whatever developed between her and her student a "piano lesson" and be paid for sharing her expertise and appreciation for music.

This is precisely the kind of "lessons" that Kitty, who was the other contact for our home-schooling support group, was seeking for her children. For example, her five-year-old daughter Joy was going through a stage when she was fascinated by weather. "It's very hard," Kitty told me, "to find someone who'll just TALK about weather, or share enthusiasm for it." At the time I, too, was looking for someone "low-key" for Devin's sudden interest in the violin. But everyone seemed to have the "lesson" mindset. "How often do you want me to see him?" "How long do you want the lessons to last?" "The violin? How marvelous! He'll be able to play Beethoven sonatas with you." "Why didn't he start earlier?"

To me the word "lesson" often signals overkill. When I was a teen-ager passionately interested in math, my parents and teachers did not arrange "lessons" or "courses" for me, and I have always been glad about that. I'm also glad that my parents said to me, "Gee, we have an old friend, Al Schwartz, who used to be interested in math. He has a Masters degree in it and, the last we heard, he was teaching at C.C.N.Y. [City College of New York]. He used to always like working on math problems, the way you do; maybe you'd like us to call him and invite him over for a visit." Al Schwartz and I wound up corresponding by mail for years, covering our pages with equations. No one called any of this "lessons" but in fact I still consider what Al Schwartz gave me to be among the best encouragement and feedback on my own work.

There are other words besides "lesson" which seem to me to be given undue authority, and thus operate to the detriment, rather than the advantage, of teaching, learning from,

and interacting among human beings. “Teaching” and “learning” are two such words. When is someone teaching? When is someone learning? When has teaching and/or learning occurred? One cannot always know. If Patty’s student “messes around” at the piano without once needing Patty’s input, has Patty “taught”? Has the student “learned”? What if that happens five “lessons” in a row?

In some circles, “teaching” and “learning” are such buzz-words, so deified, that they can’t be argued with. Their mere mention seems to require bowed heads. Is learning always a beautiful thing? Conversely, can something be beautiful that isn’t learning? “EVERYTHING is learning,” some home-schoolers say, which is probably true, but why is it so *important* to them that it be true? Sometimes I can’t help wondering whether the title of even John Holt’s book, “Learning All the Time,” serves to help sell copies via the idea of promising parents and other adults never-ending learning from their kids. What if something were discovered that was *not* learning? Would that be so terrible? Are people afraid to do something that’s not learning? In general, what are we afraid of?

Other loaded words are “education”, “reading”, “literacy”, “excellence”, “motivate”, “potential”, and “concern”. What these words are loaded with is authority. And often big, and small, business is behind them. They run rampant, for example, in advertisements for schools, curricula, books, and toys. “Do to captivate. Discover to motivate. Dramatize to visualize. Dialogue to internalize. Drill to crystallize.” This is an excerpt from an ad in a home-schooling magazine, for a home-schooling curriculum. (It sounded to me like an ad for a military school.) Note all the buzz-words. “Captivate”. “Discover”. “Crystallize”. All (except possibly for “drill”) might be perfectly reasonable and meaningful words, but they run the risk of being misinterpreted, exaggerated, and given too much authority. They seem to be geared towards pep-talk and the illusion of control. Look through the pages of almost any periodical about education, be it traditional or alternative, and you’ll find an abundance of these words. You’ll also find a sprinkling, or an abundance, of real words and ideas – and that can be confusing and misleading. For example, in the same ad quoted above also appears a quote from a child: “I’m sitting on the outside but I’m wriggling on the inside.” And in fact the title of the page-long ad is “Working with the Wriggle.” But wriggles and drilling are too often inconsistent.

“Just because a child sits compliantly still does not mean he is learning,” continues the ad, but then it goes on to talk about “drill to crystallize”. It seems to me to be using the child’s quote for its own end. In truth there are many ways to “crystallize” besides drill, and crystallizing often doesn’t happen for years after something has been taught (“drilled” or not).

When I leafed through the many home-schooling publications on whose mailing list our home-schooling support group seemed to be, I would see what seemed like a lot of hypocrisy. So many curriculum suppliers and home businesses use buzz-words and phrases like “the whole child”, “hand-on math”, “creative learning”, even “wholistic” and “gentle”, often right alongside words and phrases like “drill” and “unity study”. And the myriad of magazines which run articles about how unnecessary curriculum is have, in

order to survive financially, to fill their pages with advertisements for curricula (which include those buzz-words, including “curriculum”).

Then, too, there are certain things that adults often seem to think are “good” for children, and these often serve (or dis-serve) as authorities. What comes to mind are “things like dinosaurs and rain forests”. I believe that, for parents in this society, at least during certain decades, “dinosaur” is a loaded word. Nothing wrong with it in itself; dinosaurs are cute, fascinating, concise, self-contained, connected to history and science (which adults want kids to learn) and, perhaps most important, good clean fun. And I was one of the original dinosaur advocates when, pregnant with Devin, I made him a baby-dinosaur quilt. But if your three-year-old hasn’t yet heard of them, or has but couldn’t care less about them, does that make you a bad parent (or him a bad kid)?

Next I’d like to talk about loaded ideas. Many home-schoolers, again out of doubt and fear, seem to turn, not only to home-schooling curricula, but to various, so to speak, “schools” of thought regarding children and how to “help” them learn. Better Babies Institute, Montessori, Susuki, Waldorf, and so on. I don’t consider myself enough of an expert to analyze and judge any of these conclusively. However, I can give some of my impressions, in particular of what people say about them. Buzz-words and phrases abound. Waldorf, so a parent tells me, considers “the spirit of the child”. But what school would say that it *doesn’t* consider “the spirit of the child”.

To me learning seems an uncomplicated matter. I fail to understand the need for any “method” of teaching or learning. Yes, there’s something to be gained from just about everything, but Anne Sullivan, the famous teacher of Helen Keller, wrote, “I am beginning to suspect all elaborate and special systems of education”. It seems to me that, unless a child (or adult) is specifically prevented from learning via negative learning experience, or negative experience, period, that person will learn. In particular, that person will learn what is important. As the posters say, “A child learns what she lives with.” If it’s there, and relevant, she’ll learn it. Or, perhaps more accurately, she’ll *consider* learning it.

To me, in fact, that’s what learning means; It means looking at something and reacting to it in some intelligent way, and deciding (often very quickly, and perhaps subconsciously) whether that something is worth absorbing (perhaps storing) and to what extent, and then acting accordingly. Many home-schoolers talk, I believe erroneously, about “the John Holt method” or “the John Holt way”. But John Holt’s whole point was that there be *no* specific way, that adults be open to all ways of interacting with children and not get caught up in any one way. Home-schoolers often treat John Holt as an authority. Curricula and educational materials companies make use of this by, for example, wording part of their ads in home-schooling newsletters, “John Holt used our Worm Computer Bin.” But, as Kitty Anderson says, “John Holt didn’t say ALWAYS it!”

A member of our support group, the mother of two pre-school aged children, would talk about how she’d like to eventually home-school in an un-structured way and how the Waldorf method had caught her attention. It didn’t, however, become an authority to her.

“I’m fascinated by some of the ideas,” she says, “by the way it views the human mind. But I’m not necessarily interested in applying any of the methods. I just like to read and think about it, and I’ll probably take a lot of it into account when I interact with my children.” This is, perhaps, a good model, for how to deal with loaded words and ideas, and with all authorities – take them into account.

ETIQUETTE

In the alternative education newsletter ALLPIE (#15), which always gives much space and attention to home-schooling, a father, Dr. Sam Yulish, describes his family’s very un-structured style of home-schooling. “I never asked him an educational question, never told him he was doing anything wrong.” However, he seemed to feel some need to add, “and, by the way, he [his son] was raised with strict behavior guidelines, and turned into a real gentleman...”

Etiquette, perhaps, is a crutch as well as an authority. “Johnny can’t read but at least he has manners.” Or maybe it’s some kind of measure, a way of proving. Or what starts out as a crutch, or a measure, becomes an authority. And how, I wonder, can a child be raised with “strict behavior guidelines” without ever feeling that he’s “doing anything wrong?” How, in general, is etiquette different from academics? Or, perhaps more pertinent, how is etiquette *like* academics? For some home-schoolers, does etiquette *replace* academics, in some metaphoric way? That is, do the two serve some common emotional need or agenda on the part of adults? How, perhaps, is etiquette like Girl Scouts, book reports, or ecology clubs? What does it prove?

The point of this section is not to discuss the pros and cons of etiquette, or of any particular examples of etiquette. My belief is that some rules of etiquette make sense, while some don’t, and with some it depends on the situation. But the point of this section is to discuss the *role* which etiquette plays in the lives of people, in particular as an authority. Here are some examples of instances of etiquette issues among home-schoolers. The magazine Home-Schooling Today (Nov/Dec ’95) contains an article by Mary Elle Carlise called “Teaching Etiquette to Children”. “When eating,” she writes, “we take small bites, always chewing with our mouths closed, speaking only when we are completely finished chewing and swallowing.” It isn’t so much these rules per se that rub me the wrong way as the attitude. It seems, again, to smack of the need for the appearance of control. Again, this is understandable among home-schooling pioneers.

Still, I’d like to say something about the rules, and practices, per se. When, during a meal in the above household, a child has something so important on her mind that she forgets these rules, she is told in a friendly and non-judgmental way, “I’d like to hear what you have to say after your food has been chewed and swallowed.” But I wonder whether that kind of thing can feel inhibiting to a child, perhaps even irrelevant and alienating. Can it also feel distracting, or just plain insensitive? Even in Hollywood movies people talk while chewing. Are chewing and swallowing really that important? Sometimes yes,

sometimes no. But why do adults so often fixate on it? Is it, I wonder, instead of fixating on gum-chewing? (Etiquette instead of academics)

The sidebar to that article contains a heading, “What a Two-to-Four Year Old Can Learn.” This to me sounds school-like in several ways; in particular, it smacks of the “potential” bit; “can” and “are emotionally ready to” are two different things. At a child’s birthday party several months ago, the four-year-old cousin of the birthday kid was very excited about the cake. He had watched it being made, decorated, and set out on the big table in the living room where the other kids at the party were playing around, virtually ignoring the cake. But this little boy seemed impatient for “cake time”, kept exclaiming and asking questions, most of them amounting to “When are we gonna get to the cake?” To me he seemed simply enthusiastic and not at all pesty or annoying. I was charmed and moved.

But the birthday mother was feeling rushed and hassled, and she saw his joy and anticipation as pressure on her to hurry up and “do” the cake. “Cut it out,” she kept snapping. “Let it be.” “It you say one more word about that cake...” She was, so it seemed to me, trying to get him to be “polite”, or rather, her version of polite. According to my own version of polite, this kid was being extremely polite because he was showing her how much he appreciated the cake. Possibly, in fact, earlier in the day he had felt very close to her as they were making it together, and she had been very loving with him. Possibly he expected that closeness and loving-ness to continue, and he might have been bewildered when it didn’t. And perhaps this “two-to-four year old” *could* learn to “control himself” and not get too excited about things like cakes, but was he, and should he have been, emotionally ready to?

One morning 7-year-old Devin’s needs and mine were at odds. Devin wanted me to write down his book as he dictated it and I wanted to get an early start on my planned thrift-ing expedition. More than once he asked if we could do “just one page”, and I said no, not this morning. At one point he said, “We didn’t get to write the book last night, either.”

Finally I said, I hope facetiously, “How about, every time you criticize me, you counteract the criticism by finding something to compliment me on?” But a second later I had second thoughts about that. “Actually,” I told him, “a lot of criticisms are automatically also compliments because, when you criticize something you’re also saying that that person DOESN’T USUALLY do that thing. Also, when you criticize by saying I haven’t done a particular thing ENOUGH, you’re at the same time complimenting me by telling me how much you like that thing that I usually DO.” Devin nodded.

Thinking about it now, perhaps I should have taken his dictation for “just one page”. Then again, I might also have said, “I didn’t get to go thrift-ing last night, either!” Just kidding.

All that makes me think that, in general, when kids pester somebody for something, or merely repeatedly ask for that thing, adults often view them as being impolite and they

teach or discipline them out of it. To me this seems a shame. It's so wonderful, the way kids want. The way they appreciate and get pleasure. It warms me when kids (or adults) are impatient for something which I have to give. I don't think I'd choose it any other way.

On the other hand, it does sometimes seem (perhaps only seem) obnoxious when kids "pester". But maybe that's only when there's something more than genuine want involved, when perhaps there's a kind of hostility, or challenging, or flirting, or goading, going on – or when it is, indeed, a matter of want but what is wanted is not the same thing as what is being pestered about – or when the impatience is for something which I don't have to give.

At any rate, the whole matter of manners or etiquette seems to me much more complicated and interesting than many people see it. As in the above example of the cake, what some adults call lack of manners can express something, and insisting on etiquette often seems like forcing a children to speak in a different language, which of course interferes with communication. Manners can be distracting, and invasive.

How can we distinguish between those times when etiquette is truly called for and when etiquette is used as an authority? Well, we can ask questions about *ourselves*. What are our needs? What is our agenda? Why are we insisting on etiquette? Are we worried about what others will think? Are we embarrassed? Are we trying to impress, or keep up appearances? Is it, perhaps, the appearance of control that we're trying to keep up, or protect? Has our kid really done anything wrong? And then there are reality-considerations, such as: Is she chewing with her mouth *very* full or only a little full?! Is it full of mashed potatoes, banana, or something less squishy? Each separate incident will yield different answers, and we can try to answer them honestly.

THOUGHTS ABOUT TV

The issue of TV and video-games is often discussed among parents, teachers, and adults in general. In home-schooling circles, not-watching TV can act as an authority; the less TV one's kids watch, the more status one has. This section will not specifically draw conclusions about the TV issue. Rather, it will, I hope, show light on it by examining "the anti-TV syndrome" as an authority and by exploring some feelings and motives, both children's and parents'.

When our children were little, my then-husband and I never quite made up our minds about the TV issue. Indeed, we were torn between the two opposing stands taken by a lot of home-schoolers: (1) worry about the quality of TV programs and about the possibly negative effects of the very act of watching TV, versus (2) the belief that kids can be trusted to make their own decisions, even with respect to TV. In our family the second viewpoint won out most of the time – although we also realized some limitations -- and the year Bret was twelve we felt rewarded (and, in the face of the home-schooling community and the home-schoolers we knew, proud, perhaps a little relived when, all on

his own, Bret decided that he was tired of the TV. Moreover, he was also tired of Nintendo, as well as several piles of Nintendo games taking up space in his room. He sold them all, making comments to us like “now I’ll have time to meet people” and “I want, at the end of my life, to have only a few of my very favorite things.” Several years later this same decision-making led Bret to buy another TV! Then, several years still later, he sold that TV! In short, he went through the various ages and stages, making what felt to us like reasonable decisions. All-told, I’ve been glad we handled things the way we did. We were also sustained by some of the following ideas:

For many children, perhaps most children, especially children who are loaded down with too many authorities (as described in this chapter), the *only* way to relax and sit still, and also to have some control over their lives, is to watch TV. I remember myself at ages nine, ten, and eleven, rushing home from Girl Scouts every day at 5:00 to watch Howdy Doody. I was very careful not to miss an episode. Kids in general (adults too) sometimes have to have some excuse to just sit there and do nothing and not be bothered by anything or anyone. In this society they are not encouraged or supported when they *actually* do nothing, even for a couple of hours. Perhaps this is the reason why many children, and adults, like and need TV so much. And perhaps children who are allowed to live relaxing uncomplicated un-invaded lives don’t in general need TV as much. At any rate, it seems important for adults to realize that TV might be useful on an emotional level, and that when discussing the TV issue, these emotions need to be taken into account.

Many of the feelings that some people have against TV seem to be authority related. The most obvious of these is “TV interferes with homework”. Or, for home-schoolers, just plain work. A subtle version of this is “TV prevents you from using your mind” or even “TV is a waste of time”. Do people have to be using their minds every minute of the day? Do they have to always, or even usually, be making the most efficient use of time? As described in other sections of this book, ideas can incubate as we sleep, as we play – and as we watch TV. (And if they don’t, that’s okay too.)

Consider the statement, “TV exposes kids to violence.” Yes, many programs do go overboard in the violence department and I, an adult, avoid violent movies, along with horror movies,, and I sometimes lose sleep over learning, for example, about a form of torture I hadn’t previously known about. But do *we* have to go overboard in the *anti*-violence department? Does it have to be such a big deal? Years ago a neighbor of mine, an artist and mother of two, confided to me, “I think this whole anti-violence business is a yuppie thing.” Certainly, although many working-class families are concerned about violence (often, though, in imitation of the middle class), there is a significant segment of the population that is both middle-class and concerned about violence. Also, the “better” schools seem to be the ones that concern themselves with things like non-violence.

This is not the place to deal with questions about emotional and psychological violence, but I can’t resist posing the question, are authorities a kind of violence? That’s a biggie, and I’ll merely pose it. Certainly, as I hope I’ve been demonstrating, authorities bring on *violations* of many of the rights of human beings.

Next consider the retrain, “TV is passive”. Does that translate into “When my kids watch TV, they don’t accomplish anything?” Would that be another version of the above-mentioned “TV is a waste of time”? At any rate, I wonder whether that’s precisely the reason that some kids like to watch TV, because that’s their only opportunity to curl up and not accomplish anything.

Actually, kids might prefer to curl up *in their parents’ laps* and accomplish nothing. But they might not be allowed, or not for long enough time periods. On the other hand, sometimes kids might need to *get away from* parents and other people, especially if they associate proximity to other people with pressure to do something. So sometimes, when kids say “leave me alone; let me finish my program”, it’s the “leave me alone” part that’s really important.

Many adults say “TV isn’t creative”. The next chapter will explore in detail what I call “the creativity mania”. For now: during what fraction of the day does a human being need to be creative? Every creative person knows that the answer to that question varies, and that the fraction is often very small. Then, too, we need to ask ourselves about creativity versus the *appearance* of creativity, perhaps about “conspicuous creativity”. When a kid watches TV, does the appearance of non-creativity embarrass the parent? Is it, as my old neighbor said, “a yuppie thing”? And, again, do working-class parents sometimes copy it?

Across class lines, do parents worry what people will think? And do they worry about the implications of the TV-watching, that perhaps the *reason* the kids are watching “so much” TV is that they’re not well-adjusted, or not loved enough, or not stimulated enough, or not “provided” with enough? In other words, do parents worry that it’s their fault, or that people will *think* it’s their fault?

Consider the barrage of anti-TV statements on the order of “If they watch too much TV, they won’t [take your pick] read/go to the library/take part in outside activities/have a social life...” Perhaps many adults are simply afraid that “too much TV” means too few authorities. So they strive to eliminate or minimize TV, in order to create time for one more art or karate class. It might be helpful to parents if they kept all this in mind, were honest with themselves, and asked, for example, how much for our children’s sake and how much for appearance’s sake are we discouraging or forbidding TV? And then they could base their decisions, and their household TV rules, on this new, more accurate information.

In the pediatrician’s waiting room one afternoon, I browsed through the magazine “Healthy Kids” and came upon the article “What’s the News about TV?” by Valerie Latone. Her basic stance seemed to be that TV is a fact of modern life and parents might as well make constructive use of it. I was suspicious about that word, “constructive”. Does TV always have to be a “constructive” activity? Did she mean that to be a *rule*? I was actually horrified.

Her suggestions seemed tantamount to: Use TV as you would use school – that is, as an authority. “Watch V with your kids and help them understand what they’re viewing.” “Avoid placing a TV in your child’s room.” “Help your child select TV programs.” “Get your child interested in follow-up activities. If you find that your child loves TV shows about animals, take him to the zoo or the aquarium.” “Position educational aids near the TV set... an atlas, globe, dictionary, reference books.” “You can also develop questions for your child to answer.” I couldn’t help thinking “O my God!”

I looked up from and remarked smirkingly to Dev, “The kids would HATE all that.”

Indeed, it seems to me that these are surefire ways to get your kid to give up TV! They take away whatever it is about TV that many kids like – in particular, autonomy and privacy.

True, some of those suggestions per se seem brilliant -- in some situations. But they smack of self-consciousness, nervousness, and mania. And they positively reek of an authority agenda! Consider a kid brought up in a life already cluttered with activities and authorities, a kid who needs TV to get away from it all – curl up, hang out, do nothing, let ideas incubate, rest up from being intelligent and creative, learn to love animals without being taken to the zoo or the aquarium. How could these needs be met in a home with the above practices and attitudes?

Is using TV as another authority better than using TV as escapism? Which authorities are “better” (or worse) for children? And finally, what are we really afraid of? What do we really want and need?

OTHER THINGS I’M SUSPICIOUS OF

I hope this section will be taken in the spirit of speculating, of “brain-storming”, rather than of definitely formed-for-all-time opinions. This way we can all feel uninhibited; you might even add your own list of things you’re suspicious of.

For starters, I hate the word “excellence”. It smacks of military school. It sounds competitive, “preppy”, and just not particularly sensitive. It seems to imply that worth is linear, everything judged on a scale from 1 to 10, any two things comparable as to which, or who, is better or “more excellent”. Strangely, I don’t hate the *adjective* “excellent”. This could be because, if you say something is excellent you’re simply complimenting it, you’re not comparing it to anything else. Also, “excellent” has come, in the 80s and 90s, to have a colloquial meaning.

One of the first books written about home-schooling is titled “Home-Schooling for Excellence”, by David and Micki Colfax. And... well, I don’t like the “excellence” *there*, either! The authors have stated, in the book and in their presentations, that not all home-schoolers have to wind up at Harvard (as did three of their four sons), that that is not the point of home-schooling. They continue to say that kids should basically be allowed to

follow their paths, whatever they might be. Still, for me, home-schooling is *not* for excellence, and never should be; that to me is not the point of home-schooling, and I wish the authors had chosen another title for that book. But then the book might not have sold well – in fact, its publishers might have been the ones to give it that title. Hm.

Another thing I'm suspicious of is what I call "reading campaigns". "Read to your children at least fifteen minutes a day." "The family that reads together..." Buses, billboards, and libraries are plastered with it all. Rah-rah-reading!

I'm an author; what would I be without readers?! And how would I have known to write books if I hadn't known about books to begin with? Still, I believe society goes overboard. I've heard parents tell their toddlers, "Don't write on your books. Books are to be respected." Well, my first reaction to that is "Oh yeah, what about Mein Kampf"? I buy most of my kids' and my own books in thrift stores and thus don't worry a whole lot about the expense. I also know I can very probably find another just as inexpensive if I want or need to. So I don't particularly care if a book is written on. Most important, I feel that books are enhanced by their readers' drawings or scribbles – or, perhaps, first draft of their own writings. (I sometimes get ideas for poems while reading a poetry book, and write the first draft of the poems on one of the empty back pages of the book.)

In general, I consider books as inspiration. I've heard college students remark that the main disadvantage of selling a textbook at the end of a course (in order to get back some of their expenditure) is that they can't write in it – which, they say, is one of the ways in which they learn. It's certainly one of the ways in which I prepare lectures (and, sometimes, write math limericks).

Books per se seem to me to be *too* respected or, perhaps more accurately, respected in the wrong way (which in a sense means *less* respected). And I'm suspicious. Books are big business and so are things associated with books, such as schools and other authorities. Who has what to gain? Whose psychological tendency towards what is being played upon? What authority is invoked? Kitty Anderson said, "This over-serious attitude towards books can create a rift between author and reader. It's as though the readers have to learn from the authors, and not vice versa." This is one way in which books can act as an authority.

In that same conversation Kitty also admitted to me, "Years ago when I first met you, you said you were suspicious of all the fuss about reading, and I thought that was a bit nuts. But now, that I've been thinking about these things awhile, I see what you meant."

I'm also suspicious of the "creative writing" in several magazines put out by home-schooling kids. It seems so uncreative! So much of it is predictable, not much different from what I've seen in adult-run mainstream children's magazines or on school bulletin boards. Instead of "How I Spent My Summer Vacation", it's "My Day at the Home-Schooling Curriculum Fair". As with the "home-schooling extra-curricular activities" discussed above, I suspect that adults are behind these writings; moreover, that these adults have their own agendas, their own things to prove.

To me the ultimate in this “creative home-schoolers” phenomenon was a program once organized by a group of parents and put on by their children for “our legislators” to “thank them for passing the home-schooling law and allowing our children to home-school” and “to show them what home-schooled children can do.” In actuality home-schooling children, like other children, might not have *anything* important to “show” until they’ve grown up, often to a ripe age, and “our legislators” might never understand that. Also, I believe that, though in some instances “our legislators” might be worthy of thanks, even more worthy are the home-schooling children and parents. So why aren’t programs being put on for them?

Here’s what, in my experience, kids *really* write: my sister Rosalyn at eight: “Dear God: Do you love me or do you only like me?” Devin at eight: “Dear My butt: you fart too much.” And at ten, his “Die with Grandpa” series, complete with decorative T-shirts and sneakers and fan-club cards. Or Bret at ten, for a school project: “My invention: A lot of people have the same key chain because, there are not that many different kinds of key chains businesses don’t think about key chains that much Why, I don’t know, but, I have discovered that dipping tea bags in urethane glosses and hardens so you can have a keychain that looks like a teabag. And then I poked a hole in the tea bag, and then I took a...”

Or they write imitative stories, or first chapters of books, often (apparently) violent. And, ad infinitum, they do, rather specifically, very uncreative writing, and make no bones about it. And I often wonder whether, or to what extent, kids want to share – with teachers, with parents, or with “our legislators” – their deepest, most intimate, more “creative” writings.

Another source of suspicion for me: Why do home-schoolers, home-schooling groups, and home-schooling publications seem to like to *keep* thinking of home-schooling ideas? This project, that activity, the other game; there’s literally no end. It’s enough to drive people away from home-schooling, and it often does (otherwise known as “home-school burnout”). Why, I brainstorm, can’t there be a *fixed* set of ideas? A small set that would work, once and for all? (like the “Extended Casino” game I made up, via which Devin learned arithmetic) Why does everyone have to go overboard in thinking up new things all the time? Is it because Life Has Never-Ending Possibilities? ... Well, Life probably does, but I think people exaggerate that phenomenon, and use it to moralize and rationalize. Is it because Life would be boring without all those possibilities? Or because, as home-schoolers sometimes say, “there are as many different learning methods as there are children.” (Another exaggeration, I think; most likely, learning methods fall into categories, sometimes subtle.) Or, along the same lines, because “there are as many teaching methods as there are parents and teachers.” (Same reservations.)

I’m still suspicious. Why THAT many? And why do the same so-called “new” ideas keep re-appearing in different periodicals under different guises, and from different authors? Why, as people often say, do they “keep re-inventing the wheel?” I believe that at least one answer is: So that there can *be* periodicals. Yes, variety is big business. More and

more magazines. More and more books. More and more products. And businesses, even home- businesses, probably don't want any *one* idea to solve any particular problem once and for all, any more than some drug companies want any one inexpensive, or free, cure-all.

In my life as a parent, my main problem has not been finding, for example, children's books, but *choosing* from the overwhelming number of children's books. As a reader, I have the same problem. Not any lack of books to read but, on the contrary, all the good books on my shelves that I haven't yet read, along with the worry that I'm missing out on the "best" books, or the books I'm "supposed" to read. "I'm overwhelmed," said Kitty, "by this wash of stuff. It takes up too much time. Does more somehow mean better? Even if it does, why this desire for constant improvement? Why do things have to keep getting better?!"

Variety is very often good. And things do need to be said more than once and in different ways and from many perspectives. But *how* many? Isn't there some limit? Does "changing times" mean that ideas and information have to change quite *this* much? Won't there be any let-up?

The next-to-last suspicion for this section occurs in my mind when home-schooling parents say "I took Johnny out of school because they wouldn't teach cursive" or "because they wouldn't let him move ahead" or even "because he was bored". When parents say things like that, I usually (though not always) feel that they're subtly bragging about how far ahead their kids are, or want to be. I also suspect that the brand of home-schooling they embrace is of the "out-school the school" ilk. (Further along in the conversation, my suspicions are usually born out.)

When I was a kid, I *liked* it when I was 'way ahead of the class – when I had, for the time being, learned all the teacher would teach, when I could relax (almost as though I didn't go to school), when I could be bored, and then think of ways to alleviate the boredom. I drew on my paper, worked out math problems, and day-dreamed. Nancy Wallace used to remark to me, "You escaped school by being 'smart'. Some people escape school by being 'dumb'."

When my kids were in school (and my kids have been through both over-achieving and under-achieving ages and stages), I never wanted the teachers to move far ahead or to give much work, especially homework. (And word got back to me that these teachers liked me because I didn't pressure them – for example I didn't ask, during Home and School Association meetings, things like "when are you going to start them on long division?") I wanted my kids' school classes to be relaxed and I preferred more time spent on the topics they did learn. I was, indeed, the future home-schooler! My reasons for taking my kids out of school weren't, and would never be, under any circumstances, that "they" wouldn't teach cursive, or long division, or even creative writing. I never wanted more of *anything* from the schools, or from my kids. Indeed, unlike some home-schooling parents, I took my kids out of school, not "because they wouldn't teach cursive", but because they *insisted* on teaching cursive. And not "because they wouldn't

let them move ahead”, but because they wouldn’t let them *stay where they were*. And not because school was boring, but because it seemed afraid of boredom, because they wouldn’t allow boredom in the learning process, nor in the living process.

The final suspicion (at least in this section!) is the fact that so many home-schooling parents, when discussing the pros and cons of non-structured learning, seem to qualify this style of learning by saying things like “Everything has SOME structure. An INTERNAL structure. Structure is part of life. A natural consequence of living...” On and on they go. What do they need to prove? The answer, I believe, lies in their (almost inevitable) conclusion: “It’s not like what we do doesn’t have structure.” *That’s* what they’re afraid of, that what they do doesn’t have structure.

It seems to me that sometimes people turn to structure as a crutch. They seem to need that *word* “structure”, if not structure itself. They somehow don’t want to give it up. “They can’t let go,” said Nancy Wallace. Perhaps to them lack of structure is synonymous with lack of effort. And lack of effort means they’re bad. Again, they’re afraid.

The question here is not whether or not it’s true that “everything has internal structure”. It probably has, but I don’t particularly *care* whether “everything has internal structure”. At least not when thinking about home-schooling styles. (As a mathematician, I care a lot about things like internal structure.) The question, for me, is *why* so many home-schoolers *say* things like “everything has internal structure”. Let’s brainstorm again; suppose one’s home-schooling style doesn’t involve structure at all? Not even “internal structure?” Would that be so terrible? What is the threat here? What, again, are people afraid of?

Suspicions are important. Like Geiger counters, they can be authority detectors. Perhaps my own suspicions, just described in this section, seem far-fetched to some (at least at first). Perhaps it seems as though I’m “making a big deal”. Perhaps, even, you’re suspicious of my suspicions! Perhaps you prefer your own suspicions! Perhaps one person’s suspicion can be another’s authority.

Suspicions are important. John Stuart Mill said “Dissent is the prelude to revolution.” And perhaps suspicions are the prelude to dissent.

CHAPTER THREE: THOUGHTS ABOUT CREATIVITY

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter described several subtle forms of authority, institutions, and ideas that adults often venerate, fixate on and latch onto, for reasons other than their worth or enjoyability. This chapter will deal with yet another kind of authority, which takes on another form, so subtle, so non-suspect, and so encompassing that it does indeed deserve a whole chapter. This authority is the word “creativity”.

I’ve alluded to this in previous chapters so perhaps you’re not all that surprised. “Creativity” is so often thought of as being a beautiful word, sometimes even more so than “learning” and “education”. Scrutinizing the ideas behind the word “creativity” is not something people do, or admit to doing.

Indeed, schools make use of this word. It’s built into their agenda, almost a part of the lesson plan. The schools I attended as a kid assigned compositions on “any topic you like” (and my mind would suddenly go blank; I couldn’t think of any topic I liked!) and gave “thinking-type tests” (during which I’d suddenly stop thinking!). “Forget creativity? Just tell me what to do, and let me do it and get it over with!” was Kitty’s silent plea during her childhood schooling years. Indeed, the most regimented, obnoxious day care center often includes the word “creativity” in its advertising. When it comes to children, not even a military school would admit to being against creativity.

Analyzing “creativity” to pieces – what it is, what it’s perceived to be, and why it’s such a loaded word – has been extremely helpful to me in my life both as a creative person and as a parent, also as a teacher. Indeed, I have found it necessary to do. Again, many of the ideas expressed in this chapter might be taken in the spirit of speculation or brainstorming. I hope readers will feel free to use them as food for thought, and to accept some and not others.

There are many political ideas concerning creativity, to which I have given a lot of thought. These, however, are not the ideas with which this present chapter is concerned. Nor, I admit, are they ideas about which I’ve formed any firm opinion. For example, I haven’t yet decided whether I believe that everyone is creative, whether creativity is individual or collective or both, nor whether there’s even such a thing as creativity. I also don’t know whether there’s a word for “creativity” in every language.

I do feel strongly, however, about many other things concerning creativity. For example, we need not look to judge children as to whether they’re creative (especially at any particular moment, or day). Also, we need not make children, or ourselves, nervous or self-conscious about creativity. Moreover, as with all other forms of authority, adults need to be wary of the word “creativity” and how it’s used, all the sentences it appears in! And I have strong feelings about how *not* to proceed with respect to creativity.

THE OAKTAG SYNDROME

When I was a kid, I loved oaktag paper. Something about its milky smoothness and its subtle colors. Not red but brick-red, not orange but peach-orange. And the brown like shaved mocha, the pink like Good-and-Plenties. It seem such a refreshing contrast to regular construction paper, almost something *more* than paper, perhaps some high-grade plastic. It seemed to cut so neatly and to fold without splitting.

I felt emotional about oaktag; there was something inspiring about it. I would sit at our kitchen table for half an hour straight, cutting the oaktag, enjoying the crunch. I never actually made anything much out of it, never used it for the fairy-village houses and stores which my sister and I and neighborhood friends used to put together. However inspiring oaktag was, it never actually inspired! It remained purely a medium, a medium per se. Or it was, perhaps, not a medium but an end in itself. Oaktag qua oaktag. I probably spent a total of days and weeks just fiddling with it, or doing predictable and non-creative projects.

Decades later I wrote a poem called “Oaktag”, in which I included some of the descriptions mentioned above. A couple of years after that I used that poem to accompany an article titled “Re-Thinking Creativity”, which appeared with the poem in Mothering Magazine. Soon afterward I used that poem as an opener for a presentation of the same title for the local chapter of the American Association of University Women. After reading the poem at the very beginning of that talk I asked the audience two questions: (1) Was the poem creative? (2) Was I being creative at the time with the oaktag? The answers to those two questions were, respectively, yes and no. I then used the term “oaktag syndrome” to describe the syndrome of potential, or latent, creativity, whereby an act seems non-creative, even idle, but in fact is the very beginning of something creative, the “small bang” of a long creative process, sometimes lasting, yes, decades.

If, decades ago, any adult had been watching me with the oaktag, and if that adult had wanted me to be creative, she would have been frustrated. If it had been “oaktag lessons” I was taking and she were the teacher, she might have tried to do some “accelerating” or, just the opposite, she might have given up on me and suggested discontinuing the “lessons”. Yet oaktag led, not only to the poem, the article, and the presentation (and now to the lead-in for this chapter!), but very possibly also to other more subtle ideas which have already manifested or will manifest in other poems, writing, even theorems.

As I write this I recall another example, from my childhood, of the “oaktag syndrome”. It wasn’t with oaktag. When writing with a pencil, I used to like erasing mistakes, doing a skimpy job of brushing away the eraser crumbs, then writing over the residual crumbs. I liked the way the new writing came out darker, somehow, just the right shade of grey (almost an oaktag shade). Also, it came out thicker, especially if I held the pencil at a certain angle. I haven’t yet written a poem about it (only this paragraph!) but maybe someday I will. And who knows what psychological or merely emotional repercussions this impression has had?

I also think of Devin at five (and of many children at five) going through what I called “the eyeball stage”. He loved eyeballs! Everything was an eyeball. A nose was an eyeball, a mouth was an eyeball, every noun in every song got replaced with “eyeball”. If I handed him a finger he’d stick it on his eyeball; if he handed me a finger I was supposed to stick it on my eyeball. He knew how to make his eyeballs bulge, and he did gross things like pulling up on his lids and down on his cheeks. He was as preoccupied with eyeballs as his brother Arin, at age nine, had been preoccupied with his Adam’s apple.

And Kitty once told me how, when she was in first grade, she loved the letter G, the way it curled in like that, so fancy, like the beginning of a spiral. But the G she especially liked was a specific G, the one printed in her school reading book. She didn’t particularly like the G the way the teacher told the class to make it. In secret Kitty used to write pages and pages of her type of G, and she sometimes felt that she was doing something wrong.

And my mother used to tell me how, when I was a toddler, I loved the letter X – “the way,” as I recently wrote in a poem, “you don’t know whether it’s two lines or four. And the way you just know those lines meet some other place besides the middle.” Walking around outside I’d see two sticks lying together crossing each other and I’d call out “X!”. When we got home I’d draw more X’s on paper.

Maybe some day Devin will write an eyeball poem, or Arin an Adam’s apple poem, or Kitty a G poem. Or maybe some other use will be made out of this apparent idleness. Or maybe not. Creativity, along with learning, isn’t always a matter of accomplishing something, or proving. There isn’t always a definite product coming out of it. Creativity can be of the oaktag variety. It isn’t always obvious, at the time, what’s creative and what’s not, nor even what will lead to something creative. Adults often say, when working out a problem, “I’ll sleep on it.” Children might very well say, “I’ll grow on it.”

Nor is it always a matter of “applying oneself”. That often comes later, perhaps with “advanced creativity” or rather adult creativity. Both creativity and learning are not always conscious or controllable. Just because a particular activity doesn’t *seem* creative or educational or useful doesn’t mean it’s not.

A home-schooling mother once said to me of her son’s pottery lessons, “I think I’ll discontinue them. He loves them but it’s been three years and he hasn’t improved.” I felt saddened that she used improvement and accomplishment as the criteria, that love of the lessons wasn’t considered enough. And perhaps the pottery was like my oaktag. Perhaps he needed or wanted it for some emotional reason. As is often said, maybe the pottery was “therapeutic” in some way. Maybe, even, he needed something to *not* be creative in, to relax with – in order, perhaps to be creative in something else (as for some children, watching TV or playing video games also serves this purpose). To me deciding whether or not a specific moment or project or half-project is creative, or being otherwise judgmental about it, seems like developing a prenatal test to determine whether a fetus has, say, job potential. In most matters concerning creativity, or anything else, it is simply too early – nor do we need – to tell.

CREATIVITY CAN BE SERIOUS

Perhaps that sounds obvious. But it took me a long time to figure it out. When I was a child, I was conscious of the fact that I was considered “creative”. At the same time I was aware that I *was* creative. The adults in my life let me know that they appreciated my creativity. My teachers had me read my compositions aloud to the class, or play the piano, and they often displayed my drawings. My parents delighted in the greeting cards that I made them, with their many pages and clever rhymes. I called such cards “cute idea cards” and perhaps this is metaphoric of the fact that I thought of *all* my creativity as consisting of “cute ideas”. I thought creative meant “cute. I didn’t think of it as being serious.

Indeed, throughout my early childhood two theme ran parallel: (1) I had serious thoughts (For example, at age three I would sit on the living room floor drawing and cutting, simultaneously contemplating things like how far down the ground went and whether other people were conscious as I was). (2) I was creative.

Thus I was serious and creative, but for a very long time the twain did not meet. It didn’t, that is, occur to me to be creative *about* my serious thoughts, nor did I realize that expressing serious thoughts could be considered creative. I didn’t realize that creativity could be serious, that when I sat (or moped) around thinking serious thoughts (perhaps fiddling with the oaktag), I was beginning to be creative. This was a revelation that came at age eleven, the age when I read Anne Frank’s diary and also began writing my own.

It’s fine, maybe even advisable, for children to not realize that their serious thoughts can be considered creative and used as a basis for whatever forms their creativity takes. (This can in fact be part of the first “isolation” stage of creativity, which I will talk about later in this chapter.) I don’t, however, believe that it’s fine for *adults* dealing with children not to realize this. Children need adults to know that children’s serious thoughts can be connected to their creativity. They certainly need adults to get rid of any cute-ness or accomplishment or performance mindset concerning children’s creativity. And to not discontinue “lessons” which the kid enjoys only because they’re not “going anywhere”.

Papier mache puppets, dolls’ clothes, “cute-idea cards” – indeed, childhood creativity probably does often manifest itself in terms of cute things. But what’s behind it all is often similar to what’s behind adult creativity; words like “profundity”, “obsessions”, “anguish”, “Angst”, “existential”, even “loss” and “grief” come to mind, and I mean those words to apply both to the process of creativity and to the individual products of creation.

Sometimes I think of the oaktag syndrome as a kind of mannerism. Indeed, sitting “idly” cutting non-creative shapes out of oaktag did feel a bit like biting my nails. In fact, creative people often do tend to display mannerisms. Perhaps it’s a kind of gearing up. There seems to be at least some correlation between creativity and certain disorders, such as ADD, autism, and bi-polar disorder. As with much living and learning, disorder in one sense often means order in another.

At any rate, adults need to know that creativity is a sensitive area, and we need to respond to it (or to its apparent absence) in sensitive ways. We need to treat it, or its absence, with reverence and respect, which in many cases means silence and patience.

CREATIVITY INGREDIENTS

It would be uncreative to say that any one item or any set of items was absolutely necessary in order for creativity to occur! However the list of items read, there'd certainly be exceptions and additions. There do, though, seem to be certain ingredients common to the experiences of many creative people, and giving creativity authority status tends to deny children, and adults, the full range of these ingredients. This (longer than usual, I warn you!) section delves into some of these ingredients.

(1) Emotion: Some people believe that an unhappy childhood is a prerequisite for creativity. However, perhaps it would be more accurate to change this prerequisite to an *emotional* childhood. This would mean a childhood in which emotions aren't discouraged – from happiness and sadness to anguish and obsession to the more subtle “oaktag type” of emotion. When adults stop a child from “purposelessly” cutting up oaktag, or taking pottery lessons that “aren't getting anywhere”, or even nail-biting, they are very possibly discouraging not only the expression of emotion, but the emotion itself.

When people think of the linking of emotion and creativity, they usually seem to mean “the arts” – painting, sculpting, writing, and so on. But I felt and feel emotional about *math*. For me, writing little x 's, y 's and later epsilons, or drawing geometric figures, was like cutting or fingering oaktag. In my adolescent diary I wrote, “Other mathematicians seem to think of math as being *interesting*. But I think of it as beautiful.” I now write poetry using “math metaphors” and extended metaphors to describe my mathematical life (independent of whether any theorem gets proven or published), and eventually that poetry was collected in a book, *Crossing the Equal Sign*. The subject per se is emotional to me, and so is creativity per se, not only the specific products of creation.

(2) Time / space / patience: It took my poem titled “Oaktag” forty years to gestate from its “idle” beginnings. Some creative products take longer. As is well known, Gauguin's creative life took on gusto after age fifty.

When I was a kid, my mother told me about an artist she'd read about who alternately painted and rested for ten-year periods. “I guess that's just the way his inspiration works,” she said. In waiting for the products of creation, the world (meaning parents, teachers, friends, colleagues, and so on) often needs to be patient. So does the creative person herself. We need to be patient and trusting. Sometimes, even, a product of creativity will *not* emerge, as many poets with notebooks full of jottings know.

In this schooling result-oriented hurry-up-and-prove society, we all have to keep reminding ourselves that a “dry spell”, whether it lasts for a week or for ten years, is

often a necessary gestation period. A huge part of what goes into creativity is time, space, and patience, which sometimes means conscious waiting, and holding back from interfering.

(3) Periods of not being conscious of being creative: Many creative people (including myself) have gone through portions of their childhoods, or of the early beginner stages of their creative lives, when they did *not*, for example, “define themselves as writer”. Perhaps this “age and stage can be referred to as their “childhood of creativity”, meaning beginnings of creativity. When, how long, how well-defined, and so on depends on the particular creative person and in fact, if the same person displays more than one area of creativity, the separate areas might involve different “creativity childhoods”. I knew I was a mathematician in ninth grade. I didn’t know I was a writer until my thirties.

Perhaps, even, every instance of creativity has and needs a stage when the person doesn’t even know there’s *such a thing* as creativity, or as specific genres like “writing” and “painting”. Not knowing in general might be an important stage in anyone’s development. Perhaps when I say that every instance of creativity has and needs a childhood, perhaps I also mean that every instance of creativity has and needs a *babyhood*.

The minute anyone knows that (1) she’s creative and (2) creativity is desirable, there immediately arises the question, “HOW creative am I?” Other questions soon follow. “Am I creative ENOUGH?” “Am I creative enough RIGHT NOW?” A creative person needs to have had some “childhood” *without* those questions, without this feeling of self-consciousness. This is part of what I call her creativity *base*, her emotional stronghold. And just as children in general need an emotional base – namely, childhood itself – so perhaps the creativity part of people needs this creativity emotional base.

Later I’ll talk about adult creativity, and about mature creative people, people who are “veteran” artists, writers, and so on. Their situations are different; commitment entails more than continual potchkying with oaktag. But it’s still true that even creative *adults* need to be able to regress, sometimes, to that childhood of creativity, and to oaktag-potchkying. Thus adults, too, need to have moments, or days, or longer periods, when we are not conscious of being creative.

As a writer, I have sometimes made up non-creative stories for my kids. As a mathematician I often go back to problems I worked on as a teen-ager, or simply indulge in memories of sitting in fifth-grade math class working out whether there’s such a thing as “Mr. Magic 4” (analogous to “Mr. Magic 9”). I’m also still fascinated by the very basic stuff, the “pixols”, such as the writing down of x’s and y’s, or the shapes of triangles. In a similar way Kitty, an advanced quilt-maker, is still fascinated by the fitting together of two completely different (“clashing”) prints. And probably most creative people like to putter around the house.

(4) Periods of feeling like the *only* creative person: This is the opposite of the previous creativity ingredient. I also believe that a creative person might need to go through ages

and stages, and moments, when she thinks or feels, at least on some level, that she's the only one creative. She's making the world! (And I think of Robert Louis Stevenson's poem, *The Land of Counterpane*, about a little boy sick in bed playing with his toy soldiers.)

This can be true for other aspects of life, too, not only creativity. When I broke the news to my mother of my first pregnancy, one of the things she said was, "When I was pregnant, I often felt as though I was the only woman ever to be pregnant." I don't think of this as being self-indulgent. It's merely *one* way to feel, *part* of the time.

As a creative child, I was often told that I was "sitting on the shoulders of giants". Looking back, I feel that maybe I was told that too soon and too often. It's true, but I didn't need to be aware of it just then. I needed privacy, and being told that others had been there before me (and who were still there) threatened that privacy. It sort of took my creativity, my projects, my very thoughts and self, *away* from me. Perhaps I thought "And *what are the specific* giants that I'm indebted to." Or "So? I never said I *wasn't* sitting on the shoulders of giants."

When Devin was ten I was reading "The Junior Encyclopedia of Authors" and had happened upon the Hugh Lofting page, in which was related the story of how he got the idea for his *Dr. Doolittle* books. It involved the war in which he was fighting – his observations of animals in wartime. He wrote illustrated letters to his children back home. I found that fascinating, and also thought it would make a fun thing to let Devin know about (and then I could enter it into our home-schooling log under Writing, History, and Civics).

I didn't want to be invasive or obviously educational about it; I just wanted to mention it in regular conversation. So a couple of hours later Dev and I were riding in the car with another mother and her family, who were home-schooling. So I began telling the mother – not even the kids in the car – about the interesting stuff I'd just read, ending with "I always find it fascinating, how writers and artists get the ideas for their work."

Devin, however, in a very matter-of-fact and non-hostile manner, said, "The way I get the ideas for my writing is" – he paused, slightly but dramatically – "I just all of a sudden thought of them."

I chuckled as one of the other kids in the car took Devin's cue. "Ya wanna hear how I got the idea for my *Mother Nature* story?"

"Yes?" we all asked.

After a short but dramatic pause, something like Devin's, that kid came out with "I just all of a sudden thought of it!"

I laughed and hugged Dev, silently conjecturing that very possibly what I'd done "wrong" – or at any rate what the kids were being such good sports about – was not that

I'd been invasive or dishonest or too educational, but that I was piling "the giants" on them. Thinking a bit further, I recall that my mother used to use the word "fascinating", as I'd just done, to describe the accomplishments of "the giants". And something about the way she said it, or perhaps just the way I perceived it, smacked of "And *you should* be fascinated, too."

Is childhood the time to teach children to be appreciative of those who laid down their paths? How does a child perceive herself in relation to the rest of humanity, especially as pertains to her work? I can only know how it was for me. To me working on a project often felt like working on something that had indeed been done before. In some sense my projects felt like re-discovering or re-inventing. Perhaps, even, my fantasy was that the person who'd done it first would somehow, like a teacher, notice that I'd also done it, and without being taught by her. Perhaps she'd be impressed with me and I could "creep into her heart".

I do realize that a lot of this has to do with my own psychological issues, or former issues; to a large extent I was brought up on admiration rather than love, so sometimes to me admiration *feels* like love. Or I find myself seeking and craving admiration rather than love. That, I realize, is very possibly what that business of "creeping into the teacher's heart" was all about. But I understand all this, and have a hold on it, and also on when I might regress. Also, I still think that what I'm saying holds water, for many people besides me. In fact, in our society, I'd conjecture that *everybody* to some extent is brought up on admiration rather than love.

Now that I'm an adult, there are still moments when, in my creative life, I need, for example, to forget that there are other books on home-schooling, or other "poet mathematicians", or even other people. And I try to allow my own children these forgettings, however unrealistic or even self-centered they might seem.

Again, we're talking about moments and stages, not all of life. And there are exceptions to the adults-don't-interfere rule. For example, being told about, or actually encountering, one of the giants upon whose shoulders we're sitting can serve to inspire a child. Being introduced, at just the right time, by my mother to Anne Frank's diary got me started on serious writing. Browsing in bookstores and buying and reading "Euclid's Elements" got me trying to prove the Fifth Postulate from the other four postulates (something which mathematicians now realize cannot possibly be done), which in turn got me proving other theorems. And taking young children to concerts has been the first step towards lifelong pleasure from music.

So I'm not saying *never* introduce or expose children to the creativity of others, be they giants or dwarfs. What I'm saying is: Be careful and sensitive. We don't have to get over-anxious about inspiring kids to be creative. There's a difference between taking a five-year-old to a concert because, subtle or otherwise, we hope or expect that she will become inspired to become a prodigy, and taking that child to that concert because we love music and want to share that love with her, or even because we couldn't get a babysitter. The difference, I believe, is the difference between authority and life.

More questions: When we take children to concerts to inspire them, are they truly inspired, or do they only *wish* they were inspired, thinking that they *should* be inspired? Do they *pretend* to be inspired (as I remember doing)? Whose needs, indeed whose inspirations, are these children fulfilling? And at what cost? Wouldn't it be okay if they were inspired by the violin playing of the man next door or down the block? Or by their older brother, perhaps playing badly? Must inspiration, too, be "official"? Indeed, must the word "inspiration" be an authority?

(5) Freedom from too much input: Chapter One had a section on too much input with respect to learning. Creativity, I believe, is just as vulnerable. Parents and other adults often talk about the dangers or undesirability of over-stimulating young children. Yet they still, I believe, can be guilty of over-stimulating.

What constitutes over-stimulation? Many adults seem to have mindsets about that. Too long a day, too scary a movie, too loud a song, too many kids at a birthday party, too large a class at school, and so on. But there are also lesser-known forms of over-stimulation. Children, and adults, creative or otherwise, need freedom to grope, to not know what has already been done, to not take things for granted. And to stay with one accomplishment – be it a completed project, a book read, or something more subtle like oaktag potchkying – before moving on to another. "Oh, that's wonderful - now, how about trying it with more colors?" "Okay, you've learned how to multiply fractions; now it's time to learn to divide." "We've finished our math; now let's tackle science." How often are children talked to like that?

I feel especially sensitive (perhaps even too critical) about writing classes, or workshops, for children, even for teen-agers. I believe the input in them should be minimal, and given only when asked. Indeed, are the classes or workshops asked for by the kids themselves? While my three older children were in elementary school I was asked, or even offered every once in a while, to "do something with writing for the kids" in my children's classes. What I did was the thing which to me felt the most honest and the least invasive; I read stories, poems, and book-excerpts that I'd written when I was a kid, along with some writings of my own children or other children I knew. I didn't say anything about how *they* should write, either grammatically or creatively, nor did I say anything about *whether* they should or would write.

When I was in high school I had a creative writing teacher who was very "good" in the sense of what I mean by good, but I still didn't write for him or for the class what I wrote in my diary; instead I shared what I felt were my more ordinary writings. And I believe that, without that class, I still would have become a writer.

One of the only ways in which many poets and writers can make even a little bit of money is by giving presentations or workshops for children. But I still believe that most of these presentations are overkill. I conjecture that it doesn't always take an entire course, or even an entire afternoon, or hour, to kindle a kid's interest in writing. If that kindling occurs, often all it takes is one poem, perhaps even one sentence. And it doesn't

always occur immediately; it's a delayed reaction. Common questions often asked in workshops, or by well-meaning teachers in school, are often on the order of "Are you expressing what you're feeling?" To me this seems trite and invasive. (And I think of a sentence in "Parent Effectiveness Training": "If you want communication, don't ask questions.") How does one know, at the time, whether one is "expressing what she's feeling"? I think of my own adolescent diary; there are many passages which, at the time I was writing them, felt quite ordinary. Not creative, not "what I was feeling", and which I now feel were not at all ordinary – in fact I've used them in my present-day published writing.

The poet Anne Sexton's psychiatrist, the one who first advised her to write poetry, chose not to "go over" that poetry with her, not to "relate it to her issues" because he felt that might inhibit her in her writing. Similarly, if anyone had told me the true meanings, psychological or otherwise, of some of the things I was writing in my adolescent diary, I probably would have felt mortified and might have stopped writing them, maybe stopped writing altogether, at least for the time being.

There are times to be stimulated and times to be left alone. For me, most times are to be left alone. The times to be stimulated are exceptions, punctuations. A creative adult often knows how to monitor as to when she needs stimulation time and when she needs alone time. A child usually hasn't yet learned how to monitor, at least not consciously. Thus adults need to be careful about introducing stimulation in children's lives, whether in the form of "inspiration" or suggestions or writing workshops. A good general rule, perhaps: When in doubt, leave it out.

(6) Freedom to feel secure: For adults, that's a luxury, sometimes an impossibility. But adults can help children feel secure in their creative lives, or rather not hinder them in feeling secure.

What do I mean by "freedom to feel secure?" I mean, in Nancy Wallace's words, "freedom from fear". Freedom from judgment, freedom not to think in terms of judgment, not to think in terms of equating creativity with "good" and non-creativity with "bad" (or non-committal), freedom to make mistakes, to not think in terms of mistakes, to never have heard of mistakes, or to use mistakes in some way, perhaps as oaktag. Creative adults struggle with ego a lot (perhaps partly because of the way their creativity was handled when they were children), but creative children needn't. And, as brought out in the last section, too much input and stimulation can lead to feeling insecure.

Insecurity is inherent in the human condition and can feed creativity. Adults don't need to add to it, our own or our children's.

(7) Periods of not feeling rushed: Creativity, childhood or adulthood, has many aspects and phases, many or most of which are inherently necessary. The feeling of being rushed, and/or obsessed, is one of them. This feeling can also add to creativity's passion, in a good way, and is natural and unavoidable as a part of the creative life. Society doesn't have to force or cultivate it.

Learning also requires periods of not feeling rushed. In a poem about babies and their development I wrote "...For everything learned / is something forgotten / especially if learned too soon." If "created" is substituted for "learned", the statement would, I believe, still hold. The minute a child or baby learns or makes something, she cannot go back to the stage when she hadn't learned or made that thing. Thus, for example, when a toddler learns the letter A she forgets, at least to some extent, the *shape* A. And when she learns to understand the words that people around her are speaking, she pretty much forgets when it feels like to simply hear the words as *sounds* (as adults must do when they hear a foreign language). We've all forgotten how it felt to not be able to focus our eyes, to not know that distant objects look smaller, and in general how it felt to be a baby. And the more we rush, both ourselves and our children, from one phase to the next, the more we forget. And, perhaps, the more some of us regret.

If we learn or create too soon, we often haven't milked enough out of each stage. Things are forgotten, and lost.

(8) Periods of not being creative; Minutes, weeks, years... many creative people, children and adults, need breaks from being creative. Or we need to go through an initial, or final, non-creative stage. Sometimes, even, a creative child becomes a non-creative adult, and vice versa.

There are several possible reasons that periods of non-creativity can be beneficial to a creative person. First, we might need to "slum", to know what it's like to not be creative, to gain a kind of perspective, perhaps to help us appreciate our creativity, or perhaps to appreciate the creativity of others. We might need time and space to delve into subjects in which we ourselves are not creative. As an eleventh grader at my music and art high school I chose to take a semester course in Ceramics, an unusual thing for a music major to do. I knew at the time that I would very probably land only a C or less in that course, and that that C would go into my records. Nonetheless, I wanted to experience ceramics, to see what my art major friends were doing, what it meant to them. I remember in particular the look on Robert Brennan's face and the stance of his hands as he shaped a figure of Adam. As I had anticipated, what I myself shaped was a very boring non-creative vase, which got me my expected C. Still, I derived what I'd wanted from that course, and perhaps what I learned, though not in itself creative, influenced my creative life (or at least this book...).

A second reason for a creative person to dip into non-creativity: We all (or most) need periods of being slowed down. Sometimes a project, or series of projects, can proceed too quickly – too quickly, that is, to accommodate the coming on of ideas. If the coming on of ideas proceeds more quickly than the carrying out, it's usually too fast. Things get out of synch. Perhaps a creative person is happiest and most efficient when her ideas, her busywork, as well as the other aspects of her life such as family and societal responsibilities (and leisure) are, as they say, "in balance". Thus, in general, she needs to continuously monitor the proportion in which the various aspects of her life appear, and she needs to know when and how much to slow down.

Slowing down is the approximate role that thrift-shopping, and to some extent mothering, has played in my own life. I say approximate because, for one thing, both these activities are also *part* of my creative life. For another thing, the throes of my creativity feed on thrift-ing and mothering; thrifting and mothering serve as subject matter, images, background, sources of emotion, and so on, and not only as slower-downers. And in fact that might be *often* be the case with periods of non-creativity.

Thirdly, there's a difference between the kind of ideas a creative person gets when, say she's thrift-ing (or oaktag-ing) and the kind of ideas she gets when she's actually at her desk (or wherever) working at being creative. Both kinds of ideas are important.

Also, it's not necessarily true that, if one writes a poem a day, then one writes half a poem in half a day, or two poems in two days. Doubling the writing frequency is scant guarantee that the ultimate output will double. Much as many people would like that to happen, creativity cannot be controlled in that way. Probably there's a maximum point, an equilibrium point, beyond which it's not very lucrative to sit at one's desk and try to create; there might even be *negative* gain. (For example, working overlong might cause us to revise, perhaps unwisely.)

A fourth purpose of stints of non-creativity is simply to relax, and build oneself up for the next creativity session.

A fifth reason is to build a basis, a "childhood of creativity". My mother used to say (and I'm not sure I entirely agree with this): "You can't create in a vacuum". Perhaps the non-vacuum in which things are created is that basis and, by definition, is itself non-creative, or maybe created by someone else, namely, the giants. Yes, the non-creative items are reserved for the giants or, as I once said in a poem "for poems I have already written". (In that case the giant was myself, or my past self.) Perhaps another way of putting this is: I have to have something to write *about*. More generally, one has to have something to be creative about.

When Devin was four, he loved to buy stickers. I would get all excited and bring out various non-sticker things, like buttons, multi-colored paper clips, pictures from magazines, thinking he might want to make a collage. But all Devin did, several times running, was take the stickers off the sticker sheet and stick them onto some non-sticker sheet. He'd work long and hard at this and he seemed extremely satisfied. How un-creative, I couldn't help thinking; if he asked me how I liked what he'd made, I'd say "yes" but smirking-ly. But what Dev was doing, perhaps, was getting to know stickers per se, perhaps so later he could do more creative variations on them. (Or they might have been his oaktag.) You can't do "Variations on a Theme" without first doing the theme – or rather, you can't *knowingly* (and artistically) do such variations.

In a similar manner, Devin for a long time preferred coloring books to "The Anti-Coloring Book". To many adults, coloring books seem non-creative, and undesirable. Adults are used to coloring books so of course they're non-creative to us. But to a kid

who's never seen one, they can be fascinating. The very idea of them. Like my x's and y's in algebra. Or like oaktag Or like Kitty's clashing prints coming together in a seam. Perhaps also the impression, the emotional surreal impression, of a scene without color, consisting only of outlines, is an interesting and serious idea.

When adults overly concern themselves with a kid's "creative potential", when they worry every time they see him not being creative, or when a day or week passes by without him doing any creative, when they again and again step in or discourage him ("Why don't you try a little blue?" "Why don't you add to the picture instead of just coloring it?"), they are very possibly depriving him of a very important age and stage of his life, and perhaps of some of his creativity.

THE CHILDHOOD CREATIVITY MANIA

By childhood creativity mania I mean the phenomenon by which everyone seems to be expounding and fixating on childhood creativity. Parents, teachers, and experts of all sorts race around trying to get kids to be creative, or quietly and patiently (sort of) wait around for kids to be creative, lying in wait for creations. Articles on childhood creativity abound (most, in my opinion, maniacal), often how-to approaches peppered with phrases like "have your child write", "have your child draw...", or even "have your child keep a diary". Sometimes these articles refer half-facetiously, perhaps slightly condescendingly, to "your budding Rembrandt".

It feels to me like a trap, something I'm suspicious of. Home-schooling publications run these articles, too. Toy companies and curriculum suppliers (again, home-schooling curricula, also) join, or initiate, the bandwagon.

Who benefits, or thinks she benefits, from this mania? Parents, for starters, seem to like to talk about how creative their children are, or aren't, or perhaps gloat about the fact that they're *not* talking about it. Some say (or think), "Well, Johnny's not reading or adding, but he's creative." Or "besides reading and adding, Johnny's also creative." Home-schooling parents often use that buzz-word, "creativity", to reassure themselves, to assuage their (sometimes understandable) insecurity, or guilt, or embarrassment. Sometimes creativity is virtually used as a crutch.

Why are we so anxious for our children to be creative? Why are we investing so much time, money, and energy? Is such an investment wise or necessary? Do we want our children to draw, or play the piano, because we never could? Or, conversely, do we want to be able, for example, to tape their drawing on the fridge door so that visitors might notice and comment, "and interestingly, their mother's an artist." Is it a little like the ecology clubs of the previous chapter?

Probably we all have our Achilles' heels; on a personal note, when I volunteered to speak at Career Day at Bret's high school (He stopped home-schooling for two years, ninth and tenth grade), how much of it was that I love re-defining my own stance as

writer – love, in particular, informing twenty sixteen-year-olds that “the writer’s life is romantic”? And how much of it is, in reality or in imagination, to enhance, or further, or justify my own career, or to assuage any frustrations? This is the kind of thing parents and other adults might need to ask and analyze. How much of the creativity mania is for the kids and how much is for ourselves or for our agendas? Indeed, whose creativity are we really wrapped up in? And how, then, should and do we choose to proceed?

Parents could ask themselves other questions: What if Johnny *isn't* creative? Or not creative this year? Or not creative during his entire childhood? Or never creative, ever? Would that be so terrible? In particular, would it be so terrible for our own lives? Indeed, is creativity always a good thing? Hasn't creativity ever been used for evil purposes?

What might all that mean in terms of Johnny’s life, and our lives? Many home-schoolers have already discovered that often reading doesn’t happen until age ten or twelve (and then, at that age, there’s no difference in reading ability between these kids who just caught on to it and those who’ve been reading all along). Many are also considering that it might be possible to live useful adult lives without reading at all. Perhaps something analogous to that is true of creativity.

Who, besides parents, might benefit from the childhood creativity mania? Well, teachers have a stake in a child’s creativity; for example, they seem to like to talk, or think, about the creativity they “brought out” in a student, or in a class of students. And often the *illusion* of creativity will work just as well for them; I think of school hallway displays, drawings of all types and qualities, the differences among them barely noticeable because of their thick frames of brightly colored construction paper. And the reason these hallways look so attractive and impressive is those frames. It’s really the teachers’ creativity (if we want to call it that) that’s being displayed. Yes, some kids could get a kick out of it, but other kids could feel insulted, even if their parents are pleased and lavish praise, and even if it does get the teachers and the schools recognition, parental approval, satisfaction of sorts, and funding.

Speaking of money, businesses have a huge stake in childhood creativity. Mention has already been made of school supplies, art supplies, so-called “hands-on” curricula, and so on. Kitty and I used to talk about a particular large toy store in her neighborhood, which sported a section marked “Creativity”. “It’s mostly to sell parents things,” Kitty laughed. She went on to describe various pre-assembled kits, not really creative at all. She called these kits “officially creative”.

We then lapsed into a conversation about how our own kids have often demonstrated true, and not official, creativity. Devin makes “paper sculpture”, Bret used to make “scotch-tape sculptures” and, said Kitty of her then-ten-year-old son, “Jimmy makes little characters out of dustballs.” (“So now he can go into the business with dustball kits,” I quipped.) To be truly creative, kids don’t need things that cost money, and they don’t need things that are dubbed “creative” by some company or store or other authority. Indeed, childhood creativity is literally big business.

Moreover, childhood creativity is also *small* business. I'm thinking of artists and writers (like me) for whom childhood creativity often leads to the only avenue for them to make even a little bit of money, or gain even a little bit of exposure. "Hands-on Art Workshop", "Poetry Writing for Children". They go under various titles. It's small business but it reflects and permeates society in a big way, contributing to and capitalizing (however slightly) on the childhood creativity mania. It's small business but it's modeled on big business. And I can't help wondering how many "artists in the schools" would, if honest with themselves, admit that their main interest in doing this kind of thing is to get a gig. It all seems rather pretentious.

At this point I can't resist telling the following true story: I have tried a few times to earn money by becoming, for example, a "Poet in the Schools". Somehow (hm) I was never hired. In particular, one interview I was called in for seemed to go very well. I possibly talked about some of the ideas in this book, but I don't remember. Certainly I had new things to say. After the interview, I went to sit down on a bench just outside the interview room. And here's what I overheard: "She *brilliant*." "She's *too* brilliant." Hm.

Now, do *kids* benefit from the childhood creativity mania? There have been, I'm sure, examples of kids becoming inspired by a kit or an art class, especially if they're allowed to mess around with the kit – a kit containing materials which might not otherwise be accessible to them – and if they're allowed to use the kit for some purpose other than what it was intended for, and if they're allowed to quit when it's time to go their own ways. As with anything else, there are undoubtedly instances in which products associated with the childhood creativity mania have been beneficial for children and/or their creativity. They can all be like oaktag, or like stickers. But I believe that this is the exception rather than the rule and, again, they're authorities, or potential authorities.

In my experience, a child's most creative work is not done out of any kit or art class. Again and again home-schoolers have attested to this. The real creativity is in making up the material, the framework, and the questions. Not in being handed papier mache, or even oaktag. (Perhaps my oaktag is somebody else papier mache!) Adult society infiltrates kids so much; I often wonder whether I would have been more creative if I'd never heard the term "creative writing". And what kinds of work would Kitty have done if she'd never heard of "quilting"? I have said that Anne Frank's diary inspired me, but perhaps I would have been inspired in a different way if I hadn't heard of "diaries"; perhaps I would have thought of some other kind of "diary".

It seems to me that the childhood creativity mania is detrimental to every one of the creativity ingredients mentioned in the previous section. Here's a quick rundown:

(1) Emotion: At the very least, the mania makes creativity public, far too exposed and invaded. A child, creative or not, needs more privacy than the mania allows her. "Hours of creative fun" might be what is written on the labels of what Kitty and I facetiously call "creativity kits", but often creativity needs more than "hours"; sometimes it needs days, weeks, years. And it doesn't have to be "fun". The very fact that somebody bought it for

him – that is, its very kit-ness – can feel pressuring and spoil things, especially if it was expensive and the parents feel wasteful if and when the kid loses interest.

(2) Time / space / patience: The mania, in plain words, is not patient. In order to get good ratings or a promotion, a teacher or workshop facilitator has to demonstrate progress by the end of the year, or of the six sessions. In order to sell a “creativity product”, a business has to make that product “creativity efficient”. Time is of the essence, a *short* time. Time, money, and proof is what the mania is about.

(3) Periods of not being conscious of being creative: Again, what would a “creativity vendor” have to gain from such periods? If you don’t think about creativity, why would you buy a creativity kit? Indeed, the mania is constantly asking everybody, “Is your child creative? Is she creative NOW? Can you prove it?” The mania would never let anyone forget about creativity. If the mania had its way completely, every day would be a day to start some new “creative” endeavor. It would always be time to buy a new kit.

(4) Time in which to believe you’re the only one creative: The mania is continually introducing creative kids to other creative kids. They meet in the “creativity sections” of toy stores and at art classes. The kids get to meet accomplished adults, too. As Kitty says, “perceived inadequacy” (perhaps perceived non-creativity) is often the message.

Perhaps it seems as though I’m making “too much of a big deal”. But I’m not saying *never* buy a creativity kit or shop in a creativity store. I’m saying don’t view these things as authorities.

(5) Freedom from too much input: The mania is input personified. It doesn’t leave anybody alone, not for very long. If being left alone, to their own resources, produced creativity, who would need “creativity kits”?

When I talk about leaving kids alone, I don’t mean *completely* alone, all the time. I certainly don’t mean leave them alone when they don’t want to be left alone. What I mean is, give them input based on their needs, or on your needs, rather than on authority in the form of the childhood creativity mania.

(6) Feeling secure: “Mania” means desperation. Grasping at straws. The very opposite of secure. Often the very opposite of creative.

WHAT ABOUT ADULT CREATIVITY?

The lives and choices of adults are intimately related to those of children, in particular when creativity is involved. For example, inside every creative adult is the creative (or non-creative) child she once was. The destructive attitudes and habits that were inflicted on her by society, in the form of the childhood creativity mania, usually persist at least subtly. Thus creative adults contend with worries about things like “dry spells”, mistakes, ego, and living up to potential. True, these insecurities are possibly not due solely to the

way they were treated as children; they could also be inherent to the creative life. But certainly every adult, creative or otherwise, is haunted to some extent by her childhood.

As with everything else, what creativity means to children is often very different from what it means to adults. My present writing stems from the need to communicate, both with my world and with my self. My childhood writing was done largely in *imitation* of the world that I expected to someday be an adult member of. Like my toddlerhood walking and talking, it was part of the process of becoming a world citizen. And, though it did, right from the start, connect with serious feelings and ideas, it was also “cute”, part of my child-ness.

My childhood writing also varied from context to context. What I wrote for school was different, in style and subject matter, from what I wrote in the kitchen with my friend Frances. Both of these were different from what I wrote in my diary. And for a long time I didn't imagine that the diary was “the real me”, or that it would figure so prominently in my adult writing.

The years of working through the ideas in this chapter have been very helpful to me in my own creative life, in dealing and connecting with society. Since all creative parents, being adults, need to come to terms with the status of their own creativity, and how it connects with society, it seems in order to include a few thoughts about adult creativity.

Is there an adult creativity mania? Let me brainstorm: Colleges and adult schools offer courses and workshops (though often non-credit) in creative sewing, pottery, and so on. They're not as much the rage as art classes for kids but they're still there. And “creativity businesses” advertise “toys for all ages”. And in the academic and professional world, there are at least some prizes, awards, grants, and the slogan “publish or perish”. Adult creativity is a mania in certain circles but not all.

In general, it is my opinion that there is *not* an adult creativity mania. In fact, quite the opposite. As a child I got lots of strokes and points for creativity. I've already told how my parents and teachers noticed and applauded it, how I used it to “creep into the teacher's heart”. But in junior high there were fewer teachers who had “creep-able-into-able” hearts. High school was better, since it was a music and art school, and a very good one. But college was a hard nut to crack. The older a student is, the less creativity a teacher can claim she “brought out” in her; the less, that is, she can claim that creativity for herself. And, perhaps, the less motherly she feels towards the student, the less her heart craves being crept into. Thus, good or bad, less creativity mania for adults.

A fellowship to graduate school was a little harder for me to obtain than the scholarship to undergrad school. And my Ph.D. was held up *because* of my creativity. Indeed, naïve to the workings of grad school politics, I thought of my own thesis problem and its solution before finding an advisor; thus I was stuck for three years with a completed thesis and no advisor who could understand or approve it. (And of course, to get such an advisor I had to “go outside the box”.)

And, as I found out the hard way, very few employers appreciate creativity. Indeed, writing A+ on a paper or report card is a lot simpler and less expensive than hiring or promoting or stepping down in favor of a more innovative person to do the job. And when I apply for jobs or even gigs (poetry readings, lectures), I very often get nice rejection letters saying, in essence, “impressive resume but we don’t see any way of fitting you into our program”. And the higher paying the job or gig, the more likely this is to happen.

Indeed, society seems to recognize and reward creativity less and less as this creativity proceeds from childhood to adulthood. And creative adults can feel unpleasantly surprised and betrayed. (And as a teacher, I see that “creeping into the *students*’ hearts is an inappropriate thing to try to do.)

Indeed, no one has a stake in adult creativity. Parents of grown children, who a generation ago might have been right in there with the creativity mania, putting all sorts of money and energy into their children’s music or art classes, often seem to care very little about how creative their *adult* sons and daughters are. Indeed, parents often *worry* when their grown children are creative in any serious way, when for example they pursue careers in art or music. Is it only that they’re concerned about the kids’ financial independence, or is there something else? Is there perhaps something emotionally or psychologically threatening about a creative adult? Moreover, consider the creative *parent*. Do her children concern themselves with her creativity? What about her friends? Why such a fuss about childhood creativity when this creativity will morph into something undesirable when these creative kids grow up?

No, there doesn’t seem to be quite the creativity mania for adults. Adults seem to occupy a very different place in society from children, and creativity is one of the stages upon which this difference is played.

Many adults are disparaging about adult creativity. A typical comment might be “I can’t stand that Picasso. All he has to do is scribble something on a piece of paper and he gets away with not paying for his dinner.” Or, perhaps closer to home, “creativity is kidstuff.” What’s going on here is probably a combination of bitterness, ignorance, envy, feelings of inadequacy, and fear – fear, perhaps, of feeling feelings. It seems that, for many people, adult creativity is a mysterious faraway phenomenon, about which there is much myth and misconception.

And many people seem to think that adult creativity is useless or idle; others seem to think it’s unattainable, almost holy. It reminds me a little bit of the dual position of women in society, simultaneously on the pedestal and in the ditch. In either case, people often seem to *equate* creativity with childhood. Meaning, even those who, perhaps secretly, aspire to it might say it’s childish (“kidstuff”). No wonder there’s all this talk about “childhood creativity” – as though that’s the only kind of creativity there is (or should be). So no wonder some adults are so often frustrated, and no wonder they *need* childhood creativity, in the same way and ways that they need children, period. Or, sometimes, toys. (You know how parents often joke about how they’re glad they have

children – so they have an excuse to play with toys.) No wonder there's such a childhood creativity mania.

“THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CREATIVITY AND LEARNING”

I recall Nancy Wallace mentioning that phrase. And in writing this “creativity chapter” I've been aware that, in many places, I've been tempted to write the word “learning” instead of or in addition to “creativity”. Indeed, many statements that are true of creativity seem to be true also of learning. And I've wondered whether the two are not, on some level, the same thing. At any rate, they seem intimately related.

Both involve serious emotions, sometimes anguish or grief, and the “oaktag” syndrome applies to both. Both can occur without a definite product or other accomplishment. Both have and need their gestational periods. And many of the ingredients that go into creativity are also ingredients that go into learning. In our society, both are examples of authority words, and both are words which, frankly, don't move me as much as they seem to move many other people. (Possibly, stripped of their authority status and the misconceptions given them, they *would* move me.)

Allow me some more brainstorming: Often creativity involves learning about *ourselves*. Or rather about ourselves in relation to the world. Being creative means taking what we learn and mixing it with our selves, putting our selves into it, seeing whether there is anything we have to give it. In a sense the creative person is part of the subject matter to be learned.

It's often said that, in order to be creative, one needs to have learned (“You can't create in a vacuum.”). What we need to have learned is that part of the world to which we give our creations. Thus, at least to some extent, the “better” a person is at learning, the “better” she is at creating.

Conversely, in order to learn it often helps to be creative. That has certainly been my own experience. Whenever I've learned anything important, I've often felt a great need to write a poem. More subtly, I remember my college and graduate student days; in every math course I'd not only take notes, but write something akin to a textbook. I felt I had to write it down my way. I made definitions and theorems more axiomatic (that is, more precise), and I tried to think of new examples, and new problems, problems different from the problems at the ends of the chapters or those given to us by the professor. I felt I had to check that it worked for *all* problems, not only those rigged to work by the textbook writers. It didn't matter to me if the examples I thought of were simple or obvious (“trivial”, as some mathematicians say). What mattered to me was that I thought of them myself, that I created as I learned. I alternated input and output. It wasn't ego and it wasn't that I thought in terms of publishing any “results”. It was the process of creating, or discovering, that was so vital to me. Very definitely I was conscious of the fact that I learned more efficiently and more securely when creating was part of the process.

Earlier in this book I quoted a remark: “The moment you teach anybody anything, you have robbed him of the experience of discovering it himself.” The creating way of learning described in the previous paragraph took some of the edge off this phenomenon. In *Child’s Work*, Nancy Wallace says of her daughter Vita, “She wanted to read but... in her own way. Often, her way meant making a picture out of every letter she wrote.” And I remember Devin at four and five making “letter pictures”. A was A-man, C was C-man, and E was a mother with three nipples filled with milk. He’d draw M’s atop other M’s and make what he called “super-M’s” – that is, M’s with many scallops. He’d also make “super-B’s” with many circles. John Holt might call it “messing around”. It’s also creativity.

And I sadly think of how some teachers in schools, including some home-schools, say things like “Don’t doodle on your paper” or “Pay attention to your work.” Indeed, teachers, in and out of schools, would do well to realize that “your work” *includes* things like doodling, “messing around”, and other forms of creativity.

So creativity and learning are very much connected. Each is often necessary for the other. Thus it’s not surprising that, being as big a topic as learning, creativity has needed this entire chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: NEW HEIGHTS IN NON-STRUCTURE

This chapter is not about chaos or anarchy. Nor is it a call for home-schoolers, un-schoolers, or anyone else to compete over who has been more unstructured. Rather, the keyword here is the word “heights”. As in emotional heights. As in “a high” Perhaps “ecstasy” is an alternate word for what I mean – which is how one can feel upon freeing, or partially freeing, oneself from the shackles of many of the authorities described in the previous two chapters.

Such heights are available on a minute by minute basis. To me being permitted to not-teach Devin “his” letters or “his” numbers, nor even social skills, and in general not having to worry, doubt, test, or even feel concerned, has been a height – or many heights. The feelings described and analyzed in this chapter are not necessarily positive. Sadness, fear, anguish, and ambivalence are also involved. Perhaps, in fact, instead of “heights”, I should use the word “depths”.

THE EMOTIONAL ASPECT OF LEARNING

I’m talking about the emotional aspect of both the learning *process* and the material learned. In *Growing Without Schooling* someone once wrote about how emotions can get into the learning of history; “learning about slavery *hurts*”. Kitty Anderson once told me that when she was reading “*Souder*” to her son Jimmy, then aged seven, he stopped her after two chapters, saying “it’s too sad”. Kitty stopped reading the book, aware that Jimmy had learned enough for awhile about conditions of blacks in the south.

I’m thinking, too, about even subtler emotions. Many parents have noticed several fears and/or misgivings that kids have as they discover their bodies, and how this sometimes even causes various mannerisms. Arin at approximately ten went through an “Adam’s apple stage”; he kept touching his Adam’s apple and asking questions about it. And when I mentioned this to his pediatrician, she laughingly told me, “Oh, that’s nothing! One of my patients was so upset by his Adam’s apple that he wouldn’t eat for weeks!” In an earlier chapter I mentioned Devin’s “eyeball stage”; enthralled and delighted as he seemed, by day, to be about eyeballs, I’d notice that, at night as he fell asleep, he would cover them with his hand (“eyelids,” as I said in a poem, “not being enough”). Another year Devin went through a burping stage (and his pediatrician said her son was going through the same thing!). I recall reading an article in *Parents Magazine* in which the author very respectfully, wisely, and slightly humorously acknowledged these kids’ mannerisms; she suggested that adults allow the kids these mannerisms, however unappealing or “gross” they might seem.

If not mannerisms, kids can have strong emotional reactions and disturbing thoughts about the material they learn, in and out of schools. These deep and subtle feelings will probably not be expressed, or not in words, by the kids themselves; kids don’t seem to be

articulate in that way; they don't always say the most serious things on their minds (at least not at the time they occur), as experts on child abuse and molestation know very well. In the previous chapter I talked about how, when I was a kid, I had serious thoughts and liked to write, and was aware of both these facts, but it wasn't 'til I was eleven that it occurred to me to put the two together and write *about* serious thoughts.

Besides starting a diary at age eleven, I also, in celebration of the above discovery, wrote my autobiography. Not for school, as our class had done the previous year, but an autobiography of my inner life. Here's a very short excerpt:

My mother read to me a lot; sometimes I also looked through the books on my own. One illustration showed a little girl in her room playing with her toys. "Where's her mommy?" I asked.

I'm sure that I stayed alone in my room without feeling any exaggerated separation anxiety. But still, somehow I was worried about the little girl in the book. In general during my childhood I worried about other children. I was sensitive to little things that I heard about other children, whom to me seemed to lead strange, perhaps unhappy, lives. For example, I felt sorry for my friend Maureen because her family had potatoes instead of rice with their fried chicken! And I'd look through what seemed to be pep-talk-y books designed to help children feel comfortable with different cultures. Such books made me feel suspicious (yup, even then!). I wondered why, if everything was so okay, have a whole book about a kids' daily life, a book in which nothing else happened, no plot? I used to ask my mother about, say, "Little Ingebord of Norway", "Does she play?" By that I think I meant "Is she okay? Is she a 'regular' child?"

In another book from my pre-school years there was a story about children drawing pictures. I recall the phrases, "they made flowers", "they made tables and chairs", and then "they made themselves". Of course the book meant they *drew* themselves, and possibly I realized that. But somehow the sentence, "they made themselves" is what stuck in my mind. And I remember feeling troubled. How could they make themselves? And later, when I became aware of that Escher print of two hands drawing each other, that pre-school book came to mind.

Reading can, as they, "open doors", but sometimes these doors leads back inside. This can be true of *all* learning. When Devin was four and his next-older brother Bret eleven, Bret was worried about the progress, or lack of, that Devin seemed to be making in learning to count. "Yesterday he counted to sixty all by himself but now he won't even count to ten." I tried to imagine and express what some of Devin's reservations might have been. In a poem, "The Vertical Number Line", I wrote: "He's afraid, today, of going too high... today he has vertigo, he keeps looking down and seeing one and it's tiny, far too tiny, maybe too tiny to get back to..."

One of the "new heights in non-structure" is that adults can be careful not to "go too high". Or too anything. I recall a kid who was afraid to watch Sesame Street because of the way "the numbers jump out at you." And I speculate about how a kid might feel,

however subconsciously, about learning “his” letters. From a poem: “The letter V, for example, the way it can slip so easily in, the way it can fold... and fall through the crack. and the first letter A, though it has that crossbeam so cannot fold, still it doesn’t have canisters, they don’t provide letters with cannisters so A can still bore... and drill... and someone can get hurt...” As Devin used to say, “Letters are shapes”, and shapes can be weird or scary. On the positive side: As kids do become emotionally ready to learn a particular thing, they often *bond* with what they learn and come to truly love it.

Emotions can get into etiquette, too. When I was little I was afraid to say “hello”. My parents had taught me “please”, “thank you”, “you’re welcome”, “hello”, and “good-bye”, and I easily learned and applied them all except for “hello”. Hello seemed too sudden, too much of a commitment, maybe like being born. And who was supposed to say “hello” first? And suppose the person was on the other side of the street? When you’re little, across the street is far.

My parents didn’t insist that I say “hello”, and my fear and aversion were only temporary. Soon I was saying “hello” as much as anybody else. Still, I’m reminded of the autistic child I once read about who would say “please don’t say hello”.

Kitty Anderson told me that, when she was a child, she was afraid of flashcards. Like Sesame Street, the numbers jump out at you. Perhaps there’s something about suddenness that frightens children; adults, too, might call it existential horror. I’m reminded of the toilets in the Girls’ Room when I was in kindergarten. They flushed automatically; I knew that, a few seconds after I stood up, they would “go off”. I tried to prepare myself for it but it always felt like a surprise, a shock, and out of my control. I dreaded going to the Girls’ Room.

Young kids sometimes like to talk about what their favorite numbers are. But what about *un*-favorite numbers? Adults, too, can have un-favorite numbers, numbers they’re superstitious about. There’s an actual word meaning “fear of the number 13”. I also think of the twelve chairs in the movie *Poltergeist*, and it seems to me that there’s something a little scary about the number 12.

Schools and home-schooling parents often act as though learning, along with reading, and experiencing (and being creative), is always wonderful and positive. The “height” or “depth” being described in this section is the permission to respect emotion, positive *or negative*. It can even be thought of as the permission to give *preference* to emotion, whatever that emotion is. Perhaps the ultimate in this “height” lies in the question: What do babies learn? And do they feel emotional about it?

I’d say yes, but even more definitely I’d say yes to the question, do parents feel emotional about the things their babies learn? At least I did. When Devin was a baby, which for me covered the period from just before birth until age seven or even beyond, I wrote a collection of poems titled “The Fuss and the Fury”. I meant “fury” in the sense that Anne Sexton uses the word, which to me is “passion”. And I meant “fuss” as the expression of anguish. In my poem “Three Weeks” I speculated on the answer to the question What do

babies learn? “That there is more than one face,” I began. “That there is more than one room / that you can’t see what you hug.” And in “Three Months”, “that the room is not symmetric / that objects do not smile back...” Is it bewilderment that babies feel? I don’t know for sure but perhaps it’s bewilderment that parents might feel.

What do babies *do* about what they learn? Perhaps a more pertinent question would be, how do the adults in babies’ lives handle it? How do they help babies through this learning process, through what’s often referred to as “the little tragedies of childhood”, through what I call “the fusses”? I would hope that the answer to that question is: They hold them. They love them. They might not understand or know what the babies are crying about but they know what to do about it.

They do not, I hope, talk about potential. Nor say it’s time to go on to the next lesson. Nor give them a test. When you learn something sad or scary or disturbing, be it obviously so like slavery, or subtly so like the way the letter V “can slip so easily in”, you lose something.

In society today we have grieving support groups for people who’ve had losses. In my poem, “The Bereaved Parent’s Child,” I treat learning as a form of loss. “When Devin is learning I want him to be handled compassionately, flexibly... I want him allowed to grieve as slowly and as incorrectly as he pleases, I want him permitted anger, depression and denial/isolation as he sees fit.” I also wanted him given comfort – holding and breastfeeding by me, holding and non-motherly love by others. Later in the poem, and not as literally, “I want him in a grieving support group, *this* support group / a group for survivors of V, A...”

Lately society has been relatively informed about grieving. It seems to understand that grieving takes time, that patterns of grieving vary, that it’s pointless to formulate rules about grieving, that “the five stages” don’t always proceed in any set order but are more like five *aspects* of grieving. Acceptance can make its first appearance on the first day, then peter out for another year. And isolation/denial can suddenly, five years down the road, make a surprise re-entrance. Thus society is coming to be gentle and flexible and wise with its grievers, and has found that this pays off. So why hasn’t society come to have that same attitude about *all* thought and feeling – and learning? Perhaps someday it will.

ON CHILDREN AS BABIES

Each time I had a new baby I was more relaxed than the previous time. I worried less about things like sleeping through the night, used fewer and fewer items of baby equipment, and breastfed more and more places – the ultimate was the bus. In general, I accepted fewer and fewer authorities. This meant that I was more in touch with myself as a mother, and with the baby as a baby. With each baby, and each child, I reached greater and greater heights and depths.

That also meant that I thought of the baby as being a baby for a longer period of time. Raising the age at which I thought of children as still being babies has been very helpful to me, and I assume to my children. It has helped me to not expect certain things from them, from sleeping through the night to alphabet to manners to playing with more advanced toys. (“That’s for babies.”) It has freed me from the burden of expectation, disciplining, and educating.

I don’t mean all that in any absolute or rigorous way. My babies crawled, walked, and talked at “regular” ages. They observed and loved to play with older children. I wasn’t over-protective. My babies – at actual baby ages, in fact – had sleepovers with both siblings and friends. They also learned part of the alphabet as toddlers. I was not trying to hold them back. I simply *didn’t force them forward*. And when I say I thought of children as being babies, I mean *emotionally*.

What is it, anyway, that we find so poignant about babies? “Their innocence,” some people say, or “their openness.” But I would add, “the fuss.” Their bewilderment (that, for example, “the room is not symmetric...”). Their vulnerability. The fact that they’re frightened, or might be frightened. And that sadness about them, and dignity in the face of that sadness. And that they seem to take nothing for granted, or different things for granted that adults take. In his poem “Baby’s Way”, the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore has said, “... though with the smile of his dear face he draws mother’s yearning heart to him, yet his little cries over tiny troubles weave the double bond of pity and love...” Perhaps the bottom line is that babies put us in touch with our deepest selves, and they do this in non-invasive ways, by just being who they are. Who, besides babies, doesn’t say things like “So? Why’re you looking so blue today?”)

It’s obvious that I love babies. I also respect and appreciate them. I appreciate them enough to not be in a hurry for them to stop being babies – that is, to grow prematurely into older children and adults. What, I wonder, is the point in having babies in the first place if our goal is to grow them up?

One of the things I appreciate about babies is their “little ways”. I love babies for *serious* reasons. It’s not only that I think they’re cute, whatever cute means – although I do. (To me, perhaps, cute *means* serious.) To some extent, I love babies for the same reason that I love math. They come from the same place within me.

Part of what gave me the courage and mindset to begin home-schooling was the baby- and toddler-hood of my youngest child Devin. I might describe it in this way: I began at the beginning, and in certain emotional respects I *stayed* at the beginning for awhile. In some metaphoric sense it took me years to get off that delivery table. In the same way that mothers (and in a different way from fathers) want to protect their sons from going off to war, I wanted to protect Devin from *all* the world’s cruelties, or as many of them as I could. These cruelties to me include over-stimulation, over-input, and authorities. I mentioned earlier that when he was three months old I wrote, “for everything learned / is something forgotten / especially if learned too soon.” I tried to raise Devin so that not very many things were learned too soon.

Perhaps this amounts to the same thing as thinking of children as babies. At any rate, thinking of children as babies (or being open to this) has served as a good approximation, or a good *model*, for my approach to parenting. In fact, sometimes I think of *adults* as babies. Perhaps, unless proven otherwise, everyone is a baby. That, for me, is a height, a depth, and a good way to relate to the people in the world. The poet Lucille Clifton said, in an interview, “Everyone’s afraid.” And I have written, “Everyone’s pleading.” It’s in that sense that everyone’s a baby.

As for relations among children themselves, when the school or neighborhood bully grunts, “What’re you, a baby?” a fantasy of mine is that the other kids be able to answer “yes”.

THE WORLD’S RESEARCH

In the introduction to the book “Unsolved Problems in Mathematics”, the author explains that he specifically didn’t include any progress previously made in solving any of the problems, because he didn’t want to run the risk of bias-ing the reader in any one direction. He intended readers to be able to work as completely as possible on their own, taking nothing for granted. The hope was that readers would discover whole new paths that would work, if not in actually solving the problem, then perhaps in making new progress, or perhaps in solving *other* problems. This kind of thing has happened ad infinitum in the history of what I call ‘the world’s research.’”

In short, too much knowing sometimes hinders the process of invention and discovery. Not-knowing is sometimes an advantage. There needs, I believe, to be at least a period, a stage, of not-knowing, in essentially every endeavor. It is in that spirit that I want to offer the world to my babies and children. It was in that spirit, for example, that for a long time I didn’t teach Devin addition. Perhaps, I thought, there’s some other process, something more fundamental, and more useful, perhaps something so obvious that everyone just takes it for granted. If we didn’t teach children addition, maybe some children would come up with something else.

That “height” might have also been partially selfish. For it’s true that, as a mathematician, I was interested in seeing what would happen if I didn’t tell Devin about addition. And then, of course, I could write about it – in this book or in a math paper (yes, giving him credit). Moreover, since my teens, I’ve been working on a math research problem, or a series of problems, concerning alternatives to addition (which would then imply alternatives to multiplication, meaning the iteration of addition). It would be a contribution to “the world’s research”.

Nonetheless, the unselfish part of my idea was for Devin. I didn’t want him to be indoctrinated. I wanted him to discover addition for himself, which he eventually did, gradually but sometimes in spurts. For example, one day, age four or five, walking through a parking lot, he spotted a station wagon. “Three seats in front,” he mused.

“Three in the middle and three in back. That’s.. uh... nine seats.” Dev also learned addition (and subtraction, and multiplication, and division, and powers) via a card game which I made up called “Extended Casino”. (If you’ve played regular, non-extended Casino, you might imagine what Extended Casino is; for example, you’re allowed to subtract, as well as multiply and divide, and you’re allowed to calculate with picture cards.)

There were other things that I didn’t teach Devin. I didn’t teach him about God, neither the existence nor non-existence of. I didn’t want to bombard him with explanations such as “People wonder who created things”, because I wanted him to be allowed to reach these – and other -- wonderings by himself. And I wanted him to do the wondering when he was naturally and emotionally ready, and not before. Why would a five-year-old necessarily notice that there are things to have been created, or that things need to have been created? Why, just yet, would he wonder these exact things. I wanted, perhaps partially selfishly, out of my own curiosity, to see what questions Dev would come up with on his own. (And in case *you’re* curious, a few things he came up with were “Why is air invisible?” and “Why do trees and ground always go together?”)

This, by the way, is the only mention of religion in this book. The only reservation, in this context, that I have about religion is, it can act as an authority. Religious parents usually want their kids to be religious, and with the same religion. Thus they indoctrinate. They nip in the bud the more interesting and less typical questions by rushing to convey to children, as young as possible, what they should wonder (“Who created the universe?”) and what the answer is (God). This to me is very similar to teaching reading too early, or math, or poetry, or manners. It precludes true questioning and originality, and sets back “the world research”. I believe that parents can be religious without this happening, but in actuality this does happen much of the time. It can also happen with atheism, though possibly not as much.

Another thing I didn’t do was show Devin maps. Why, I asked, would a five-year-old believe in North and South America when he barely believed in North and South *Philadelphia*?! Why would he know, truly know, that what houses and trees stand on is the same thing as what North and South American stand on? When I was three I envisioned the entire universe as divided in two: a big solid “ground” infinitely long, wide, and deep, and the sky, consisting of everything above that ground, including the air around my head and body. If someone had told me too soon about planets and maps, I probably wouldn’t have believed it. I think I would have felt alienated and not ready to learn that stuff.

Suppose humankind had discovered or been told, right away, or suppose it had always known, about addition, the number zero, the wheel, that the world isn’t flat, and that the earth revolves around the sun? Would the history of science be as interesting? Would discoveries made during the period when everyone thought the world was flat still have been made? Would the world’s research have been the same? Perhaps humankind needed, emotionally and intellectually, to have fears of falling off the earth? All those are simply questions.

For me “not teaching addition” has been, in the metaphoric sense, yet another height or depth. And when we do teach addition, or even “please” and “thank you”, too early, perhaps we’re nipping in the bud a good portion of the world’s research, or at least our children’s research.

A THEORY OF DISCIPLINE (AND OF EDUCATION)

When Devin was a toddler, one of the discoveries I made concerning the art of mothering might be called a “new height in humility”. And in fact, when I used to hang out with my toddlers in Rittenhouse Square, a young man (not a parent) once remarked to me, “You’re a good mother; I’ve noticed how you act with them. You’re *humble*.”

What I discovered with my last child was a difference in attitude. Rather than associating discipline with anger, or with punishment, I felt as though I were merely *telling him* something, informing him (as in “this is to inform you”). After all, he was non-verbal and new to the world; how, without being told, could he know?) I also treated discipline as the gentle *breaking of bad news*; for example, the news that he wasn’t allowed to go into the spice drawer. It was a *loss* (the way learning often involves some kind of loss, as described earlier), and I did whatever I could to help him through that loss.

When I had to “correct” him, I’d think, “True, as they say, we can’t have or do everything we want in life, but that’s not his fault.” Then I’d take him up and breastfeed. If he hadn’t been breast-feeding, I’d’ve held him. “I’m sorry,” I’d’ve crooned. “I’m so sorry you can’t have everything you want in life. I’m so sorry that, no sooner do you discover that the whole world is yours, you have to also discover that it isn’t. I’m ever so sorry that, even without wars, pollution, and disease, those little red berries would still be poisonous” – or that long smooth banister would still be dangerous, or the strawberry chapstick would still be Bret’s.

It worked. Devin learned with few tears. Moreover, the “theory” worked for learning letters and numbers, too. And for other facets of life. For example, that time, aged three, he wanted to watch Superboy at 1:00 in the afternoon. First I tried to explain. “The TV’s not like the VCR. The TV’s just at certain times. On TV Superboy’s only 6:30 on Saturdays. See, with TV there’s a place, a definite place, and a definite time, and they put on various shows at various times and... oh, it goes into the camera and through wires and stuff, and then into everybody’s TV’s.” But that didn’t work; Devin only looked increasingly upset.. But then he said, “I wanna EAT.” So I took him up and, as he was eating on me, I explained it again, using exactly the same words. And then he understood. He kept nodding, perfectly accepting of the facts, and I never had to explain about Superboy again.

And so through the years we've had, in our family, not only schooling at home but schooling on Mommy's lap, schooling in bed, schooling at the breakfast table, and so on. And neither education nor discipline has been that big, or bad, of a deal.

ANOTHER THEORY OF DISCIPLINE

At various ages and stages Devin would inform me that, for example, he didn't feel like helping me unload the groceries. Sometimes I'd try the following strategy. "When you're older, you won't say that; you'll help out because you'll realize that I need you to. You'll realize that I don't feel like unloading the groceries, either, especially all by myself while you stand there not helping."

I'd speak matter-of-factly, non-judgmentally, and non-bitterly. I was mostly trying to *define* for him, perhaps also trying to preserve everyone's dignity. Again, it was information I was offering, information that I figured would take him years to process. I did not mean to be telling him "You need to unload the bag now in *preparation* for when you're grown up." (Indeed, he had plenty of time to grow up and learn to unload the bags.) On the contrary, I meant to express, in a non-negative way, some form of confidence that when he grew up he *would* unload the bags, whatever he chose to do now. And I didn't expect him to respond by unloading one or two of the bags, but in fact that is often what happened.

I call this *using his future self as role model*. It often seemed to work, possibly because Devin would then decide to play grown up. Perhaps he'd think, "Let's try it *now* and not wait."

I have, true, wondered whether it's wise or advisable to make a kid so conscious that some day he'll be an adult. So I played that kind of thing by ear. I tried to be careful not to overdo it and I'd be aware that if I overdid it, it might not work. My gut feeling was that I did not overdo it. I can only hope I was right; so far (Devin's now 28) it seems I was.

To what extent, anyway, should adults make children aware that they will someday be adults? Some teachers and parents do it all the time. "How will you support yourself when you grow up?" "How will you be able to get up at 7:00 AM for work if you can't do it for school?" "How will you learn responsibility if you won't even unload the groceries?" And in school kids are given assignments to write about what they want to be when they grow up. Yes, adults are constantly throwing their kids' futures in their faces and sometimes, in my opinion, they give mis-information. Indeed, as alluded to in the first chapter (What's Wrong), when Marielle was six weeks old, I might have yelled at her, "How are you going to be able to get up for kindergarten in five years if you can't get up early now?!"

Children seem to already be aware, at least in their own ways, that they will someday grow up and need to do certain things. We don't have to keep reminding them, especially

in invasive ways. Devin, all on his own, used to stoically talk about “someday when I’m almost dead and I look different from the way I do now.” And I remember very clearly how I felt when I was a kid concerning the spectre of growing up. I felt the way adults feel about the spectre of dying. I often consciously as well as unconsciously thought, “I know I go around acting and feeling as though I’ll be this age forever, but I know in my head that I will some day be an adult.” I felt as though that would be just soooooo far into the future that I might as well not think about it. It seemed as far forward as my birth was far backward.

These very clear, and correct, ideas were incorporated into my entire childhood, starting from age six or thereabouts, and I don’t see anything wrong with treating with respect, in front of children, those children’s adulthoods. It might even, as with Devin and the grocery bags, help them process their growing – and help adults get help with the bags.

PERMISSION TO NOT-TEACH

Decades ago, when my then-husband and I were graduate students in Connecticut, his aunt, uncle, and three children lived twenty minutes away from us by car. I struck up a friendship with the little girl Barbara, aged seven. We were both interested in sewing and, at one point, I was going to teach her to make herself a dress. We went shopping for the material in downtown Hartford and then we went over her house to make the dress. But as soon as we got started, I suddenly realized that I had absolutely no desire to begin explaining. The prospect of standing over her while she slowly fumbled with pins, and of inevitably ripping out at least one seam, held even less attraction for me. I very quickly, almost immediately, simply got to work on that dress.

Barbara watched intently, asked questions when she had any, handed me various items, and cut along various lines which I had penciled in. But my involvement in making, and in finishing, the dress was comparable to my involvement in one of my math problems. And the bottom line was: I didn’t *feel like* teaching, or even interacting much. I felt like making the dress. I remember feeling guilty, and wondering whether I was being selfish, even though Barbara seemed quite happy and satisfied.

I was tempted to title this section “Permission to Make the Dress”. The saying goes, “Those who can do. Those who can’t teach.” Of course, that’s only a portion of the truth. But the fact was: Not only *could* I do, I was *burning* to. I was *not* burning to teach. Nor, very probably, was Barbara burning to *be* taught. Thinking back on that incident, I now feel that I did the right thing. Though at the time I felt guilty and uncertain, I gave myself permission to not-teach (and, again, Barbara permission to not be taught). In other words, I gave us both permission to do what we both really wanted.

This of course doesn’t mean that we have to *always* give ourselves permission to not-teach. Sometimes we want, or even need, to teach. But there are those other occasions, when doing rather than teaching is the ticket – or, put another way, when teaching *consists* of doing, and when being taught consists of watching (in particular, in watching

the interest and passion that's going into the doing). Perhaps, anyway, the best way to learn something is to observe someone who already knows how to do it, and who likes doing it. We can all give ourselves permission to go along with that flow.

PERMISSION TO BE BORED

When our family first started home-schooling –Bret was ten and Devin wasn't yet of school age – Bret quickly set about making a life for himself. He was interested in magic and so got himself several books on the subject, soon knowing enough so he could perform, often for money, at children's birthday parties. And he was interested in baseball cards, and began teaching a course on the subject at the Mount Airy Learning Tree, an adult school where I was teaching thrift-shopping and doing a poetry workshop. At one point he bought a baseball card for something like a dollar and sold it for \$250. He was also interested in things like comic books and video games. He had friends "left over" from school and did the regular things that ten-year-olds do.

And of course there were times when he was bored, or couldn't decide what he wanted to do. Or a friend he'd hoped to get together with wasn't available that day. But as many home-schoolers have attested to, boring is not such a terrible thing. It's a fact of life, sometimes serving as the necessary link between one activity and another. Also, boredom can serve as an opportunity to sit and do nothing.

People are often so accustomed to thinking of doing nothing as boring that, automatically, as soon as we find ourselves doing nothing we say "I'm bored". And children might automatically equate "there's nothin' to do" with "I'm bored", even though the two are quite different things.

Some parents and teachers seem to be *afraid* of kids' boredom, and of their doing nothing. It's as though it reflects on their teaching or parenting ability. It just doesn't look good to them; it looks as though we *always* do nothing, our entire lives. Also, what if the principal or a relative just happens to walk into the room at the one between-activities moment when the kids are doing nothing, or are bored? And sometimes it seems that kids have this "boredom" and "doing nothing" to *hold over* parents and teachers. Think what happens, or how a parent or teacher feels, when a kid announces, often in a kind of goading way, "I'm bored."

At any rate, Bret didn't escape boredom; if anything, he was granted *permission* to be bored, or to do nothing. And his father and I were granted permission to *let* him be bored.

PERMISSION TO JUST HANG OUT

When our family was home-schooling, a lot of our time was spent just hanging out. Not only alone in our separate rooms or out on the streets, but also all of us together up in the attic or on the big bed. "Mom, could we all just hang out in the attic?" We'd play Tetris,

or cards, or watch TV. And sometimes Bret would ask, “Mom, could we all... you know, all just hang out and do our separate things?”

Bret would draw. Dev would play with his action figures. I would write. This hanging out development seemed to me very significant. There are, I think, many things about it having to do with the *emotional* lives of kids and families.

(1) Many families might *say* things like “yes, we also try to take some time just to *be* together, to hang out.” But by “some time” they seem to mean less time than I do – less often and for shorter durations, sometimes totaling a scant hour a week. In many cases what they also seem to mean is *try* to take the time. Which implies, in particular, just-plain try. Which translates into work at it, perhaps feel anxious that they won’t be able to do it, won’t “succeed” because “some time to hang out” simply might not exist in their busy schedules. Everyone these days seems to be talking about “time to smell the flowers” but that phrase seems to mean different things to different people. In particular, it seems to mean different amounts of time (and maybe different kinds of “flowers”). And often “time to smell the flowers” becomes just another activity they have to try to squeeze in, just another doomed-to-failure no-win endeavor. (Perhaps, in fact, it turns into a nature walk!)

(2) This hanging out seems to me a very important demonstration of, or perhaps cause and/or result of, what is often termed “unconditional love”. Hanging out together says “We don’t love one another only for what we DO; we love one another for what we are, or THAT we are.” It also says “We don’t love one another for what we will BECOME, but for what we are right now.” Our family just-plain enjoyed hanging out together. So we wound up doing it a lot.

Whereas some families, because of school (or over-emphasis on home-schooling work), spend almost all of their family-together-time over homework, or home-schooling work, often arguing or disciplining and conveying the message of dissatisfaction. To me what this says to kids is “the most important thing is that you do well in school; maybe even that’s what determines how much I love or approve of you”. Parents don’t usually mean that, and will often tell their children the opposite (“It’s not your grades that are important: it’s who you are.”), but with the amount of sheer time spent over homework, the impression kids can’t help but get (and kids are pretty impressionable) is that schoolwork is what their parents want from them.

(3) This large-scale hanging out bring a very secure comfortable feeling. Even when Bret reached the ripe “old” ages of 16 and 17, he would take some time to specifically hang out with me (though not always with siblings). And perhaps this hanging out business is at the root of what I often tell people about our family’s style of home-schooling: “It’s more home than schooling.”

I would like to address any readers who might be thinking, “But people have to live up to responsibilities. We can’t spend our whole lives hanging out.” In the first place, who said anything about our whole lives? I was, true, talking about a lot of time, but I wasn’t

talking about “whole lives”. If a genius spends 23 hours a day hanging out and one hour in the throes of creation, isn’t this living up to responsibility? If a non-genius spends 16 hours a day sleeping and hanging out, and eight hours working, isn’t that, too, living up to responsibility? Second, as we hung out, we often learned and accomplished things. We wrote, we drew, we talked. The games we played helped develop math concepts for me. You probably know by now that I believe it’s okay to hang out and *not* learn or accomplish – or rather, not *apparently* learn or accomplish. I believe it’s okay to trust the hanging out per se.

In fact, it’s often while we’re hanging out, doing nothing or even being bored, that human beings get new ideas. I’ve often had the following experience: I’m sitting at my typewriter, working on a poem or math problem, and I’m having trouble with a certain line, paragraph, or calculation. After a while I realize I’m hungry, so hungry that, much as I might want to stay and continue struggling, I have no choice but to wrest myself away. Five minutes later, at the fridge or kitchen table, an idea – sometimes *the* idea -- comes to me. Maybe that’s why nature gave us bodily functions like hunger!

Third, in a sense *hanging out* is a responsibility. Indeed, perhaps human beings have the responsibility to decide how much hanging out is optimal, and then act accordingly.

Why are people so afraid of hanging out, anyway? Why does it freak us out so much? Why does it make us feel uncomfortable or nervous? I think of writers and other creative people, so taken up with the spectre of “dry spells”. And I think of teachers worrying about “using classroom time effectively”. In general I think of the human need to feel in control and to keep up appearances, and of how this can go overboard, even backfire.

Often we interrupt our days, and our work, by “sleeping on it”. And so, perhaps, might we also “hang out on it”.

PERMISSION TO WATCH JUNKY TV

Even junky movies or TV programs contain or plant life lessons – in particular, lessons about how people relate to one another. Even if the program comes to the “wrong” conclusion, or is done poorly, it can be turned into a small conversation, or “mere” joking around, about how “bad” the program was, and why. Indeed, the most tasteless meaningless program can often be used as a springboard for very important musings and conversations. (And I used to enter some of these conversations into our home-schooling log, to be seen by the school district: I usually put them under “Civics”.)

I believe, though, that parents and other adults need to be careful not to feel self-conscious as we use that kind of opportunity. and not spoil the fun – in other words, not get invasive, especially if the movie or TV program ended sadly. In our household, for instance, everyone would kid around about how “Mom” (meaning me) always drove everybody crazy while we were watching a funny movie, by saying things like “Why

doesn't she just TELL him?" That by itself was possibly educational in some way, both that and what I originally said.

Indeed, junky movies are part of our culture and history, including the history being made right now. They're a little like "junky" events such as slavery and the holocaust. Thus, as citizens, we all need to learn them – again, as history if nothing else. Think of some intellectuals interest if old movies (Turner Classics); even if they're junky, we often find things in and aspect of them that are *not* junky.

PERMISSION TO DO WHAT WE'D NORMALLY DO

Sometimes I'd enter into our home-schooling log things I'd simply do when the kids were around. The kids didn't have to be actively participating or even paying attention. For example, I'd put "Mom practicing the piano" under "Music", even though Dev himself didn't practice the piano (not 'til later). Nor did he particularly listen. But he did *hear* me, and he heard Bach and Beethoven. He heard my mistakes, how I corrected them, and how practicing improved my playing, though not always right away, and not always monotonically. He might have acted as though he couldn't care less, but he did hear. I'd also sing, and sometimes my friend Phyllis would come over to sing with me; we'd sing arias from Mozart operas; we were both first soprano but I *could* sing alto so I was relegated to alto. Devin would hear the joy that it gave us, the joy that Phyllis and I had singing together.

And Devin would know my life as a struggling writer. He knew how I sent out, published, got accepted and rejected, gave poetry readings. "Conversation about the lives of writers", I'd jot down in the log. I remember, in particular, how I held him and cried when, amidst the strain of waiting to hear the final word about a book manuscript being seriously considered by a mainstream publisher, a much smaller rejection came my way. "This is just soooooo important to me," I sobbed to then-nine-year-old Devin. "I've worked so long and so hard to be a real writer. I don't know if I could take it if it still didn't work out." And then, several weeks later, when I did get the final important acceptance {for *Dirty Details: The Days and Nights of a Well Spouse*, Temple University Press), Devin joined me and my friends on our celebration/thrift-ing expedition. Indeed, he did learn what the life of a writer is like, and to this day that's useful to him – as his sharing of his life as a struggling artist is to me.

More mundane adult work like cooking or washing floors can also be done in the presence of kids. We can talk with them as we work, or they can – parallel-ly – do whatever they're doing. And yes, it shows kids what the lives of adults are like – it also shows them how to help wash a floor.

ABOUT CHILDREN WHO "RESIST BEING TAUGHT" (AND MORE ABOUT PERMISSION TO NOT-TEACH)

Every once in a while a home-schooler would write in to Growing without Schooling or Home Education Magazine something to the effect that her daughter or son wasn't behaving like a "model home-schooler". Not, for example, doing "all those wonderful things" that so many other home-schooling parents would report, such as "devouring books", carrying out projects, initiating independent study, writing letters to politicians, corresponding with other home-schooling "penpals", and so on. "She seems to resist being taught," went one such letter. "For example, every time I try to teach her anything, she puts her hands over her ears and screams real loud."

This sounds very familiar to me. Devin even went through a stage when if, walking with him down the street, I inadvertently (certainly not trying to teach him anything) began humming a Mozart aria, he'd tell me "Don't sing." Or if I left an art book around, either because I hoped he'd look through it or because I was cluttering, he seemed to make a point of specifically not looking through that book. He even, as I'll go into later, didn't like to be read to, and I mean stories, not history texts. I also remember Marielle as a toddler; if anybody pointed to a letter of the alphabet and asked "What's that?", no matter what that letter was, she'd answer "Eeee.", the initial of her nickname Elle. She'd sport a coy mischievous look.

Later I'll try to imagine and describe the negative aspects of the experience of being taught. For here and now, the key to the "resisting being taught" problem seems to me to be the parents' or other adults' *expectations*. Attributes such as "eager to study", "trying new things", "inquisitiveness", "active-ness", and "creativity" don't have to be shared by all children, at all times. And activities such as reading, writing, traveling, farming, and even oaktag-pochkying don't have to appeal to everyone. In other words, sometimes adults expect too much. Or expect, period.

Indeed, the flip side to the very positive phenomenon of "everyday life being the teacher" and "learning all the time" can often, sadly, be that parents and other adults are continually self-conscious "all the time", throughout all of "everyday life". They're self-conscious of their children's learning, and of their own (however subtle) teaching.

Even in conventional schools many teachers and principals know that there are different kinds of children, that any one child goes through many changes, and that schools often don't allow for these differences and changes. Home-schooling teachers, and parents and adults in general, can take advantage of the flexibility in their lives, which allows them to incorporate differences and changes, and thereby to partake of this "height in non-structure". When children "resist being taught", adults don't have to teach.

Schools and home-schooling parents alike seem to be fond of saying that children, or a particular child, "loves to learn". Why is that? What would be so terrible if a child did *not* "love to learn". Also, even if children do "love to learn", one might still ask, "Do they love to be taught?"

I'd like to brainstorm about just what being taught – even by parents, even in "gentle", low-key ways – entails, and what it feels like. For our purposes here we'll concentrate on

the more negative aspects, even while admitting that there are often positive aspects as well. Being taught often means that someone other than you decided what you should or need to know, that she knows it better than you, and that she will teach it to you. So being taught entails a loss of control, and a loss of dignity – especially since, once a “lesson” has begun, the learner might feel as though he’s committed to it for a certain length of time. And to a child, just about any length of time is long.

And being taught entails a kind of admission. What you’re admitting is that you don’t know. This, again, can be a positive thing, but a child possibly doesn’t, nor even should, know that she doesn’t know; that’s something that comes with maturity, usually adulthood, sometimes later adulthood. So being taught can feel hypocritical, purposeless, and degrading.

Moreover, a child also usually senses an adult’s agenda. A child might sense, for example, when the adult isn’t truly enthusiastic about the subject being taught. Or she might sense when the adult is teaching out of worry, nervousness, guilt feelings, pressure, or embarrassment – that is, when the adult is teaching and acting because of some authority (such as a friend asking “Has she learned division yet?”)

Perhaps much of the time being taught feels too passive. Even when it involves “active participation”, or what they call “hands on”, the decision to be taught was still not yours. “Teacher as entertainer” is a phrase I recall reading in a pamphlet about alternative education, and children might not choose to be entertained. (Or they might prefer to choose their form of entertainment themselves – maybe TV or comic books, which kids have the power to turn off or on.)

Children are probably very aware that a person who is teaching them something already knows that thing. Why, a kid might wonder, is she spending time on it when she already knows it? There might be something unnatural about the act of teaching, too unnatural for a kid. It might make the kid feel like a burden of some sort. Perhaps the feeling of it is similar to that of Pippi Longstocking who, when asked by a teacher how much is 9 times 16, replied, “If you already know, why are you asking me?” Teaching often has its elements of degradation, insult, and again, unnatural-ness for both parties. At support group meetings, it’s often emphasized that members should not give unsolicited advice; this, so they say, doesn’t feel supportive. Why, then, does society seem to think it’s okay and perfectly “supportive” for teachers to teach without being asked? At very best, this is a delicate matter, and I’m not at all surprised when children “resist being taught”.

Then, too, the act of being taught – and of *calling* it being taught – implies the question, have you learned? There doesn’t have to be a test or grade; that question is still there along with a kind of testing, and thereby a self-consciousness. It’s the opposite of trust, even in oneself. Calling learning “learning” sometimes spoils it, just as calling creativity “creativity” has its risks, at least in this society.

I’d also like to pick apart the whole idea of learning. To me it seems, in our society, a loaded word. The equation seems to be: learning is good, not-learning is bad. Judgment is

automatically implied. Why is everyone so anxious for children to learn, or to “love to learn?” Devin once said “I want to know cursive but I don’t want to *learn* it.”

When I told people that five-year-old Devin was home-schooling they would often turn to him and ask, “and what sort of things are you learning?” Devin would shrug, or reply “nothing”. I had not yet told him about learning. I hadn’t made him self-conscious about it. I myself wasn’t particularly self-conscious about it. Devin didn’t yet know he was supposed to know what he was learning, nor that learning was something people ask or tell other people about, nor that people thought learning was any big deal.

What *is* the big deal? Why is the “joy” and the importance of learning so exaggerated, or exaggerated at the wrong times? Why do so many people get worked up over it? What’s wrong with just-plain knowing? Or just-plain being told? Why do people have to keep learning new things all the time? What’s wrong with the old things? Why can’t we rest after learning, at least for a little while, and just relax and enjoy, or not enjoy, that new knowledge?

It’s just this permission that I’ve given myself – to ask those questions – and the permission I gave my children to not learn – that represents this section’s “height”. I don’t mean that all these considerations imply that teaching and learning should never happen. I do mean that teachers, and sometimes learners, need to be aware of these and other considerations, and to be sensitive to them. And I’m wondering whether perhaps *intentionally* teaching and *intentionally* learning should, taken over the whole of one’s life, be the exception rather than the rule.

PERMISSION TO NOT-READ TO YOUR CHILDREN

In my life with Devin, there was an interesting development, which I have already briefly mentioned. For a period of several years until he was eight or nine, he didn’t want to be read to. Not history texts, not the Ramona series, not anything. During that period I thought that perhaps this was because he didn’t, on an emotional level, *need* to be read to. In many families “reading together time” is the *only* time that children get held and cuddled, or even get to be with their parents at all, or get to sit still and do nothing. Devin got plenty of all that without being read to. I like to think that Devin didn’t need reading time and that was part of the reason for his lack of interest in being read to. It does seem significant that he began asking to be read to within a year of weaning himself, and that during that year he liked to spend an hour or so a day singing lullabies with me, perhaps using “lullaby time” as a kind of transition between nursing and reading.

Perhaps all this is a metaphor for something larger; perhaps we can substitute, in the previous section, “being taught” for “being read to”. Perhaps children who get held and paid attention to without being taught don’t emotionally crave being taught, in or out of school. Perhaps that’s another reason why some children aren’t the slightest bit interested in “lessons”, however informal, and perhaps that’s why many “disadvantaged children” do crave formal schooling and discipline. To them, perhaps, schooling and discipline

mean attention, approval, admiration (or the promise of) or even love. And perhaps these emotional items are what these children really crave, rather than being taught or – getting back on the subject – being read to.

I'd like to talk about what being read to might feel like to a kid. When a parent reads to a child, her voice is usually different from her regular voice, the voice her child is used to. It might, for example, be more distant, more monotone, or less monotone. It might sound as though she weren't speaking to him, as though perhaps she were speaking to someone else, perhaps herself or some imagined audience. Or she might be speaking in the voice of one of the characters in the story or book (perhaps the voice of an *evil* character), in particular if the story is written in the first person. Or her voice might sound moralistic. Or it might convey a mood which the child isn't feeling at the moment. This could be frightening, alienating, or invasive. Indeed, to a child "reading together" might not *feel* together.

Diverging slightly, *singing* to a kid might also, during certain ages and stages, depending, feel frightening and alienating, for similar reasons. I think of Devin telling me "Don't sing". And of the autistic child saying "please don't say hello." Just as a parent's reading voice might be strangely different from her speaking voice, so might be her singing voice. A singing voice might, for example, sound ghostly, or as though it's coming from another direction. In a poem I once asked the question, "When I sing Bitties a lullaby / is it he I'm caressing / or the song?" When my parents sang me Mozart, I often felt as though it was the song. And so, when a parent reads to a child, especially a young child, it might feel to that child at that moment that it's the book the parent loves, rather than him.

Taking all this one step further, perhaps a *teaching* voice is different in some frightening or alienating way from a regular speaking voice. And perhaps a child being taught by a parent might wonder, however crazily or subconsciously, Who or what does she love more, me or this book?" Perhaps the child could also feel this while being taught by *any* teacher. The "teacher / child / subject-matter triangle" is indeed something to be taken into account.

As Devin eventually discovered, reading together can be a wonderful thing. But it's still not the only thing. There are other ways to be together. Parents and other adults don't always have to hop on the "read to your child" bandwagon or the "sing to your child" bandwagon or any other bandwagon. For me it has been a "height in non-structure" to put feelings first.

FREEDOM TO LOVE OUR CHILDREN AND FLAUNT IT

When Devin was three months old I began, as many mothers do, to mourn the passing of the under-three-months stage. I also mourned the changes in myself, my own body, the loss of what I called 'the post-partum stage.' One night I dreamt that, with Devin tucked under my arm, I sneaked back into the maternity ward of the hospital where he had been

born. I found an empty room and crawled the two of us into bed; a nurse came in and treated us as though Devin had just been born, checking my belly, taking my temperature, bringing me meals, admiring Devin. In general, Devin's and my love for each other was understood, appreciated, and celebrated in the same way as the short-lived period immediately after his birth.

A week after that dream I had a cold, and I used that as an excuse to do what I called "play hospital". I climbed into bed with Devin, spent the entire day there, brought diapers, change of clothing, and lunch into the bed with us. I pretended that we were still in the hospital and that things were as in the dream described above.

In some metaphoric way I believe that many mothers need to "play hospital" more than they do, or are encouraged to do. Moreover, this could be one of the main reasons for "conspicuous concern", for the moving away from "freedom and simplicity", and for all that emphasis and fixation on curriculum, adult-organized children's activities, tangible achievement, and the general bowing to authorities. This is a sweeping statement, and not yet justified, so let me go on and try to explain:

Many mothers are full of genuine and healthy motherlove, motherpride, and other motherfeelings which we sort of don't know what to *do* with. So we channel it into the various manias promoted by the various authorities. To make that seem less far-fetched, I'd like to further describe these very intense motherfeelings, at least as I've felt them. Sometimes I feel as though mothers, or at least some mothers, are brimming over with hormones left over from pregnancy, birth, lactation, or adoption. At any rate, we're brimming over with excitement, or with *something*. Perhaps also with bewilderment. After giving birth I always felt slightly frustrated because it seemed that, despite childbirth classes and "the park bench", there was not enough opportunity to talk about these feelings. Each friend or acquaintance would listen, either dutifully or fascinated-ly, but only *once*, to my accounts of the labors and deliveries, how much the baby weighed, and so on. I would always welcome any opportunity to meet some new mother with whom I could, once again, share such stories.

Do and can mothers *ever* get enough? I don't know. But this kind of thing has continued over the years. It gets less intense, and replaced by other intense things, and it also varies from mother to mother. But I believe it's there, even if suppressed. Or we *want* it to be there. Or it's still there because we never got it out of our systems. I often feel as though mothers are forever doomed to this kind of bewilderment and frustration. In a sense, we still have the post-partum blues, or the post-partum *frustration*. I call it "the post-partum fetish". We made/adopted these beautiful babies and then the powers that be grew them up. As the poet Sharon Olds says in her poem "Young Mothers II", "they have torn her soul out of her body and said / the child is the other one."

Yes, they have. And they keep doing it. "They" don't allow our bodies to keep even a tiny piece of our "souls". Meaning, we don't get the opportunities to express or acknowledge what we're feeling, or what we once felt. So we channel it into the accepted "opportunities" that society does allow and provide. Thus, instead of our very mother-

ness, we flaunt “reading readiness”, gymnastic and musical abilities, test scores, social adaptation, well-adjustment, maturity, independence, creativity, and so on. These are the things which society has taught and permitted us to feel comfortable flaunting. And our natural, genuine, and good motherfeelings get lost in that shuffle, and paradoxically channeled into things that work *against* these feelings. In fact, society and its authorities *play into* these motherfeelings.

Not allowing that to happen has been one of my “new heights”. It society doesn’t want to play-hospital with me, if the real hospital won’t let Devin and me back in for the reunion and celebration that I dreamt about, then I can give myself permission to, actually or metaphorically, crawl into bed for a little while and play-hospital. Three months after Devin was born, Peggy O’Mara, editor of MOTHERING magazine (in which a lot of my writing has appeared), wrote to me, “Stay secluded with Devin for awhile.” That was the closest to societal permission I got to flaunt my love for my children.

CONSPICUOUS CONCERN REVISITED

As described in other chapters, conspicuous concern is often just plain unnecessary and inconvenient. It’s usually associated with authority, and feeds on and is fed by worry, guilt, embarrassment, and so forth. Now I’d like to talk about some of its even more subtle impacts. What message does it give kids? How do they feel when parents and other adults seem “concerned” about them, or when they actually say “I’m concerned about you.”

My mother said things like “I’m concerned about your social life.” “I’m concerned that you looked hurt when that girl nudged you.” “I’m not concerned about that D in the history test; what I’m concerned about is that you were afraid to tell me about it.” All this, at least so I remember, was said in the same tone as though she had said “I’m concerned about your behavior.” She didn’t mean to blame the victim, but it sure felt like that to me. “Uh-oh,” I’d think.

Concern smacks of advice. Perhaps more advice than we asked for or are ready for. I think of those situation comedies in which, for some reason one person needs to get another person out of the way in a hurry. “Gee, you look pale,” she begins. A frown appears on her face. “And you have bags under your eyes. And your head is drooping. I’m getting concerned about you. I think you should go home right this minute and crawl into bed...” Indeed, concern can be manipulative.

When children show up at school, or ballet class, and they see all the secretaries and administrators walking around on clicking high heels, or sitting important-ly behind desks and counters, what message does that convey? All this concern. About them. How does it feel to be the object of so much concern?

When I was a kid I was called out of class to take various psychological tests because, my mother explained, “they’re concerned that you might be capable of doing more than you

are doing.” I was *already* getting all A’s. I was already playing the piano in assembly. I was already writing my little stories for extra credit (and to me, “extra credit” didn’t mean “better grades”; it meant work that I did just because I wanted to.) “Huh?” I probably wondered. “Aren’t I doing enough already? What aren’t I doing enough of?” And also, why wasn’t it considered *good* news that I might be capable of doing even more than what I was already doing? Think, after all, what they might have to look forward to in the future? (And come to think of it, I *am* doing more than I was back then, with or without their concern.)

In general, all this concern might convey dissatisfaction. In actuality, it could come from dissatisfaction with the adults’ own lives. But kids could read it as dissatisfaction with *them*. “Aren’t I smart enough? Aren’t I artistic enough? Social enough? Happy enough? Just plain enough?” As adults know from relations with one another, being the object of concern can feel like a burden. It can make us nervous when people are overly concerned about us. We wonder what we’re supposed to do about it.

Yes, concern seems dangerously close to worry, and many adults know how threatening worry can feel to a child. Indeed, adult worry can make a child feel unsafe and unloved. How often, I wonder, does concern feel like the absence of love, and trust?

Doctors often use the word “concern”. “I’m concerned about the bleeding.” “I’m concerned about this spot here.” Sometimes they even shrug, almost whine, “I don’t know what WE’RE going to do.” Concern puts some kind of responsibility on us. It’s almost as though what happened *to* us (or our bodies) is tantamount to what happened *by* us. That is, concern about what we *get* can feel like concern about what we *do*. Thus the concern, justified or not, that adults pour over children can feel like blame or criticism. Even if a parent says “I’m concerned about your teacher”, it can feel like “I’m concerned about you.” My friend Relli Katz used to say, “‘concern’ is a social worker word.”

When the dentist says “I’m not the slightest bit concerned about that little cavity,” we feel great. If my mother had said, “I’m not the slightest bit concerned about that D in the history test” or “about that hurt look on your face”, that would have felt even greater. Especially if she meant it as much as the dentist does.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE POLITICS OF ALL THIS: CAN THESE IDEAS SAVE THE WORLD?

The purpose of this chapter is to begin to show how the ideas discussed throughout this book connect with other societal issues. Much has been said in earlier chapters to lead up to this; I hope this final chapter will clinch things even more.

At this point, I'd like to confess and warn readers (with whom by now I feel comfortable and well acquainted; I hope you do too) that the subjects in which I'm probably least proficient in are history, politics, and current events. Just as some people have, for example, math anxiety, so I seem to have "social studies anxiety". But I also seem to be pretty good at understanding certain issues – in a radical sort of way!

Many believe that the issues discussed here are not important. ("How can you think so much about 'what's wrong' with the way society views children and people, when there's so much wrong with the way society views blacks / women / gays, and so on?") But my contention is that the issues discussed here *tie in* with the more "popular" issues. In fact, perhaps the "more important" societal problems could possibly be *caused*, at least in part, by the kinds of problems discussed here in this book.

Another possibility is that the more "fashionable" modern issues wind up acting as *authorities*. For example, when someone says "How can you think so much about 'what's wrong' with the way society views children and people when there are so many more important things that are 'wrong'?), that makes people *afraid* to tackle anything other than these more fashionable and popular issues., These authorities are probably "better" than the authorities mentioned so far. Still, like other authorities, they divert both people and movements away from what is truly needed, which is changing society in its entirety.

In these last pages I will try to elaborate on the ideas touched upon in the previous paragraph. The "popular" and also truly important issues seem to me to fall into five broad categories: (1) minority issues, (2) economic issues, (3) domestic abuse issues, (4) gender issues, and (5) ecology issues. These five are of course interrelated and can be further subdivided. As a first approximation, however, and for purposes of clarity, this way of sectioning out the chapter will do nicely.

And by the way, concerning the question "can these ideas save the world?", my answer, for now, is "maybe, maybe not, but they could be a big step."

MINORITY ISSUES

First I'd like to define minority. To me it means "other". Outside. Unexpected. Not the general picture which, nothing else being specified, society gets of the person being talked about. For example, if I say "doctor", many people immediately perceive a white

straight male doctor without a physical disability. So people who are non-white, non-straight, non-male, and who do have disabilities are all examples of minorities.

So minority doesn't necessarily mean non-majority. Also, there are more subtle, and less recognized, minorities, such as home-schoolers, at-home caregivers, grieving or emotionally stressed people, or even women interested in math. Some minorities are less persecuted than others, or have been persecuted for shorter time periods, or their persecutions more escapable. And for some, the onset of the minority status occurs later in life. All of these factors can be very important, to them and to society as a whole.

For now, I'd like to talk about what, for want of a better term, I call "minority home-schoolers". By that I mean home-schoolers who are also minorities in other senses. They're faced with double trouble. The home-schooling laws, which are different in the various states, are intimidating to home-schoolers in general. For example, many of these laws involve record-keeping so home-schoolers might think they have to keep a "gradebook" the way school teachers do, or provide proof of every "educational" happening in their households. In other sections of this book I've described how I wrote things like "conversation about minorities" in our home-schooling log, and how that was fine with the school district. But many, perhaps most, home-schooling parents operate under misconceptions; some have more access than others to information countering these misconceptions. And minority home-schoolers are often among the "others".

As a second example, they might also have less access to home-schooling "evaluators". In Pennsylvania "the law" requires that, at the end of every year, the family get an evaluator, which has to be either a certified teacher or a psychologist, to "evaluate" each home-schooling child. In actuality, the Pennsylvania law does *not* require actual *evaluation*, but only *approval*, meaning a signed statement that "education is taking place". Even so, it's not easy to find evaluators/approvers. In particular, it's not easy to find "qualified" evaluators who understand certain home-schooling credos, or a particular family's style of home-schooling. Home-schooling organizations publish lists of "friendly evaluators", but you have to *know* about those lists. And most home-schoolers don't. In particular, most *minority* home-schoolers don't. So they get all-nervous, and less inclined to home-school.

As a third example, in many states parents, or "home-schooling supervisors", are required to have a high school diploma "or the equivalent". It's not stated, what "the equivalent" might mean, but again, home-schoolers who are poor or otherwise disadvantaged are less likely to either have a high school diploma or know what's meant by "the equivalent".

Whatever "the law", many working class parents have either never heard of home-schooling, or they might feel that it's "not for them". If they do consider it or actually take it on, they often opt for the more structured varieties, the styles most reminiscent of and imitative of schools. There are, of course, exceptions. As Grace Llewellyn, author of *The Teenage Liberation handbook* and editor of *Freedom Challenge*, an anthology of essays by black home-schoolers, says, "several African American home-schoolers have told me that black people are much more likely than whites to emphasize academics and

maintain a structured curriculum. And their observations were indeed born out by my contact with some of the essayists and potential essayists for this book. IF more black home-schoolers (than white) follow a structured curriculum, it's *not* necessarily because they value conformity or because they don't trust their children to acquire the skills they need to become happy, well-educated adults. Rather, for obvious reasons, they don't trust *society* to recognize their kids' intelligence without benefit of, at least, a list of textbooks completed or classes taken through an academic summer program. I fervently hope *society* will get a lot saner and make it easier for black home-schoolers to feel that it's safe for them to give their kids more freedom."

In other words, minority home-schoolers are afraid, more afraid in general than non-minority home-schoolers. They walk a thinner tightrope. Moreover, oppressed people very often internalize society's attitudes, at least for a while. Also, consider the phenomenon whereby an oppressed person needs, and sometimes tends, to find someone else to oppress. This eases the feeling of powerlessness, and gives them at least the *feeling* of control. Thus, for example, poor men sometimes beat their wives (Non-poor men do too, but that's another phenomenon.), and wives in turn beat the children. As to the matter under discussion here, that phenomenon takes a more subtle form – namely, the talk of discipline so common among minority home-schoolers (and minority parents in general). "I MAKE SURE they do what I say." "And believe me, they LISTEN to me." Humor does sometimes get into it, but there's still often that serious power trip. I can't help but think of the sad trade-off. These ways of satisfying that need to feel in control means that children's and family's lives are more rigid, less joyful and loving. And then, often, when the children grow up and have their own children, they'll feel the same need (self-perpetrating) to control and oppress their own children.

So minority status can tip the balance in making various decisions regarding how to relate to one's children (whether home-schooling or not). The kind of person who, for whatever reasons (usually understandable), tends to feel defensive and worried and who needs the appearance of control is more likely to act on these tendencies if she's a member of a minority group. As a white non-poor but former well-spouse caregiving home-schooling parent, who was at first afraid to begin home-schooling --- it was another way it which our family would be different -- I think I understand at least some of the reasons why a black home-schooler (or black conventional schooler) might tend to be more structured and more reverent toward authority. Perhaps part of the picture is expressed by a black father who, at one time, contacted our home-schooling support group by phone. He'd heard of us, and of home-schooling itself, for the first time the previous day via the internet, and he was extremely interested. "You see," he explained, rather carefully, "I'm Afro-American and I know that my son's going to have to be extremely smart to succeed in life, to get into college and land a good job. Home-schooling represents to me an OPPORTUNITY. The school my son goes to now doesn't teach enough and doesn't discipline enough. It's very exciting to me that I can teach him myself at home the way I think it should be done."

He came to our next meeting and re-iterated his message to us all. Other black and some Hispanic members of the group later agreed with me that he was "milking that Afro-

American thing a bit much”, but we could also see where he was coming from. “Fear” and “worry” are two words that keep coming to my mind. To some extent everyone, minority or not, home-schooling or not, feels fear and worry about children’s futures. It’s possibly inherent to the human condition, or at least for humans in our society. The father at our meeting was a successful academic, author of articles and books, producer of TV programs. His expectations for his son must have been great and these inherent fears, whatever form they took in him, must have been quite intense. I recognized and felt his fear as he talked, for example, about “getting A’s and earning them,” “real A’s as opposed to easy A’s,” and “creating an environment for learning without distraction” (and for him “distraction” possibly included gum-chewing and doodling, which in my view are not distractions at all; on the contrary, they’re actually helpful for concentrating).

I found it interesting that, although this guy was the very opposite of hostile, he seldom smiled. The other people at the meeting, from unstructured home-schoolers to the more structured “school at home” home-schoolers, would smile and laugh as we talked about our kids; anyone present could have immediately seen that we loved and were happy to be with them, and that we were happy as parents. But this guy kept a straight face most of the time; he seemed very anxious to get to something and, thinking back, I believe that something was not so much to *gain* information as to *give* information. He seemed to have an agenda.

This guy’s home-schooling credo, at least for now, was obviously very different from mine, and somewhat different from those of the others at that meeting (as they later expressed). He talked about enforcing manners (He himself was wearing a suit and tie!) and about his own strict upbringing. “And I LOVED my parents,” he added, at which point I couldn’t help but think, “But did you feel that THEY loved YOU? Did you grow up feeling secure in that love?”

Certainly, then, this father would not subscribe to much of the stuff I’ve talked about in this book. He could not understand, not very quickly, how, for example, there can possibly be too much input, too much learning, too much doing. “Conspicuous concern” might have felt to him like an opportunity (and might get mixed up with true concern). “The potential trap” would feel to him the very opposite of a trap. He wouldn’t feel averse to authority, in either subtle or blatant forms. Nor would he opt for creativity over, say, “academics”, let alone be sensitive to the authority of the creativity mania described earlier in this book. Resisting these authorities would not for him take priority. He was caught up in authority on the *first* level, the authority of the prospects of earning a successful living, for both himself and his son.

Very possibly he was the epitome of the “white black” or “imitation white”, the black person who aspires to white standards, who goes after success in white terms, for himself and for his children. (And this reminds me of home-schoolers, frequently discussed in this book, who aspire to school-like standards.) Yes, there are blacks who are “imitation whites”, women who are “imitation men”, closeted gays, and so on. This guy seemed that phenomenon personified.

This “imitation non-minority” mindset seems to be an early stage in the revolt of many oppressed groups, and different individuals within these groups go through it at different paces – some ahead of, some behind, the group as a whole. The evolution of an oppressed group can be thought of as a learning process, and I’m about to describe several stages in this revolt of oppressed groups.

The first stage is what I’ve been describing; it’s the stage our friend was in, the “imitation stage”. If we haven’t already, let’s see how it pertains to the educational and parenting issues at hand. It’s a kind of nuts and bolts stage. A demanding of specific rights rather than liberation in general for all people. The rights on which a movement or revolution at first focuses are usually on the order of equal pay, equal access, right to be in the military, right for gay people to marry, and so on –in short, the same rights that non-oppressed people have, no less and no more. And these “rights” might be viewed as oppressions in themselves, or as authorities. Perhaps you’ve heard the saying, “everyone has the right to be equally oppressed”. And I hope it’s clear that that right is not what this book is asking for.

It’s hard to fight the battle on all fronts, especially all at the same time. And it’s understandable that many oppressed people go through this first stage, this fighting for specific “rights” before considering that these “rights” might indeed be “wrongs”. Joining the military seems a good example of that and perhaps, for some, it figures instrumentally towards moving into the second stage in the evolution of the rebellion of an oppressed people – namely, the stage of rejecting some or all of the “rights”. This brings us to the connection, or one of the connections, between all this and alternative education ideas: JUST AS BEING IN THE MILITARY IS A “RIGHT” WHICH MANY SECOND-STAGE REVOLTING OPPRESSED PEOPLE MIGHT REJECT, SO PERHAPS IS THE “RIGHT” TO “A GOOD EDUCATION” OR, MORE COMPLETELY, THE “RIGHT” TO THE MANY AUTHORITIES DISCUSSED IN THIS BOOK.

The previous chapters have, I hope, raised serious doubts as to whether the idea of school is a good one, whether there’s such a thing as a “good school”, or even a “good education”. Perhaps a “good education” is another form of authority, even another instrument of oppression. Is a “good education” and “success in business” what the father at our meeting really wants for his son, or are these symbolic of something else? As said in Chapter Two, we all have to keep analyzing, and members of minority groups have the additional challenge of bringing that minority experience into the analysis. It’s another variable, to say the least.

I’d like to say more about this second stage of rebellion. This isn’t quite the final, nor the most mature, stage. It’s a reversal of the first stage, another side of that coin; instead of emulating the lives (and the “rights”) of people outside the minority group, the group wants no part of it. Instead it begins to emphasize and raise consciousness about its own culture, which is fine except that it’s often to the point of a kind of mysticism and exclusion (a point where the *culture* becomes a kind of authority), a point whereby people both within and outside the group are afraid to talk about anything *except* that

culture, for fear of being criticized or accused of betraying “the Cause”. AND ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION ALONG WITH ALTERNATIVE PARENTING AND ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF RELATING TO CHILDREN IS SOMETHING OUTSIDE THE CULTURE.

In this second stage of rebellion, many members of minority groups often find themselves in a dilemma: they’ve rejected the idea of, for example, a “good education” in the schools (as a wrong disguised as a “right”), but alternative education doesn’t interest them either. It’s not a specific part of their culture so it’s not where they want to place their energies. And so black parents might talk about how home-schooling is “a white movement”, or how non-structured home-schooling is “irrelevant to black families”.

Unfortunately, the situation is complicated by the fact that there *is* a lot of truth in that talk. There *are* phenomena which cause minority parents to understandably feel alienated from the alternative schooling movement. I said earlier that, no other information being given, people tend to read “doctor” as “white male straight doctor”, lawyer as “white male straight lawyer”, stamp collector as “what male straight stamp collection,” and so on. Thus if someone says “home-schooling child,” people often read “white male straight home-schooling child.”

Indeed, the public image of a “typical” home-schooler is a white home-schooler. Thus, for example, newspaper or magazine articles about home-schooling usually feature families who are white, in lifestyle if not in color. In a similar vein, if someone says “black female child”, people read “black female NON-home-schooling child.”

Moreover, black people know that many white home-schoolers have decided to home-school specifically in order to avoid school integration, or otherwise mixing with “the riffraff”. More subtly, many home-schoolers home-school because they worry about schools being “unsafe”. Indeed, there’s a thin line between “getting away from the riffraff” and worrying about schools being “unsafe”. I believe that non-minority parents who talk about the latter are sometimes masking the former; it can, again, be very subtle. There’s no question in my mind that there’s a large racist and classist component to the home-schooling and alternative schooling movement.

And it’s not hard to see why second-stage-rebelling minority parents are wary of home-schooling and would rather place their energies and their trust in their group’s culture. But, for some, eventually this stage, in both the group as a whole and in individuals within the group, can give way to a third stage, a stage of realization that one’s culture might include *negative* stuff too, and that being human might be as important as being a member of a particular group (although in my view each separate culture is related to the totality of humanity, and gives *clues* as to the various facets of the human condition.) Thus a balance can be reached within each individual and within the group as a whole between the minority culture and the human culture.

Thus might a minority parent be ready to consider alternative parenting and alternative schooling. Thus might she realize that the fact of racism and other ism’s and authorities

within the home-schooling movement, as well as pure bigotry, does not prove that alternative education *itself* must run counter to the needs and lives of minorities – any more than the historic use of schools as instruments of the state to keep oppressed people down proves, in and of itself, that schools are un-savable.

Indeed, a minority home-schooler can home-school *according to* its own beliefs and culture; she can *incorporate* this culture into the mechanism of home-schooling. Perhaps most important, she can consider alternative schooling as a means to “beat the system”, she can view it as liberating and empowering. Like the black father who came to our home-schooling support group meeting, we can consider alternative parenting “an opportunity” to do things “the way I think they should be done” (although analyzing more closely than he the way “I think they should be done”). And she can consider herself a part of, for example, the *black* home-schooling community, even if she doesn’t yet feel comfortable with the home-schooling movement in its entirety. Many black home-schoolers have in fact done this.

I’d like to close this section by addressing the fact that many minority home-schoolers feel that they *can’t* home-school, that they might feel that people untrained in the “field of education” are incapable of educating. In particular, they might ask questions like “How can we teach our kids math?” There are many answers to these questions, and many considerations. There are also many myths about home-schooling that keep poor, minority, and in general oppressed people from home-schooling.

First, *is* there, in truth, a “field of education”. Does it really take years of training to learn how to teach? Well, college teachers have, almost without exception, not taken a single teaching course. On the first day on the job, most college teachers simply walk into the classroom and teach. They call it teaching because they’re in front of a class.

Do we have to teach; can’t we just *tell*? Or *not* tell, but instead let children and other students discover for themselves, or perhaps simply read, and make their own choices about what they discover and probe? In this book we’ve seen many examples of this happening, in both alternative communities and in the lives of everybody (parents simply talking to their children, for example).

Also, if we want to be concerned about parents’ expertise in subject matters, we might also ask ourselves about *teachers’* expertise. Indeed, teachers are not taught a whole lot of subject matter. (How could they be, in the space of four years’ teachers’ college?) Teachers are taught mostly teaching – not, for example, math and writing. That’s why so many kids in school are told things like “That’s something you just have to take on faith”. I’m thinking of my youngest son Devin in high school, being told that as the reason why any number to the zeroeth power is one. (The reason can actually be very quickly given – but not quickly enough to include in this paragraph! It has to do with the very definition of “exponent/power” and using one of the “laws of exponents” to calculate the *only* thing that a number to the zeroeth power could possibly be.)

But here's more about why people who don't know a whole lot of academics can still "teach" their kids. Teachers/parents and learners/kids can explore and learn together. They can watch movies and videos, and they can read books. History is my very un-favorite subject, but I "taught" Devin a lot of history by reading with him a book I bought in a thrift store, called "Twenty Modern Americans". We read about the childhoods, motivations, passions, personalities, and credos of Walt Disney, Jane Addams, George Washington Carver, and Yehudi Menuhin (who also home-schooled!). Not all of the chronology of American history was in that book, but it was in our conversations that arose from reading that book together. The both of us learned, not only history, but also sociology, science, music, geography, and art.

And sometimes, if we don't call it "teaching" and "learning", learning anxiety (in particular, math anxiety) disappears. It can feel a lot more comfortable if the teacher doesn't know the answers. And it feels more realistic when the teacher is just as curious as the student. In many conventional educational situations, students feel an emotional need for the teachers to know all the answers. That isn't the case in many alternative educational situations.

Another reason why it's possible for non-academic parents to teach their children: They might not know every subject, but they do know life; they have the advantage of having been alive for a longer time than their children. They know what I call "the field", a metaphor gleaned from my experience teaching college math. College profs are sometimes assigned courses which they themselves have never taken, nor read about. It can be done because, for example, math profs know the *field* of math. Although I never had Statistics in college or graduate school, I learned it over the summer with very little difficulty, and in very little time, because I already knew the *field*. In fact, in many math courses I've taught, there's a section or two on some aspect of math that I never "had". I couldn't do that with any other field, but I can in math, because math is a field that I know. Again, parents know "the field of life" so they can quickly learn "fields" *within* life, meaning *any* field – enough of that field to be able to "teach" their children.

Here's another reason that all parents, including minority parents, can feel confident about teaching their children: A very large part of learning consists of learning how to *look things up*. This is especially true in our internet age. Once we know how to look things up – and in some families children know that better than parents – they can find the answer to just about any question known to humankind. It seems silly and pointless to have to memorize the birthdays of all the presidents, or the dates of various battles: true, 1492, 1776, and so on are important dates in history, and people possibly should and usually do know them, off-hand, not only to look – *but* the very fact that a date is important usually *entails* that people do know them. Perhaps that's the *definition* of "important"; something is important if we already know it!

Does a graduate math student have to memorize the log tables? Does a writer have to memorize punctuation rules? No, memorization isn't where it's at. These experts learn as the need arises, but looking things up or asking a friend or colleague. And then they use what they looked up so often that they simply *remember*. Or they *don't* remember; they

look it up again. So this expertise in finding things out is part of “knowing the field”. And children, as they grow, come to know more and more of this field.

And anyway, parents don’t have to be the *only* ones doing the teaching. In fact, they usually aren’t. Friends, relatives, siblings, grandparents, baby-sitters, neighbors, tutors, even casual acquaintances or passers-by – all can be part of “the village” that “it takes to raise a child”. This actually does happen, whatever form of “raising” a family subscribes to, but it can happen more and better if parents are aware of it and tap into it. And again, non-human objects are part of “the village”. TV, videos, books, and the internet are all “villagers”. And yes, a “minority village” is different from a non-minority village, at least in some ways, and that’s part of the point. A child needs to get to know her own village.

I do have reservations about some of what I’ve said, and about home-schooling in general: For example, I don’t agree with the statement, often quoted by home-schoolers and in home-schooling articles, that “any parent knows her child”. I think there are many subtle but important things about “her child” that a parent might not know. However, the schools, the state, and society, might not know these things either – or other things. As elements of society, both parents and schools have their agendas, which prevent them from knowing children --- individual children and children in general. So I don’t join many home-schoolers, indeed the many parents, in romanticizing the parent/child relationship in that way. And, as I hope I’ve made clear by now, I don’t lend my enthusiasm to *all* home-schooling situations, nor do I believe that all home-schools are better than schools. This is as true for minority as for non-minority home-schoolers.

A friend says “The home is an institution, too, and often an oppressive one.” She goes on to point out that “handing children over to the parents” might not, as an institution, work out any better than “handing children over” to the state. The way society is at present there would have to be many changes, both in parents and in the state, in order to me to be able to recommend either.

However, I do believe that, all other things being equal, parents are just as likely as schools to know and be able to “teach” children. And that goes for minority parents as well as non-minority parents.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

It seems to me that in our society few people feel safe. Most individuals (minority and non-minority, middle-class and working-class, perhaps even upper-class, perhaps even the one percent) seem plagued by feelings of both financial and emotional insecurity.

Even if in fact they are not plagued, conditions seem to be such that they *feel* plagued. I think these feelings are understandable. Sure, it is said, for example, that raises in wages make up for inflation. But in fact they don’t. Sure, it is said that math, science, or computers are lucrative fields, and so our kids, or our neighbors’ kids, or unemployed

adults in midlife, embark on some two- or four-year “stem” educational program, but by the time that program is completed the jobs have, at least to some extent, been used up, or the situation has altered in some other way. It is said that job advancement and security depends upon performance, but in fact more people trying to have a career keep running into employer’s, or state’s. policies, whims, and lack of funding. As we age, no longer having children to care for supposedly makes up for pensions not being as great as salaries, but nowadays many older people raise their grandchildren, or support older children, to varying extents. Not to mention the coming of illness into the picture. Society and its laws sometimes try to make adjustments, but there is always a backlog – it all takes so much time – and there are too many variables. To put it simply, there are too many things that can and do go wrong.

All that paperwork not only makes things inconvenient; it also makes us nervous. It is said that insurance premiums pay our doctor bills, and taxes pay for our roads and streetlights. It is said that curbcuts solve navigation problems for people with disabilities. It is said that income makes up for “outcome”, that credits balance debits, and that “it all works out in the end”. But “in the end” – actually, more towards the beginning, meaning when we’re just out of high school or college or graduate school – it’s usually discovered that, again, the many variables have taken over. And so, for most of us, most of the time or too recurrently, justifiable feelings of insecurity reign.

I’d like to continue in this vein for a little longer, concentrating on people’s household expenses, expenses just to stay alive. Most of us worry, and rightfully so. What if the laws change and our rent or real-estate taxes go drastically up? Or what if the phone lines get crossed and our next monthly bill shows up in the four, or five, figures? And then, what if the phone company representative we happen to hook onto proves unreasonable? Could we live without a phone? Perhaps more to the point, could we *make* a living without a phone? How much do we need our phones in order to work at our jobs, or apply for jobs? Kafkaesque thoughts, many, but the root of that worry is very real; we are most of us in very precarious positions, and we know it. Too many variables. And too few control buttons.

Even if our finances seem fine for the moment, we worry about the future? What if someone gets sick? Or *very* sick? Do most people trust their insurance companies, or their case workers? When I used to get the “EOB’s” (Explanations of Benefits) from our insurance company, while my then-husband lived in the nursing home, I could see how much money was being laid out for his care. And it scared me. How, I’d think, can the insurance company afford it? Indeed, is the insurance company secure? Well, in 1932 the *banks* weren’t.

Leaving financial security for the moment, what about emotional security? Indeed, do people feel emotionally secure? So many of us seem to feel guilt-ridden, judged, inadequate, nervous, vulnerable, “like a child”, “not quite ready to grow up yet”, and so on. Our position in our families and in society don’t feel secure. We don’t feel very unconditionally or sustained-ly accepted or loved. Even after psycho-therapy. Books are written about “math anxiety” or “the hurried child”. There’s probably little need to go

into it. It's been well described elsewhere, in particular in movies, novels, and most people's everyday conversations, in particular our jokes and "small talk".

And sure, we deal with it. We expend a lot of *energy* dealing with it. We have to *keep* expending this energy, or find *new* energy, because it keeps escalating and recurring. Security, financial and emotional, seems to be something that makes a rare appearance in our lives; it seems to be the exception rather than the rule. (Has anyone ever kept a written record of which days, or hours, felt secure versus those which didn't?)

I hope that the previous chapters have at least made some headway in showing that schools and other authorities are intimately connected with, and often a contributing factor in, the very pervasive feelings of insecurity from which people, both children and adults, are literally suffering. There are at least two ways in which this insecurity happens: (A) A society so loaded with education-type authority and mania creates *actual* conditions such that we feel shaky, and (B) this same society makes us *feel responsible* for these conditions; we feel as though it's our fault that things are this way. (We didn't live up to our potential, or apply ourselves, or "earn our A's.")

Then, too, as Kitty used to say, "when parents and other adults say they want the schools to be more authoritarian, I hear such fear and anxiety in their voices. People want and need kids to be 'toughened up'." And that *causes* schools and home-schools to be more authoritarian so that children wind up feeling insecure, too. It's a vicious cycle, for many reasons: insecurity breeds insecurity. Even if adults did *not* believe that children need to be toughened up, adult insecurity would still rub off on kids.

And here's my main point: I believe that it's quite possible that this suffering from insecurity is a chief cause of the atrocities in this world. That is, the bottom-line reason that so many people want (and sometimes illegally or immorally get) *more* than they need (more than "their share") might well be that they feel very insecure with respect to getting *just exactly* what they need ("their share"). Perhaps people feel that they need *too much* because they feel insecure about having *enough*.

If people felt secure, in particular about the future, if people didn't have to feel that they had to hoard ("to save up"), if people didn't feel all these variables so much, then perhaps most people would be satisfied. Again, I'm talking about both financial and emotional hoarding. I'm remembering, right now, writing in my seventh grade diary, "I told my mother about the C in math. Maybe that partly makes up for not telling her about the D in history." That was a kind of hoarding.

In this society people are not given the privilege of feeling reasonably secure, and this to me seems to be what is causing so much trouble. This might be a huge reason why people go wrong, from overly ambitious and exploitative businesspeople and politicians to robbers and murderers. In my math classes, when a student acts hostile I read "afraid" and "hurt". And when I act in a way to soothe that hurt, it usually stops the hostile behavior—even if it doesn't achieve good study habits or the nerve to take the final, and even if it doesn't actually ease the hurt for very long.

Much of what I have just said has been gleaned from my own experience in therapy. “I feel great about myself,” I told my then-therapist. “I love myself. I love the way I look in all my thrift-store long skirts and I love the way my body and I gave birth to those five babies and I love my style of mothering those babies and I love the poems I write and... well, I think I’m great!”

“Yes,” she answered. “All very valid. But do you feel *adequate*?”

Ah, that was another matter. I spent three years in therapy learning to feel adequate, just plain adequate, and now that I do I’m freed from the burden of feeling “great”. I still *do* feel great; I still “love myself”, etc. But I don’t feel the *need* to feel that way. It’s less desperate, more in perspective. In other words, I feel secure – secure that I have and am *enough* – so I don’t feel the need to have and be *too* much.

I believe that, in the same way, everyone needs to feel secure -- physically, financially, and emotionally. People need to know on gut-level that they have and are enough, and that they don’t have to strive, or steal or murder, or hoard, to get more than enough. (It’s probably okay if they *already* have too much – I don’t want to give up my babies, my poetry, and my long skirts! – but it’s not okay to desperately need it.

Each of us needs to separate out what for us is enough and what’s too much. I hope that the ideas in this book can help. How many people do we need to love and be loved by? How many children do we want? How much attention do we think our children need? What kinds of attention? And from whom? How much power do we want? How much potential do we need? How creative do we want to be? What do we want potential or power or creativity *in*? How much money do we need? What can the world gain from our existences? Society, too, needs to ask itself questions, but that’s a more complicated task.

Another important point: In arguing economic issues, professional and amateur economists often throw around the term “human nature” (usually to argue against controversial systems like socialism or anarchy. People say it’s “human nature” to want things, material and otherwise, and to want too much of these things, as much of these things as we can get.) But I believe that, in the light of what I and others have been trying to say concerning children and adults and the way we all live and learn, we have no way of knowing “human nature”, nor what it would be if people grew up feeling reasonably secure.

I have a fantasy, a “pet speculation”. I like to think that it might prove pleasantly surprising for society to try the following experiment: First educate people to feel and make others feel reasonably secure – or rather, *stop* educating people to feel *insecure*. Then simply declare all money worthless. Tell everyone to just go and take what they want – of objects, movies, college courses, medical consultation and treatment, etc. And also, tell everyone to do whatever work they think they can or would like to do to benefit themselves and others. I believe that it’s very possible that, at least after a while, after a little sifting, the vast majority of us would not take too much, nor give too little.

I like to fantasize that having enough, and *knowing* that we have enough, and will continue to have enough, would prevent us from wanting *too much*. Could this fantasy ever come true? Could it come true in some metaphoric sense? Well, how can we know? It hasn't been tried. But I like to speculate further. I like to think about the details. I, for one, would still choose shopping in thrift stores over my favorite boutiques. I would still write, sew, sing, do math, clean house, and mother other people. I also think I'd go out and teach some more advanced math courses. My department chairman wouldn't have to worry, not any more, about "cutbacks". And I wouldn't care about not being "paid". And my students wouldn't have to worry about lack of scholarships or financial aid (again because of "cutbacks"). As for writing, perhaps that would flourish even more, because book publishers would be able to afford to publish my books; they wouldn't have to worry about "marketability" (or budgets and funding). And readers might feel more inclined to read my work, feeling less pressed to read more "practical" stuff. In general, my work, and whatever it is I have to give, would have much more of a chance of actually being given. And so would anybody's work.

Would people take so much at the grocery store that there was nothing left for others? I think not. Who wants to be stuck, at the end of the week, with a lot of spoiled milk and vegetables to get rid of? And who, at the beginning of the week, wants to be laden with twenty-five grocery bags to try to fit into the fridge and cabinets?

And feast your imagination on this: no turnstiles, no token booths, no buses standing at corners for minutes on end, perhaps missing a green light, because of the lines, slow moving because each and every person has to put something into the slot machine. No-money could render our environment much less inconvenient, less frustrating and, perhaps, there'd be less distrust among human beings. Like testing, money – and any other bartering unit – teaches distrust. But it's not the only thing that teaches distrust. I'm not, that is, saying "money is the root of all evil". Recall that, when I first introduced this fantasy, I said, "*First* educate people to feel secure." That, of course, is a biggie. But I think the ideas in this book might be a good start.

Again, this is all a fantasy; maybe it's naïve. However, if we ask, "Isn't the idea highly impractical?" we might also ask "Isn't our present system highly impractical?" Isn't it highly impractical for whole streets, indeed whole neighborhoods, to be lined with banks, office buildings, and all those other tall structures, all pretty much solely for the "purpose" of managing money?

Wouldn't such buildings serve better as housing, day care centers, libraries, etc? How expensive would it be to put in kitchens? But then, we'd have to have a new meaning of "expensive" -- or perhaps no meaning. Would kitchens be as necessary as they are now, or as we perceive them to be, with everything for the taking, perhaps the corner coffee shop would do, at least in a pinch, at least temporarily? And this part of the experiment is not totally untried; some cities have actually used abandoned buildings for real purposes.

What about the jobs of people who currently do all the money paperwork? Would the fact that they don't *need* jobs make up for the fact that they'd be out of them? Would they have emotional and/or psychological problems as they tried to figure out what else to do with their time? Would it be helpful enough to them that they could now use their lives for other more meaningful endeavors? Would more people become home health aides (of which, under the present system there's a shortage), since they wouldn't have to worry about pay and benefits (something home health aides get little or none of, under our present system)? Would people seize opportunities even remotely according to my fantasies? Would "human nature" be manifested in good ways?

I hadn't the slightest idea. This is all fantasy. Brain storing. But I think that, in light of what I've been saying in this section and throughout this book, this fantasy can be taken more seriously than society takes it now.

Another question: Would anybody want to be a trash collector? Well, first, people wouldn't have to be trash collectors six days a week. The "job" of trash collecting could be divided up; anyone who chose it would choose it for one day, or half-day. It would be work that needed to be done; the more often it got done, the cleaner the neighborhood would be – just as, in individual households, the more conscientiously we do the housework, the cleaner our houses look. So I like to believe that people would do it. Moreover, trash collecting would probably not have the negative connotation that it has in our present system (in some circles). Again, it would be like housework; everyone would know that it needed to be done. there'd be a lot more control and participation on the part of everyone. It wouldn't be considered a "low" job, a "low pay" job, or a "job" at all. I for one would feel okay about putting in my half-day, especially since I'd also feel secure that my writing and other offerings were being used and appreciated -- and that I was being given enough time to make and do those offerings.

What about "incompetents"? People who aren't very good at certain jobs, or people who hate "their" jobs so much that they slack off. And what about self-proclaimed experts? Fad cures and diets? Would this new no-money system encourage them? I'd say probably not. For one, there's not much in the *present* systems to discourage incompetents and slackers. For another, there could still be standards, review boards, and so on. But even more subtly: People wouldn't need to have jobs they didn't want. Even the "self-proclaimed experts" wouldn't have the need to try to make money, or get ahead in any way, or create a *raison d'être*. There are, for example, an awful lot of frustrated artists, or people who are great with children but who don't have teaching degrees or certificates, and often these are the people who turn to marketing fad cures for the possibility of both income and validation. In my fantasy, that need wouldn't exist any more.

Would eliminating money all by itself solve all of society's problems? Well, it wouldn't cure cancer. On the other hand, maybe it would. Possibly "funding" for cancer research wouldn't be as much of a problem.

We might be surprised at what feelings of security can accomplish – in “human nature” and therefore in economics. And I wonder whether “growing up secure” in the first place could accomplish even more.

GENDER ISSUES

There are feminists who are very wary of certain alternative ideas about parenting and, in particular, home-schooling. They feel that it’s all ‘just another thing that keeps women down’. Indeed, it can all feed into the oppression of women – in the sense of making mothers’ lives more difficult – but so can everything else.

For example, as described earlier in this book, home-schoolers are often led to believe, by society and by authorities of all sorts, that a “good” parent (which more often than not means good mother) spends lots of time, energy, money, and self on her children, and thus has little or no “self time”. As for home-schooling, society operates under the myth – or partial-myth – that home-schooling is not an option for working mothers. Completely ignored as possible options are playgroups, exchange baby-sitters, older siblings or parents or neighbors or relatives and friends, collectives and communes, and working with children present, even involving children in the work.

Then, too, home-schooling laws – in particular, ones requiring the “home-schooling supervisor” to have a high-school diploma – as well as general attitudes have led to the myth, oppressive to women, that the “better educated” a home-schooling parent is, the better a “job” she can do as a home-schooling parent. This myth plays upon, and is a special case of, the general insecurity often laid upon women. As we have seen, parents can home-school without having been educated themselves; they can learn right along with their children, for example by reading books, textbooks and otherwise, and they can direct independent study, encourage interaction with others outside the family, and so on. They can also merely decide not to be hung up on the word “education”.

Also, as minorities, women and feminists might have the same reservations, and go through the same stages described two sections ago. First, that is, they might be caught up in fighting for a girl’s right to learn math and science in school, next they might be so involved as radical feminists that schooling or home-schooling issues seem irrelevant.

So yes, alternative methods of education run the risk of contributing to the oppression of women (and everybody else) and in some cases it has actually contributed to that oppression. Or rather, the kinds of oppression which some women *already* suffer *extend* into the arena of the education of their children, both home-schooling or not.

Once again, home-schooling parents need to be informed and to examine very closely the myths and misconceptions, in order to use home-schooling to live their and their children’s lives in a truly liberating way. Home-schooling can subtract from oppression and be a subversive activity. Far from “keeping women down”, it can bring women up. Home-schooling offers the small freedoms – things like waking up and going to bed at

times of our choosing, taking jobs and other opportunities in other towns or countries, even during the “school year”, having daily family rituals other than the supper table, getting involved with the kids in all-day, or all-week, projects, and again, not having to nag about homework. I also described the larger freedoms, -- freedom of choice, freedom from “the system” – the freedom to question everything.

Feminists have spent decades questioning and changing the health care system. A large part of that has been questioning the authority of doctors and other medical professionals. Perhaps it’s now time to question, as some home-schoolers already do, the educational system, along with the authority of teachers principals, and school boards, and to do such questing with a truly feminist consciousness. To me being a feminist means being not only woman-identified but *mother*-identified. Being aware of the oppression of mothers includes analyzing the position of mothers and children in our society, and in societies throughout history. Certainly the education arena figures in this and must come under scrutiny. In my own family, just as we chose “family-centered childbirth”, so we eventually came to choose “family-centered education”. And just as we also had to make choices and ask questions within the family-centered childbirth movement, so also within the family-centered education movement.

When Bret was about a year old, I wrote a poem titled “One Year Post-partum”. It was about one aspect of how I had felt, in the very early days and months after Bret’s birth. Namely, I felt very much at one with many of the other mothers who hung out in Rittenhouse Square. We had all been very concerned with matters like natural childbirth, “liberated Cesareans”, breast-feeding, and so on. We had, in other words, been very caught up in the emotions, and in the wonder, of being mothers. We had talked ad infinitum about our own feelings, and in doing so, had questioned everything. Or so it had seemed to me. But at around “One Year Post-partum”, I began to notice a few changes. Suddenly the other mothers seemed to me to be “dropping out”, or rather copping out. They seemed less true to their mother-selves, less mother-identified. They seemed to be joining society and its status quo.

For example, I noticed more and more mothers enrolling their toddlers in things like infant swim classes, with pep-talk-y explanations like “Babies LOVE water. After all, water is what they were in when they were in the womb.” “Yes,” I wrote in the poem, “but not the SAME water.” And Caroline began worrying about her son kissing other boys. “It’s not that I’m anti-gay,” she explained. “I just wouldn’t want Jimmy growing up that way.” And Autumn began teaching Dawn “her alphabet”, instead of being satisfied with the kinds of letters and pictures which Dawn was already producing. My perception, in other words, was that these other mothers were beginning to succumb to authority. I began to feel more alienated from them, and to me this seemed a feminist political issue. “Brand-new mothers”, I sadly reflected, “are more revolutionary, more poetic, more like ME. Perhaps that’s one of the reasons I like having babies so much – because afterwards, at least for a little while, I get to hang out with mothers who are just like me. “I won’t, “ thought slightly bitterly, be fooled next time. And I wasn’t.

It seems to me that many feminists, who otherwise question authority pretty rigorously, are too accepting of authority in the form of school and other school-like authorities. For example, a “good” private school which is supportive of lesbian mothers can still act as an authority with respect to mothers in general. It can still interfere in personal and family life, and it can still take the normal “ages and stages” of childhood, which parents are often very fond and proud of, and make a big deal about them, couching them in terms such as “disruptive behavior”, “lack of motivations”, or “needs to learn social skills”. Such a school can still tell parents, in subtle ways, which of their children’s qualities to be fond and proud of, and which to not be fond and proud of. It can still play upon our motherguilt, motherpride, and motherfears, and downplay the motherfeelings described in the previous chapter. In other words, it can still act as an authority in a family’s life.

I’d like to talk about the issues of “non-sexist childrearing,” “positive role models”, and “raising future feminists”. It probably comes as no surprise that schools are not non-sexist. Not only things like boys and girls lines, but *what* is taught. True, many teachers strive to bring feminism into the classroom but, as with “tolerance education”, any non-sexist lessons taught in the schools often don’t get learned by the students because, once again, it’s “just something they’re trying to teach us”. I once sat in on a Women’s Studies class in an “alternative” public high school. The material was good, the assignments were thought-provoking, and the teacher seemed to be someone who believed and practiced what she taught. But school was built into the lesson. The same negative attitudes and assumptions prevailed, on everyone’s part – for example, that the students were taking the course because they had to, that they had to be forced, and that the assignments would not be finished. And I believe there’s at least some truth to the statement, authority cannot teach feminism (or, for that matter, diversity) because authority cannot teach *anything*.

As for “positive role models”, Nancy Wallace used to point out that home-schooling children get to see their parents do the things which they enjoy and/or are good at. They also get to see their parents relax. They might even get to see their parents laugh and cry. In short, they see the whole of their parents’ lives. Whereas children who go to school often get a more distorted view of what their parents’ lives are like; it’s during times when the kids are in school (or extra-curricular activities) that the parents are living their “real” lives. So what conventionally schooling kids see of their parents are things like rushing around to get dinner made, housework done, teeth brushed, and homework helped with. In general, they see their parents trying to make the family fit into this schooling society, rather than take control and make choices. They see a far more negative picture of their parents’ lives and work. Where, for these conventionally schooling parents, is the “positive role model”?

Just as feminism involves thinking through home-schooling issues, so home-schooling involves thinking through feminist issues. Home-schoolers need to examine, from many perspectives, the motivating factors in any decision made regarding *how* they home-school, and what home-schooling means to them. Home-schoolers need to be aware of just how affected we are by society and its authorities.

Who knows? Perhaps many mothers would feel guilty if they didn't have "home-school burnout". They'd feel they must not be doing all they can for their children. So perhaps some parents specifically, although unconsciously, run their families' lives *so that* there is home-school burnout. Parents might need to ask themselves at every turn, "Am I doing this because I love my kids, or because it's hard for me and therefore might help assuage my guilt feelings, as well as prove how much I love my kids?" This kind of questioning requires a lot of thinking and a lot of feminism.

To delve a little deeper: In actuality, living our lives as to court home-school burnout, and mother burnout in general, doesn't work at all, even with respect to assuaging guilt feelings. For guilt feelings often come about, not because of our actions, but because of our *feelings*. That is, it isn't our actions we feel guilty about, but our feelings. It can be a vicious cycle: We feel guilty so we do things that are difficult for us (home-school burnout), so we feel bad and resentful, so we feel guilty (about our feelings). And how does the vicious cycle start? We need to catch it when it does, or stop it if it did.

History has shown that most of the La Leche League leaders, as well as most of the women involved in the childbirth revolution, were and are leaders and revolutionaries in other arenas, too. They were suffragettes, feminists, socialists, intellectuals, and so on. They fought for the rights of women and of humans in all areas of living. The same, I hope, will be true of home-schooling pioneers.

ABUSE ISSUES

What happens at school to children who are abused at home? How do these children relate socially, especially to peer group? Are they *able* to relate socially? Does school help or protect, even in that vein? Or does it only aggravate the problem? Rub it in, somehow? Deepen the feelings of abandonment and alienation?

Schools, including some home-schools, are often guilty of *psychological* abuse, as I hope this book has brought out. As for physical abuse, school is often a *part* of the abuse picture. In an abused child's life, school can be a perpetrator, or a mere bystander, rather than rescuer. For example, consider the recently recognized bully syndrome. And the school might fail to recognize when a child is being abused outside of school, or it might not believe a child when she reports abuse, or it might re-enforce and cooperate with parents' unreasonable policies and/or methods of "discipline". It might even be directly abusive. There's a book titled "Abuse in the Schools".

A child who is abused and continues to be abused outside of school might, despite the refuge of school during part of the day, feel that school is somehow *in cahoots* with the abusing adults in his life. After all, schools are in cahoots with parents in many other respects (again, discipline).

True, there are cases where school has provided a refuge – perhaps, though, only relatively – from an abusive home. School has also provided a change from a *limiting*

home. I think of a friend who grew up in a wealthy and bigoted household, and who never ascribed to those values. School for her was a place to meet and read about different kinds of people. However, that isn't a reason to send all or even most children to school – any more than the success of many foster care situations is a reason to place all or most children in foster care.

I'd like to talk about "abuse education" in the schools. I'm wondering whether perhaps it suffers the same fate as "tolerance education" in the schools, or the above-mentioned gender education (Women's Studies). I'm wondering, that is, whether kids avoid it, or ignore it, simply because it's *in school* and thereby "just something they're trying to teach us". To what extent do kids trust the teachers who teach "abuse education", enough to believe them and heed them?

Another idea concerns the well-known fact that children usually don't tell when they're being abused. I'm wondering whether that's *because of* all the "things wrong" described in Chapter One. Perhaps, that is, society creates an environment where kids don't tell, or where adults don't believe when kids do tell. That chapter talked about how school undermines relations within families and communities, in particular invades family life to the extent that adults don't have time to listen to kids, or to take them seriously; everyone's too busy getting the homework done.

Then, too, if children know, consciously or unconsciously, that the adults in their lives are allowing the psychological abuse in the schools, then how can these kids trust their adults to protect them from abuse *outside* of school?

Moreover, with all the authority in our lives, adults often don't know what to *do* with kids, how to approach them, how to show their love for them, maybe how to actually love them. And maybe this translates into abuse, especially since this distortion of love can render the adults in question lonely. As A.S. Neill once wrote, "hate is distorted love", and so might be at least some instances of abuse.

ECOLOGY ISSUES

Promise, this is a short section! Society often tries to make trees be something other than trees. Ditto animals, both wild and tame. To me a huge part of ecology is understanding what things were meant to be and do, as opposed to some stereotype coming from authority. Does it seem farfetched to draw the following parallel: Society often tries to make people be something other than people. Society also tries to make children be something other than children.

In the previous chapters I have described the various ways in which society does this. I have talked, for example, about how it tries to get children to grow up, or act grown up, sooner than and in different ways from the ways in which they naturally would grow up. And, seemingly contradictorily, it tries to get kids to *not* grow up, to stay cute and dependent. It tries to get them to like reading, or art, or dinosaurs. It tries to get them to

help adults get in good with the various authorities. Society *uses* children, and people. And it runs the risk of using them *up*.

I have also described many of the motives behind these authorities, and behind the catering to these authorities. Perhaps the motives are the same or analogous to those behind the intrusion into trees and the rest of our earth. Perhaps, at least to some extent and in some way, they are one and the same battle.

ONE IDEA

This section's a tad longer, but it's the last!

Call it a fantasy, if you like. What about replacing the public school system with something more reasonable, socially conscious, and comprehensive? What about a system of... I'll call them "centers", for ages zero to end-of-life? The centers would be open twenty-four hours a day, all days of the week, holidays too, and would include college and, as we'll see, many other useful and desirable things.

This needs further qualification. First, all these offerings would have to be non-compulsory. Home-schoolers would still have to have the option to home-school. Moreover, families could decide, not only whether to attend, but when to attend. Six hours every day, three hours on Mondays and three hours Wednesdays, all day Sunday and no other time, once a year, maybe even all twenty-four hours all year 'round. Yes, parents would have this access to "free baby-sitting". Maybe, in fact, entire families or households would have the option to *live* in a center. That would take care of poverty and much homelessness.

Which brings us to the second qualification: It *would* be baby-sitting ("mere baby-sitting, as some people say, in a derogatory way, as I was describing in a previous chapter). The centers would not be specifically educational. They would not be like schools. No big deal would be made about things like "potential" nor things like book reports and nature journals. There would be no authorities in the centers. On the other hand, they could be stocked full of opportunities. There could even be classes available (not compulsory), or some "baby-sitters" who are knowledgeable in particular areas, from the academics to music to nature-watching to story-telling. There could also be artists, writers, and scientists "in residence" (but different from the "in residence" situations already present in our society, as described in previous chapters. Possibly just-anybody who wanted to be a "creative person in residence" could "set up shop"; it could remain to be seen what would develop.) There could be "field trips" for those who were interested. It could, in other words, be like a home-schooling home and like a miniature world, simultaneously.

A third qualification has to do with convenience and access. When children go to visit friends, they don't need to pre-register; likewise when they visit the public playground. Why should it be any different for these centers? All children and adults could be welcome, any time, on a drop-in basis, as in a good home or playground. And the centers

could incorporate medical and health centers, thus automatically taking care of contagious diseases and health care in general.

Impossible: Financially unfeasible? Consider the cost of such a center against the cost of the *present* public educational system. More hours, true, and more ages. But fewer “experts” and “professionals” to pay huge salaries to, perhaps a smaller staff in general, since the older kids would be around to watch the younger ones. And perhaps, eventually, there wouldn’t be much distinction between “staff” and “clients”. If it were all done sensibly, there’d be less expensive equipment and curriculum. For example, pennies and nickels are as much fun, and as educational if that’s what we want, as Fisher-Price and Child Guidance miniature cities. Thrift store goodies and materials brought from the kids’ homes, or even no materials at all, could also work. How many objects do children need? And anyway, if my idea about no-money were part of this fantasy, what would “financially unfeasible” mean?

Record-keeping costs (in particular, report cards, promotions, diplomas, and attendance records) would be virtually eliminated, and so could other red tape. There would probably not need to be as many offices, nor a Board of Education building.

Perhaps ultimately the centers could eliminate the need for other public buildings and activities; it might incorporate, for example, the libraries, the Y’s, and Little and Middle Leagues (which would then, I hope, become less competitive, less adult-oriented, and in general more low-key and less authoritarian). It might also incorporate, and in the same buildings, elder daycare and nursing homes. In fact, the services for society’s older, sicker, and more disabled people could be made use of, as well as the services of children and “regular” people used to help in the elder daycare centers and nursing homes. This twenty-four-hour year-round non-compulsory setup might actually wind up *less* costly than the sum-total of our present systems.

In this way the needs of children, parents, and other human beings (“disadvantaged” or not) could be met without society getting hung up on that loaded word “education”. Lower-income children (if indeed there were such a thing, in this society) could be exposed, in natural, unforced, and positive ways, to the three R’s, art, music, and so on, and could be given access to at least as many opportunities as in the present school system. Initially there could also be workshops at the centers, for parents and others who want to know more about this new concept of child-care, education, and living. There would, I envision, be plenty of time and space for questions and other interaction, so that everyone would be comfortable and not harbor fears and misconceptions, and so that the centers don’t work their way into becoming schools or other types of what I call “people factories”. Day-care, education and life itself could be much simplified. There could be less worry for everyone.

How fantastic is this fantasy? Could it, or part of it, be real?

Indeed, can the ideas in this book save the world? Well, how can we know? There are so many variables. And the experiment hasn't yet been tried. But it might be interesting to at least fantasize, or even – in small or in big settings, whatever is feasible – give it a try.

