

A PORTRAIT OF THE JESTER AS OBSERVER:

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. THOMAS ARMSTRONG

by Richard J. Prystowsky and Charlie Miles

Editor's Note: Last fall, Charlie Miles, our Editorial Assistant, and I met up with Dr. Thomas Armstrong in Orange County, California, where he was giving some talks. Knowing the seriousness of his work—in books such as *Awakening Your Child's Natural Genius*, *The Radiant Child*, *In Their Own Way*, *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*, and *The Myth of the ADD Child*—we were delighted to discover in Dr. Armstrong a warm, welcoming, humorous man whose insights and observations directed the course of the interview, which we present below.

Even before we began taping the interview, Dr. Armstrong provided us with amusing and engaging commentary, some of which we were able to capture once we realized that we were going to have to be quick to keep up with him! In the spirit of the wonderful afternoon chat that we had with him, we begin here *in medias res*—we think that Dr. Armstrong would like that.

Richard J. Prystowsky

Seeds of a Radical Educational Theorist

Tom Armstrong: Looking through the names of people listed here on the *Paths of Learning* Editorial Board, I recognize so many familiar names and people who have influenced my life. Oh this is amazing, all these people. Don Glines, for example, was my assistant principal in eighth grade at Canyon del Oro Junior High in Tucson, Arizona, in 1963. (Laughing) I don't think he remembers me. I was a discipline problem in eighth grade.

Charlie: So have you kept in touch with him since then?

TA: No, no no, I've had no contact at all. [Editor's note: Since the interview took place, they have been in touch.] The last time I saw him I was probably being sent to the assistant principal. He was like the discipline person. (Laughter) As I recall, I was pretty spunky that year; I got into a number of fights, and I was actually put on the discipline list, one of my better years. (Laughter) Later, we moved back to North Dakota, and then I got involved in achievement and that sort of thing, so eighth grade always stands out for me as one of my hyperactive years.

C: So you would have been considered an ADD child?

TA: Well, I had a hyperactive year in second grade, too, and so they did actually refer me for testing. I remember, I used to like to play the piano on my desk, to keep my fingers in motion, and so apparently one of my teachers came in—she was very tired, she'd had a bad day—and sent me to the principal's office, and they had me tested. This was a critical moment in my educational career. Who knows what might have happened had I not talked my way out of the situation? I remember the test they gave me. They said, "What's the hardest substance?" And I said, "It's not a diamond." I had just read in the paper the previous week that they had found a stone harder than a diamond. And then they asked me who wrote *Romeo and Juliet* and I said Longfellow! (Laughter)

Dr. Armstrong is an award-winning author and speaker with 26 years of teaching experience from the primary through the doctoral level. He has written for a number of publications, including Ladies Home Journal, Parenting, and Mothering. He has appeared on national and international radio and television programs, including "The Today Show" and "Donahue." An engaging speaker, he has given hundreds of keynotes, workshops, and lectures.

Maybe they were impressed that I knew about Longfellow in second grade. I don't know, but anyway, I just talked my way out of it, so they skipped me a grade instead of putting me into the "opportunity" class. It's those hairy moments that maybe give me a little empathy for students. They are tested, and then their educational careers end up on some kind of track and pretty soon they're flipping burgers at McDonald's for a living.

Richard: A few moments ago, you said that you sent John Holt a manuscript of your book *In Their Own Way*.

TA: I sent him the manuscript, and he wrote back saying, "Make it a little more conversational, you know, like you're sitting across the cracker barrel from somebody." At that time, I still had a lot of academic in me from college. I certainly appreciated the way he invited me to put things in simpler language and more conversational terms. He always did such a beautiful job with that in his writing

R: He's a beautiful writer.

In the acknowledgments to *In Their Own Way*, you mention that for each of your books there's been "a seed that you've been able to point to as the starting point of your labor of love. A shimmering wave of pregnant potential that gave witness to what was to come." Was there such a seed, or were there such seeds, to which you can point, concerning your becoming a "radical educational theorist," and is that label of you accurate?

TA: Radical educational theorist! Wow. Well, I think I'm becoming more radical now than I have been. I have this real itch to write an article about what corporate America is doing to education. I haven't been overtly political about some things. I'm taking a more sociological perspective, and so to that extent, I am not buying into the biological the way that some people are. But "radical educational theorist?" Okay! Okay.

So what would be the seeds of that? (Laughing) Well, it probably started in second grade. I've always tended to just think differently from the people around me, and fortunately, I've also been able to make people around me laugh, both at me and with me; it's been a good combination. In fact, sometimes I think of myself as a jester. You know how the jester, in the olden days, would be connected with the king? He would be in a position where he could stand outside. He could say, "Look at how stupid that is!" He'd even point to the king and say, "You're really dumb!" It was always a fine line he was walking, because of course the king at any moment could [here Dr. Armstrong gestures an "off with his head" motion].

Lately, I've been looking up my genealogy, now that on

the Internet you can do all kinds of searching that you never could do before. I also spent a little time in Scotland earlier this year, where I got some materials, and I discovered that one of my ancestors is Archibald Armstrong, who was the court jester to James I. In fact, he was almost beheaded by James I, who had become the King of Scotland and England; he unified the two. James wanted to clean up the frontier—the border areas, Northern England and Southern Scotland—where the Armstrongs were from. They were essentially border rascals. They were the cattle-rustler kind, you know.

R: So Archibald Armstrong was the jester roughly around the time that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*. Shakespeare's fool in *Lear* is exactly the kind of jester you're talking about.

TA: Wow! Wouldn't that be amazing? Anyway, I just finished reading James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the second chapter, where Stephen is teaching school, there is a reference to a class clown, Armstrong. I figured it was a reference to Archibald because, after he retired, King James gave him about four hundred acres in Ireland. I wanted to write somebody; I discovered this!—another allusion in Joyce! I just don't know to whom to send it. But the thing is, my ancestor Archibald Armstrong was about to be executed, but he joked his way out of it—kind of like how I was about to be sent to the opportunity class but I argued my way out of it. (Laughing)

I identify with that image of being able to be outside of things and make com-

ments about them, and I see a lot of humor. I see a lot of tragic humor, but I think that I prefer to stay with humor because it also allows us to deal with what's going on. It's easy to get depressed about some of the things going on in education. Certainly, I've gone through many, many years in which I've felt very dispirited and disheartened. I mean, my experiences in public schools were just devastating. They were the most unhappy years of my life, because of everything that was going on—the labeling, and the way that supervisors would come in and automatically look for something wrong in the classroom, and that kind of thing. It was difficult. So humor has been really helpful to me. I think it's a nice tool for people in general.

R: What in particular was it that happened while you were in second grade that led to your talking your way out of this?

TA: Okay, let me just [Dr. Armstrong spoofs lying down on the analyst's couch, and with a German accent says], "Vel, Docktor. Let me go back to when I was in second grade...."

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exemplified by
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Protestant ethic,
the more I see that the
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are built into who we
consider the
"good learner!" The
good learner is the one who
delays gratification and sits
quietly and works hard,
patiently plodding.

R: I'm just wondering, what did the tests show?

TA: I have no idea. But I suspect that, since I skipped a grade, I did well. I mean, I look at it in terms of this multiple intelligence thing I've been involved in, where Dr. Gardner at Harvard has suggested that it's the linguistic and the logical that we value the most. It certainly proved true in my case, because I was able to argue my way out, or at least to give good verbal answers. Even if they were wrong, they were good verbal answers. (Laughing) I was allowed to pass! I wonder what it would have been like had I done those same behaviors, but hadn't had the verbal skill. Where would I have gone? Where would I have ended up?

R: Do you feel there are lots of kids in the system and the schools who...

TA: Yeah! I mean there has to be a reason why I feel so driven to speak about them and to protect them. Or, perhaps, not to protect them but to have their gifts recognized, their potentials. Because so many kids go through the system, and I hear one story after another from parents about how their kids just go through the system with frustration, with anger, even though they've got all these wonderful things going on in their lives. They're creative, they're artistic, musical, or dramatic—or they're even wonderful readers—but somehow being able to read wonderful, beautiful literature and be insightful is not particularly valued in the schools. You know?

What's valued is your ability to work a workbook, to write a book report, and to know how to phrase your answers when the teacher calls on you. Those are really limited things. Where in the real world do you actually have to do that? Maybe those verbal skills are valuable in the corporate world. Perhaps you need to give a good corporate spin to your report and that sort of thing. I suppose that it's a case of training—training our kids to take their rightful place in the corporate world.

I'm going through this process now where I'm reading everything that I didn't finish when I dropped out of Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, in 1971. I dropped out about midway and when I went back, I went into Education so I never got a chance to finish my Liberal Arts education. About four years ago, I started my reading with the Bible and Homer and Shakespeare and have been reading my way straight through, you know, and just enjoying every single moment of it.

I got to Marx last year. Wow! You know, this guy started to make a lot of sense to me. He was talking about human potential; he wasn't talking about Mao and khaki uniforms, you know. It's amazing stuff. The process of looking at it made me look around. Perhaps in the same way that the Church predominated over the medieval cultures, we have corporations predominating over everything we eat, breathe, think, and live in this day and age. Take, for example, the Education Summit.

Where did it take place? This year and maybe every other year? At the IBM retreat center. Who attended? Well, not too many teachers, not too many kids, not as many governors this year, but thirty-two CEOs of large corporations.

Now there's talk of textbooks having ads in them, and that sort of thing. As I read Shakespeare and Homer, as I listen to Mozart and Beethoven, and as I look at Van Gogh and Michaelangelo, I think about the way cultures work. I have to think to myself, "Well, what is the art of the corporate world? What is corporate culture giving us? What is corporate culture giving us in terms of music? What is corporate culture giving us in terms of social relations?" Not too much!

And yet, this is exactly the world we think we want our kids to grow up in, and everybody is just as excited as all get-out to have the corporate world enter education. Because of the money! Money, money, give us money! Give us computers, give us trainings, and that kind of thing. And yet, it's a little bit of a Faustian bargain. Because what we are buying into is a very barren culture, a culture that has as its bottom line money—not edification of the soul or

some sort of deeper kind of learning. That's one of the things that I've been thinking about lately. And I don't know what it has to do with what we were talking about! (Laughing)

The best schools are the ones that look like real life, that are like real life. They can take any shape or structure, but the more they look like real life, the better they are!

Public Education and National Standards

R: Someone who worked in the field of criminology told me, several years ago, that politicians and others know that the criminal justice system is systemically flawed, but that in order to get votes they have to talk the way they talk even though they know it's a failed system.

TA: Right.

R: Is there something like that happening with the educational system, so that the people who "run things" know that it's a systemically flawed system, but that, for whatever reason, they continue to pursue this way of operating? Or is it that they don't know better?

TA: Well, I think the link with politicians as you describe it is very strong in education. In fact, the language of educators at the higher level is often fashioned by that of politicians, and vice-versa. In order to stay in power, essentially, whether that be as a school board president or as a U.S. Representative or as an Assemblyman, they need to talk a certain kind of language to their constituents.

I mean, typically surveys show that when people talk about what they want in education, the public tends to be far more reactionary than educators. In other words,

they want discipline; they want uniforms. They want pretty much everybody to learn in the same way, while educational research suggests, “No! No!” And so there’s a real lack of synergy between those two camps.

Politicians from Clinton on down are talking about national standards. “We want uniformity!” and that sort of thing. That’s where politicians and the higher administrators want to lead us. And then there’s everybody else—teachers who know that kids learn in different ways, many fine principals, and selected administrators at all levels—who understands real education. Everywhere I go I meet people who are just wonderful beacons of real learning in education, in all sorts of potentially and actually powerful educational positions. But that isn’t the *Weltanschauung* of educational discourse. It’s standards; that’s where it is.

C: So is there any hope for modifying public education?

TA: No.

C: None?

TA: I don’t know. The education structure just reflects what the cultural structure is, in a sense. I’ve been reading American history and American literature, and I’ve been thinking about “American culture.” The more I look at the American spirit, at the American spirit exemplified by Ben Franklin and the Protestant ethic, the more I see that the whole business of work and ambition and thrift—all these value systems—are built into who we consider the “good learner!” The good learner is the one who delays gratification and sits quietly and works hard, patiently plodding.

I just finished Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which was excellent and funny in this tragic funny way. He starts out the book using Ben Franklin as this classic example of the spirit of capitalism. When I think about some of these impulses in the American psyche, well, you know [draws in breath], there’s not a lot to work with.

There is the individualism of the American spirit; that I think is the most hopeful part of the American psyche. When Gardner, or Holt, or I, or someone else says, “We need to give individuals opportunities to think in their own way,” there’s a real resonance there. That’s the opening, the entry point for making change in education. I think that’s why I’ve chosen to harp on it, why I’ve been attracted to multiple intelligences.

For example, multiple intelligences [theory] is respected because it comes from Harvard—Harvard our first college—a Puritan college, as a matter of fact! Right? So it really harkens back to the very beginnings of our culture. When I say “our culture” I’m talking about the northern European culture, and not the ones that we trampled over. But Gardner, coming from Harvard, gets a great deal of respect; he’s saying very much the same kinds of things that people like Holt said, but he’s saying them in a language that’s up to date, that isn’t [as] tired as is, to be honest with you, the rhetoric of the 60s, of Holt and some of the other theorists. People kind of

laugh at it now. There’s a tendency for people to be unable to hear that language, so they have to hear another language. In another twenty or thirty years, multiple intelligences may be laughed at, and there will have to be some other new language.

I’m working on a book on the stages of life right now. It’s going to be called *Sacred Odyssey: The Story of Your Life From Prebirth to Postdeath*. There will be a chapter on each stage of life: a chapter on prebirth, on birth, on infancy, all the way up to death and dying, and then postdeath. It’s going to try to be experiential (not all my experiences, of course!). In other words, it’s the story of your life, so we’re going to take you through it, as if you are there, you know.

And so, I’ve been thinking developmentally, thinking about, well, three things: The first is exploring those developmental stages in ourselves—the past stages and the stages that are yet to come, as well as the one we’re at. Second, we can look at the people in our lives who are at different stages; how do we understand what they’re going through? You know? They live in a whole different world, a whole different land. And we think that they’re somehow where we are, and there are points of contact, but ... and then, the third part is the cultural, or the community part. How can we look at our community developmentally? In other words, what are we doing to help the newborns in our community? What are we doing to help the elderly? What are we doing to help adolescents-at-risk?

That’s really where my interest is going. I’m thinking actually less and less about education *per se*, and more and more about some broader social questions. My Ph.D. is actually in East-West Psychology, so that’s really what I *should* be doing. (Laughs) This book, *Sacred Odyssey*, is about bringing together West and East and integrating them.

R: Don’t you think that that’s what you have been doing all along?

TA: Well, in a sense I have. Certainly the multiple intelligences theory has been rich with multicultural emphasis, which is another reason why I’ve been attracted to it, looking at all the different ways in which cultures value art and music and science and logic. But, other than the book I wrote a while ago called *The Radiant Child*, I haven’t really done so much with that emphasis. In other words, in this book I want to consider the mystical traditions, such as Buddhism and Sufism, and put those together with Jung and Freud. This book is going to do more of that, or try to do more of that.

The Natural Genius

C: That sounds great. One of your most powerful and influential notions is that each child is a natural genius, and that the role of parents and teachers is to help awaken that genius in the child. For our readers who

might be unfamiliar with this concept, can you describe what you mean by it? Is it similar to James Hillman's notion of the daimon within us? Do adults have a natural genius in need of being awakened? How do we awaken the natural genius in children and adults?

TA: Right. Yes. Well, first of all, obviously it's not original with me, since James Hillman was thinking about it, and since the genius has been around for a long time. In fact, I've seen titles that predate my *Awakening Your Child's Natural Genius*, very similar titles. So it's just a great idea, and I was fortunate to stumble upon it. You know, what actually happened was that I had written a column in *Parenting* magazine for four years, and my publisher Jeremy Tarcher had an option on another book for me to do after *In Their Own Way*. I didn't know what I wanted to do, and I thought, "Well, why don't I just take a lot of my parenting columns and make a book out of that?" So I wrote up something called "The Learning Curve." I submitted it to them, they liked it, and we started to work on it.

I was working with one editor, but then another editor briefly came in as a consultant and dropped this idea about the genius in some of his notes. I felt really excited. He was talking about the genius and the Roman concept of genius, and I started to think and look at it. It had so much life for me. So that's really what happened. That editor seeded this idea. I changed the whole book around so that the idea of genius would be central to it.

I just finished another book called *Awakening Genius in the Classroom*. This book also links up with the stages of life book that I'm working on. When I was doing the prebirth chapter, I found all kinds of great cross-cultural material about the existence of a being who is with us at birth. That would be, in fact, Hillman's daimon, or more appropriately, Socrates' daimon. At the end of *The Republic* Plato actually talks very clearly about the daimon being present before birth.

R: Hillman talks about it, and Socrates very openly talked about the voice within him, the guiding voice within him.

TA: Yeah.

R: Especially towards his death, and how comforted he felt because he was following that voice, and he knew that was the right path.

TA: There are so many stories from different cultures. There's a wonderful story in the Jewish *midrash*, from about the ninth century B.C.E., about an angel. Before birth, it said in this story, we have a light that shines above our head from one end of the universe to the other. But just before birth an angel called Laylah comes up to us and strikes us on our lip, and that light vanishes. We take birth in complete ignorance of who we are. And then we have to rediscover who we are. It is said that that's why we have this little indentation on our lip.

I love stories like that. I was in New Zealand and found

that there is a Goddess Hine Titama—the goddess of the dawn—who is similar. I was in Iceland earlier this year, and they have a spirit there called a *fylgja* that also inhabits animals, and is also connected in some way with the caul, the protective covering around the fetus at birth.

I'm going to do a presentation on all of these prebirth images, these deities, at a conference in December. In Buddhism it's Avalokiteshvara (India), or Kuan Yin (China). It seems that so many cultures have a recognition of a being that is with us before we are born. Some people associate that being with one's Higher Self; other people or other traditions say, "No, this is a distinctly different entity," and so this is a puzzler. Or a guide. An angel or an archangel. I don't want to offend any particular religious sensibility, so I say, "This is the spark of divinity," whether it's within us or something that comes from above us.

That is really a nice way for me to think about linking spirituality with education. It's kind of hard, especially if you're working in the public schools, to talk about spirituality without ruffling some feathers and getting people really nervous. People are nervous because all sorts of things have been happening. If somebody has his Bible on his desk, he could go to jail. There's one guy that I know, Charles Haynes, a prominent educator in the field of religion and education, who has written a wonderful book called *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*. He says that there are very good ways of teaching about religion in a public school setting, ways that are legal, constitutionally speaking, in which you're



not encroaching on the separation of church and state.

But I think there are things that public teachers do in schools that shouldn't be done. I know one workshop leader who used to go around having teachers close their eyes and imagine the god within.... Imagine teaching the kids in public schools to imagine this sort of warm orange light, to imagine that the orange light rises, and that everybody in the classroom has their orange light; that kind of stuff. I don't think that's legal. I think the First Amendment has some protections against that, because for a child who's growing up Islamic, or Jewish, the image of floating lights may not work. For those in a Fundamentalist Christian denomination, this kind of thing can be a real offense to their sensibilities and their belief systems. I think we need to respect that.

Of course, at the same time, in education you want to talk about what is important to you, and it's hard for me not to talk about the Spirit or whatever you want to call it. So, a really great way of doing that is to talk about the genius! The genius is such a great word because we can give it different meanings. We have educational connotations to it, very direct psychometric connotations, such as an IQ score of 140 or 150. We've got some cultural connotations—Michaelangelo and Picasso and Einstein were geniuses. The best learning that we can have is at genius levels. So, it's hard to be against the genius, right? Every parent wants his kid to be a genius!

So we have all these educational associations, and then, on the other hand, we have many spiritual and cross-cultural connotations. I find it's a really nice word that allows people to move from feeling "I'm a little uncomfortable here" to feeling "I'm pretty comfortable with this." I find that many people respond to the idea that we're all born with this birthright to learn. It brings us back and reminds us, and everybody needs this reminder, probably every five minutes, that we are natural learners. I think that's probably the most important concept in all of education. I can't conceive of a more important concept.

Once you understand that concept, then you can examine all the education structures and ask, "How true is this structure to this basic idea? Do we see people learning in their natural ways in this learning environment? Or are those natural ways being somehow frustrated, or blocked, or disconnected, or fragmented, or torn apart, or flogged, or stabbed." [Dr. Armstrong grows animated, acting all of this out.]

(Laughter)

R: Let me follow up a little. Many of our readers are in alternative education in one way or another—home-schools, free schools, Montessori schools, democratic schools—or are in the more traditional system but have a great interest in alternative education, as parents and teachers and so forth. How can they help to awaken the

natural genius in the kids they work with, given that they don't have the kinds of constraints that the public school system is working with? What kinds of good learning environments can they help to create, in other words?

TA: Well, it all comes back to awakening their own natural genius, as parents, as teachers.

R: How do they do that?

TA: Good question!

(All laugh)

Carl Jung on the Shores of Lake Zurich

TA: Well, okay. One example I give people is Jung's life. I used to think Jung was a lot greater than I think he is now, frankly, after I learned of some of his connections to early proto-Nazi publications. To me he's not quite as exciting as he used to be. But still, I do like a lot about his work and his life, because he did lead an interesting life. He took some risks.

After he'd broken with Freud and wanted to go his own way, he didn't quite know where he wanted to go, and he went through kind of a depressive period. He had a dream, one night, about playing as a child. He remembered that when he was a child he used to go to the beach of Lake Zurich and play with stones and rocks and gouge out places for little fortresses. He used to make little cities! And being, of course, at that point already a psychoanalyst and pretty keen on the idea that dreams could point to some significant things, he took it very seriously, or maybe very playfully, and he decided as an adult now to begin doing that again.

He had his psychiatric practice there, still on Lake Zurich, and after his morning rounds of clients, he went out on his lunch break to the edges of the lake and played as a child. He just started playing again! He said this process of playing, as a child—I think this is in his book *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*—unleashed a whole string of fantasies and dreams and images that actually got pretty hairy for him. He went pretty deep into a primary process. And yet it provided the creative foundation for the rest of

his life, for forty years after that.

So certainly, that's one very specific thing. Pay attention to your dreams. Remember your childhood, in whatever ways. Remember what you were doing because your genius was alive then. What were you doing? Were you painting? Were you dramatic? Those are just starting places. Another way to start is to say, "What is it already in my life that fills me with passion, that I wish I had more time to do? I want to paint. I want to write. I want to write poetry, or act, or whatever it happens to

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be!" That's the genius, that's the daimon calling. I really love James Hillman's *The Soul's Code*. In fact (laughing), I got so excited, I sent him all my books. I said, "God, I feel like I know you!" And I got a postcard, you know, sort of a standard postcard back.

(Laughter)

TA: It was a cute postcard though. He'd just become number one on the bestseller list—this guy was an overnight sensation—so he had a little postcard of a dam breaking and the waters pouring through and people trying to bail out. I distinctly had a sense of the predicament that he was in. But I really, really liked that, the way that he looked at the destiny experiences of people, and the call of the daimon. We don't have a language for it in traditional psychological models. The whole nature-nurture thing doesn't quite work for that.

R: Is it the case then that if parents have the time and freedom to awaken the daimon, the genius in themselves, without the other constraints, it will just sort of naturally follow that they'll be able to help their students and their children and others?

TA: Well, first of all, you used an interesting phrase, to "have the time to awaken their daimon." Think about that for a minute. Well, let's see, do I have the time? When I think about it from Hillman's point of view, the daimon doesn't wait for time. The daimon doesn't care about time!

R: That's true, that's true.

TA: When I give parent talks, that is the question that comes up: "I don't have the time!" I gave a talk last night, and I remember one guy, this very quiet, wonderful father, saying, "I want to do all these things. But what about the time?" There's this feeling that comes on parents of "should," "could," "I've got to," "I've got this responsibility," "Look, I've got this incredible opportunity and I'm blowing it."

First of all, I'm not a parent. So, I have a hard time giving any kind of response at all to parents about having enough time. I have no idea what parents experience. I have no concept of it! In the second place, I am willing to say something because I'm up there. For some quirky reason my daimon put me in this situation, you know. (Laughs) So, with this father I ended up saying, "Hey, look at your life now. Enjoy your life! The way it is. You don't have to do anything different. Just look at your life!"

And that's where it's at. You have this opportunity. You're so lucky to have this child in your life. You're together. Don't listen to all these "parent experts" who say, "You should be doing x, y, or z. You should be stimulating and enriching the child and blahblahblah." Enjoy the time you have together—that's such a simple

thing!—because the daimon, or the genius, is always there. It's just staring us in the face, I suppose. It's like consciousness itself....

R: So, you're saying that it's not so much that we need to find the time, as it is that we ought simply to enjoy the time that we have already.

TA: Yeah, yeah. See, when you say "find the time"—where are we going to find it? It's hidden! I don't have the time to find the time, you know? I don't know where to start looking. But when this father asked that question, I was thinking, "Well, how much time do you have?" I actually said that to him, but what I was thinking was, "He has 24 hours, like the rest of us."

R: Yes.

TA: And, of course, I don't want to minimize. Some parents do actually have to spend eighteen hours or more *not* in the presence of their kids. So there are very dramatic things that need to be dealt with. But assuming that some of that time is with your child, that's the time. That's the time, right there! The daimon is hanging out in that part of the day as well. And available, too!

R: But, you know, there is a connection here. The very fact that the father who asked you that question has this predicament indicates the complications—culturally, familially, communal—ly—that you're so concerned about. His question comes up only in that kind of context.

TA: Yes, and even though I don't have children, I have my inner child. Somebody said this morning that they just love the way my child comes up, and I thought to myself, "Well, that's why you don't have children. You don't need children! You have enough on your hands already, you know?!" And that's pretty much it. My wife and I got married

when we were around 40, and we thought about having kids. She's a child psychotherapist. It just seemed so overwhelming, to have a child when you've got your hands full with your own inner children!

Anyway, the predicament that I'm having right now—I've been having it for many years—is that I want to write poetry. I want to write novels; I want to write plays. My daimon is telling me to do this. And I can't shake it. And yet, I want to kind of hold on to this secure world of educator or radical educator or multiple intelligence person, and my daimon says, "No, you've got to do this." That's the predicament I find myself in. I'm saying, "I don't have time. I don't have time for it. Uh, no, I'd rather not, thank you!" But my daimon says, "THOMAS, DO IT!" You know, I feel this really powerful voice and I go, "Calm down, uh, I'm too busy. You know, I got a book to write." Or, "I'll do it, but after I finish this next education book." And then I finish that book and wow, there are two or three other education

You're so lucky to have
this child in your life.
You're together. Don't
listen to all these
"parent experts"
who say, "You should be
doing x, y, or z. You should
be stimulating and
enriching your child and
blahblahblah." Enjoy the
time you have together—
that's such a simple thing!

books that have popped up in its place. So I mean, there's a sense in which I'm kind of related or connected to that predicament. We all find the prompting of something powerful, and yet we live in the midst of the ridiculous. We want to live the sublime but we live the ridiculous, the everyday stuff. Trying to find that miracle, that daimon in the midst of the everyday world, I think, is the big challenge.

R: That's good.

TA: I think, isn't that what they write about a lot these days? Finding that thing in the midst of everyday life?

R: Yeah, absolutely. Vietnamese Zen Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh is very clear about that when he says, you meditate in the world. You don't meditate outside of the world.

TA: Yeah. I have been doing meditation for a number of years. I took a little course that Jack Kornfield gave, at a particular time when I really needed it. And it has been really helpful; I just love it. It really is a process of noticing, noticing all the crap that comes through your mind, and then always being able to bring yourself back to your quiet place—I suppose your daimon. But, I don't think of the daimon as being particularly quiet; it can be, though! Does Thich Nhat Hanh talk about the daimon or any of that kind of thing?

R: I don't think so. At least, I've never heard him do that. He does talk about getting in touch with your true self, though. Coming home to your true self. So I think that, in a sense, they're all talking about the same thing.

TA: When I think of the daimon, I think of sort of this wild thing inside. Very unpredictable. And then when I think of meditation, I think of this quiet place. What would it be like to cross Hillman with Thich Nhat Hanh?

The Medicalization of Education

C: You're very critical and suspicious of the diagnosis of ADD and ADHD. Yet many children in schools are given these particular labels. Why is that, and how, in your view, can educators and parents begin rethinking their assumptions about ADD and ADHD, given the extent to which learning disorders in general or ADD/ADHD in particular are now such big business? Do you think it is likely that we'll see an end to this kind of labeling anytime soon?

TA: Well, it's a difficult question. Talk about getting challenged on this one! I had just finished the manuscript for *The Myth of the ADD Child*. I'd gotten all frothed up about it and everything, and then I ran off to Europe to do some teaching on multiple intelligences. I was pretty stressed out; the trip to Europe and the jet lag

and everything got me even more stressed out, and so I didn't sleep for about five days during that workshop. I actually did the five days on one hour of sleep. When I came back to the States, I started taking Prozac.

It was a real dilemma for me, because I had finished a book that talked about 50 ways to improve your child's behavior and attention span without drugs, yet I had just started taking Prozac! At one point, I almost called my editor and said, "Can we call it off?" I started pulling out large amounts of material. That was probably part of the stress, actually, because then finally the Prozac took effect and I felt fine about everything that I'd written!

(All laughing)

TA: When the ADD thing first came out, I thought, "Oh no, not again." I'd already been through this with learning disabilities. I thought, "Are people really going to buy this? Are they really going to?" And sure enough, the ADD book *Driven to Distraction* was featured

on Oprah—anything that's on Oprah is going to be big, right? It also had the seal of approval from the American Psychiatric Association; then the U.S. Department of Education got behind it.

At first, in 1991, Congress voted it down. They voted not to make it a handicapping condition under the special education laws. You see, all these special interest groups came out against it. The NAACP came out saying, "You're going to start stigmatizing African American boys." The National Association of School Psychologists came out against it. Fourteen or fifteen other organizations came out against it, and Congress said, "No." But then, quietly, the U.S. Department of Education circulated these letters to all the Superintendents of Special Education in the States, saying, "Here's how you can do it through some existing loopholes and laws."

Now, with the ADD label, parents don't have to deal with relatives who say, "Why can't you control your own child?" Politicians can crow: "I support legislation for the handicapped! I voted for ADD!" And then there is all the legislation, and as you point out, the growth industry around it—the pharmaceuticals, the tests, the educational kits and the like. It seems to me that it is a disease of our time. But, like the jester who stands outside of things, I look at it and say, "If you can get a little distance, you can see how ridiculous this label is!"

For one thing, our society's falling apart. Is it any wonder that our kids might be a little more jumpy than usual? What's going on with our media? Have you seen an image on TV lately that's been on the screen for more than half a second? Probably not. In fact, they're getting faster and faster. Might *that* have something to do with it? Was anybody asking those kinds of questions? No! Everybody was so locked into "science." "Science says..." or "Doctors say..." "The medical model says..." We worship that.

We can all agree—
restless child. Why?
What accounts for that?
Some people say it's
because there's something
called ADD. And that's
exactly what I say isn't
the case. And people
get angry, you know.

We worship anything that relates to genes, and neurochemicals, and the brain. In education now, what's the big focus? It's not multiple intelligences anymore. It's "brain-based learning." I had a fantasy about doing an article on "pancreas-based learning," learning about the pancreas, its impact on our lives, (Laughing) or "liver-based learning." Aristotle would certainly appreciate that. Or the pineal gland, for Descartes.

I come from a medical family—my father was a pediatrician; my mother was a surgical nurse—so I have memories of growing up as a child with my parents having discussions at the dinner table about these diseases with long scary names. And it scared the pants off me. I think there's got to be something intrapersonally about my feeling a little angry about that, and maybe mobilizing some of that anger in a positive way towards looking at the medical model, saying, "Hey, what's happening here?"

At one time, we might have said, "Gee, this kid has an 'interesting quirk,' is an 'eccentric child,' seems to be 'very moody,' is a 'late bloomer,' or is 'all boy—always really all on the run.'"

Now, we've taken that language, which to me was human, humanistic, and we've medicalized it. And it's scary. I remember as a child how scared I felt, how alienated I felt, by those words. There was no feeling in those words. As a child, living in a world of feeling, I craved words, to be surrounded by words used with feeling. I think that's what sensitized me to them when I started to see them come into education.

It concerns me because teachers now, when they see a child having difficulty with learning in the classroom, no longer ask, "How can I understand how this child learns and how can I change the learning environment to meet his or her needs?" Now the question for them is, "Does he have ADD? Should I have him tested? Should I refer him to be medicated?!"

Again, not that those questions aren't appropriate at certain points. I mean, I learned that medication can be helpful. I learned it in the most difficult way. It's really true; the drug does really help. And it gave me a whole different perspective. Before, when parents had come up to me and said, "You know, my child is dramatically improved since he started taking Ritalin," I would go, "HO! Well, that's because you haven't tried other things!" "Well, yeah..." "No, you haven't tried..." You know, the empathy was gone, was not there. And I think that life's lessons, helping me through this situation, were very valuable. Because now I can see it has its use; however, I also see all kinds of problems with medication.

My father was depressed for much of his life, and he had a horrible time with medications. Of course, they weren't as good back in the 1950s and 60s. I had a medical doctor father given medications by other doctors

that screwed him up, screwed up the whole family. So as you can see, I had a lot of motivation and concern about what medication does to people, and how people can over-rely on medication. I can see how easy it could be if you were taking medication, for someone who didn't like the way you were acting—perhaps your spouse—to turn to you and say, "Do you think maybe you should have your medication increased?"

(All laughing)

TA: I think kids go through that, too. On *Wayne's World*, Garth used to go bazooko and then Wayne would turn to him and say, "Oh, you've got to take more Ritalin!" In the psychological world, that's called attributions, the attribution theory. One of the big concerns about medication is that when kids or parents start taking it they attribute the changes that they make in their [lives] to the medication, as opposed to their effort, their will, their trying.

It's very important for kids, when they're growing up, to feel that the things that they do in life are directly connected to the outcomes. For example, when they work hard at something, they need to know that they're going to be more likely to succeed. Instead, their lives may be wrapped up in their medications. They may come to say, "Oh, yeah. I did punch that kid this morning. But it was only because I forgot to take my Ritalin yesterday. So, yeah, I'll try to remember tomorrow," or, "The reason I got the 'A' is I've been taking my Ritalin very regularly the last two weeks." I think that's really problematic for our age and will continue to be so, as more and more drugs are being used to tweak our systems in different ways.

R: Let me direct the question a little bit towards the parents. Isn't it true that parents would be forced to confront the systemic problem of public school (or public school-oriented) education if they didn't accept the medication route for their children who are diagnosed with ADD?

TA: Yes. That's what I feel. I'll tell you how the *Myth of the ADD Child* got started. I was giving a talk for a group of parents in New York State, when I was in one of my more militant "anti-Ritalin" phases. I said, "I don't know if you parents recognize all the alternatives that are out there!" and I almost got booed off the stage.

In addition to its being a painful experience, it was also a learning experience. It woke me up to this need. They booed at me, but I was convinced they didn't know. I knew what they were reading; I knew they were reading these ADD books that recommended Ritalin, behavior modification, a few educational accommodations, some counseling when it's appropriate, and that's about it. I knew there were all kinds of things out there, and I knew that the ADD world was discrediting a lot of those.

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A lot of these ADD people were saying, “Unless the treatment has been sent through a double blind placebo control study, it has no proof, and therefore it shouldn’t be used.” Okay. What about finding out what interests our children—how are we going to run that one through a double blind placebo control study!? We’ll get some parents who think they’re interesting their child, but really aren’t, although they don’t know that. So it’s a double blind study, you know!

(Laughter)

TA: And then we’ll get some parents that really are interesting their child, and we’ll see what happens. Well, you just can’t do that kind of study. You can do it with a pill, but you can’t do it with most of the real strategies, the real life strategies. That really motivated me to look at the things I already knew about and to research more alternatives.

Challenging Paradigms; Rethinking Ourselves

R: Do you assume, then, that there is such a thing as ADD?

TA: I believe that there isn’t such a thing as ADD!

R: Okay, so what are these strategies being used for, then, if not for a disorder?

TA: Well, what I’ve said all along is that it’s quite obvious that there are behaviors going on. There’s movement. There’s inattention. There’s forgetting things. Everybody can see that!

I have a new book that just came out called *ADD/ADHD Alternatives in the Classroom*, and I use the paradigmatic approach. I talk about Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. And in my presentations, I do the thing with—I get something like...[Armstrong stands and drops a wallet.]

I say, “Okay, everybody agrees that this wallet has dropped, right? Okay, we have no disagreement about that.” Okay, Aristotle would say that that dropped because it *wanted* to drop towards the earth. In fact, the closer it got, the more eager it got to get there. So that was one paradigm, right? Then Newton came along and talked about gravitational attraction; then Einstein came along and talked about equivalence of acceleration and gravity. We’re all looking at the same thing, but these different paradigms are using totally different reasons to account for it.

Same thing. We can all agree—restless child. Why? What accounts for that? Some people say it’s because there’s something called ADD. And that’s exactly what I say isn’t the case. And

people get angry, you know. Worried parents want to trust medical facilities and medical journals. If I were a parent, I’d probably do the same thing.

R: Why the defensiveness?

TA: Defensiveness comes out of insecurity. Imagine: Your child has been told he is dumb and stupid, and everybody’s asked you, “Why aren’t you a better parent?” You’ve taken your child to one doctor, and he says your child has *this* wrong; you go over here, and someone says something else. There’s confusion. There’s disillusionment. There’s hopelessness. So, when you finally come on something like ADD—and there’s a consistency about it, and lots of doctors support it, and there’s a treatment for it, and it seems to be working—it’s like, “I don’t want anybody to rock this boat! I have finally got something together!”

R: Yet, few people in the alternative education movement talk about the frequency of ADD. If it’s really there, and if it’s in so many kids, then you would expect to see it manifested in at least some kind of statistically significant number of alternatively educated kids.

TA: You would expect so, yeah. That is interesting.

R: So the parents would have to say, “Maybe this rat race, two-income, family-fragmented, leaving-‘post-its’-for-each-other-and-calling-that-communication, the television, the latch key, the whole nine yards—that’s what I would have to confront. I don’t want to feel guilty for being a bad parent, for making these choices, so it’s easier to go with all of these authorities.”

TA: Yes it is. Just as it’s easier to take a couple of Tylenol when you get a really bad headache, instead of looking at the way you organize your day and all the stress you put on yourself.

Learning From History

R: So then again: Given that kind of problem, and given the extent to which learning disabilities are such big business now, what’s the hope of making any kind of move that’s going to really be effective on a large scale, in your view?

TA: Well, the culture is going to have to change, and culture will change, because cultures always change. Circumstances are going to change. I don’t know what’s going to happen. One of my scenarios is that it’s only a matter of time before a nuclear weapon is detonated somewhere in the world, again. Culture’s going to change because of that, in some way. And there may be a closing up of family, a coming more to community.

But that’s one of the neat things that I’ve enjoyed over the last two or three years about looking at history, seeing

At one time,
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how it continually changes. What's hot today is not hot tomorrow. I think I've eased away a little bit from wanting and needing to change society. Spending a bit of time with the French Revolution will do that to you. And again, maybe it's because my nature is to stand outside and look, and maybe it's both with comfort and trepidation to think things are going to change. Okay, we know they're going to change. They're going to get better; they're going to get worse. Maybe it'll get worse before it gets better; maybe it'll just be different. But it will change.

And so ADD is going to go away. I don't know about medications. The real concern I have now is with the bioreductionism of our culture, the way in which—with greater and greater scientific knowledge, and as we map out every aspect of the human genome—we are going to be in a position to change the structure, the genetic makeup. We're going to be able to use drugs to do all sorts of things that we can only crudely do now.

However, that pattern may be disrupted at some point. I mean, science is really relatively young. Somebody just wrote a book about the end of science, saying, "Well, we have reached the end. We can look back to the Enlightenment and see how, in that period, they thought, 'Well, we know everything there is to know!' Then, whoops! We slide into something else!" And so, I'm thinking that although now we're in a highly scientific paradigm, we're going to slip into something else. I just don't know what it is.

R: There is a lot of emphasis on the spiritual now. Do you think we're heading there?

TA: Do you mean that we're going to slip back into the Dark Ages?

(Laughter)

TA: That's another thing. I'm not sure I know what is right anymore, from reading about things. I used to think the Dark Ages or the Light Ages. I've been getting excited reading about science again, because when I was a kid I wanted to be a scientist, worse than anything. Sometimes I think, well, all this religious fervor, isn't it just a call for ignorance and superstition? For example, look at what's happening in Kansas with evolution. People want to just totally bury it. Still, I sometimes go through periods of being angry at science—feeling that science is an apparition of our minds. In fact, I wrote a little sketch about this a few days ago, about the birth of reason. About 600 B.C.E., there's this Greek farmer. He's worshipping the gods, and his goat is about to be sacrificed. All of a sudden, a cosmic ray comes and zaps him and he says, "What am I doing?! I need this goat! I could make a lot of money from this goat! Okay, get these irrigation canals going!"

(Laughter)

TA: Sometimes I think that perhaps rationality is just this mutation that happened relatively recently that will

lead to our self-destruction. Then there are other times, particularly when I think about what's happening in Kansas or what happened with Galileo—what he went through in relationship to the church—that I begin to feel, "Well, science, all right!" Look at the courage it took to pull out of that incredible period of religious frustration. Think that one thousand years after Aristotle nobody ever bothered to check out a few things that he said about falling bodies and such. You have to wonder about that kind of thing, you know? That's why I go both

ways on religion, too. There are times when I feel this is the renewal and the awakening, and there are other times when I feel like saying, "This is just more of church about to happen."

R: I want to go back a bit. You talk about media in some of your work. We're in an age in which we can sit at home for long periods of time, using our computers to gain access to all kinds of information that, previously,

we couldn't obtain easily, if at all. For some of this information, at one time we needed to be where the source of the information was (in a classroom, for example), or else we had little or no chance to obtain the information. What about computers in schools, in classrooms, and in our homes? Do you think that the school evolution will get to the point where we're more or less out of that traditional, sitting-at-a-desk, listening-to-a-teacher classroom structure?

TA: I would certainly like that. Somebody asked me last night, "What is the perfect school?" I said perfect is not a word that I particularly like, because the clinical literature suggests that there's a link between perfectionism and depression. Again, I'm questioning some of my idealism, because idealists are always bound to be frustrated. The perfect school. I told her that the best schools are the ones that look like real life, that are like real life. They can take any shape or structure, but the more they look like real life, the better they are! It's just as simple as that. So that's why I like Illich's book *Deschooling Society* and Holt in his later work, when he got into homeschooling. I like the idea of taking the walls down, looking at the way life is organized—'cause that's the way education originally was; that's the way it really should be, any way that happens.

So, certainly I find that the Internet is positive, although there's a lot that can be said negatively about it. In a positive way, it's helped. I'm a really self-motivated, intrapersonal learner, so I love to do things on my own. But it's stressful! We were not biologically programmed to sit in front of these glaring screens. And yet, at the same time, I'm sorry, I can't take one side or the other! You have to be amazed by some of the things we've come up with.

R: I want to make sure I ask this: What can you say to our readers to help them find and follow their own paths to compassionate, mindful teaching and learning?

TA: Mindful, compassionate teaching ... that sounds kind of Buddhist.

Pay attention to your
dreams. Remember
your childhood,
in whatever ways.
Remember what you
were doing, because your
genius was alive then.

R: Mindfulness, however, isn't necessarily Buddhist. I don't think you have to be Buddhist to live mindfully.

TA: No, not at all. I am just trying to feel the words. I am sensitive to the words, so maybe if you could throw a few more words at me, because when I think "mindfulness" and "compassion," I just go back to Spirit Rock and think of Jack Kornfield.

R: Yeah, it is beautiful there.

TA: But there isn't a lot happening. They're walking and chopping wood.

R: Well, maybe that's it, you know. Maybe you have already answered it about getting back to doing the things that we really want to do. We are hoping to reach readers who really care about family, community, and mindfulness in their living. So I am sort of asking you for some of those words of wisdom. But I am sensing in you the Coyote; you are the kind of teacher who is the Trickster. I am hesitant, but I need to see what you are going to say.

TA: Well, I am used to giving a patterned response: "Well, Richard, compassionate mindful teaching is something that we must always strive for in our lives. I feel that if parents are able to wake up each morning, saying that this is the first day of my life and of my children's lives, then they will be able to take joy in the day and make each moment an opportunity for learning. Learning can emerge, essentially, like a lotus flower." But if I talk like this, it is missing something.

(Laughter)

R: Well, authenticity is one of the things that it is missing! Profundity is also missing!

TA: So, talk to me, talk to me!

R: Okay, let's say that I am a reader of *Paths of Learning*. Maybe I am a homeschooler or maybe I want to start a free school in my community. Maybe my kids are young and I am looking at Waldorf or Montessori, and so forth, but you know, I am caught up in this problem: I have to work and my husband works, but I don't want to do the public school thing. What do I do? You have challenged all the dominant paradigms that I have either accepted or that I am trying to challenge, but I am not quite sure how to challenge or change them. I am not sure where to go from here. What would you tell me?

TA: Well, weren't we talking about the daimon, the genius, the voice that speaks within?

R: I don't know how to tap that, though. I don't know how to get to that.

TA: Well, who told you to read this magazine? Who told you to question these beliefs? Who told you to be dissatisfied? If you are dissatisfied about something, then obviously there is something else that you want, that you are looking for, so that is the place you start: "I am looking for something that allows my child to be who he is."

R: Okay, let me ask you this: My kid was diagnosed

with ADD. I want to listen to you. I want to listen to my inner voice. I don't want to harm my child. And my fear is that I will do the wrong thing.

TA: I was at an ADD conference, and I couldn't believe this. I took this workshop on ADD and math, I think, and somebody said, "What if my child is off medication for two weeks while he is learning the times-tables?" And the response was, "Oh, that could be irremediable damage during this critical time." I couldn't believe it! The thing is, you are in the reality.

I started out the *Myth of the ADD Child* with a metaphor from the *Chronicles of Narnia* about one of the wicked witches that would send out this smoke that would cause everyone to forget Narnia. One character, Puddleglum, could just barely hold on to the memory that there really was Narnia. But that is all that it took. He started to kind of rustle people up.

Perhaps everyone else is suffocating, but as long as there is one person who has just enough consciousness to start grabbing people and getting them some air ... You know what I am talking about?

I am alluding to our suspicion that there is not enough air. We are alive, alive enough to know what is going on, but when we are in the middle of it, we feel afraid. What if Calvin (the theologian, not the cartoon character!) was right? What if, before we were born, some of us were destined to be damned and some of us were destined to be saved? What if that's really true? How can I think about my life now? In fact, in Weber's book on the Protestant ethic, he talked about the kind of anxiety that that provoked. The counselors, the clergy had to spend all their time dealing with the anxieties. In fact, that is how the church formed, trying to cope with the anxieties of people, given the nature of Calvin's proclamation.

So that is what it is. I am afraid because I am in this world that believes that I can damage my child by removing him or her from this oxygen-deprived coal mine—or from Plato's cave—into the sunlight. What if there are monsters waiting, or what if the sun burns his



skin and he gets melanoma and dies?

It takes a lot of courage. But how do you do anything differently? Look at Socrates' example. Socrates could have walked away from the table. He could have gone off to Corinth for a few months. By the time he got back, everybody would have forgotten the situation. But no, his daimon said no. And he had to be true to that. His whole life was based upon that.

R: That is absolutely right. And it was more important than the physical manifestation of his being. He said, in effect, "The question is, is it morally correct for me to escape?" And he went on, "Haven't we agreed that the important thing is not to live, but to live well? And that to live well means to live honorably and rightly?" And Crito answers, "Yes." And then Socrates says, "Well, then, we have to decide whether my escaping from jail is the morally right thing to do, or whether my staying in

jail is the morally right thing to do." He makes a wonderful point because he says that we have a moral disjunction on our hands if we say, "I believe in doing x but I'm going to do y anyway."

TA: And if he abrogates the moral responsibility, then what happens to everything else that he had said and what happens to the moral fabric of the whole society? But I'm no Socrates, you know. I like the going off to Corinth option. I would have walked out in a minute.

You know, there are many metaphors that talk about how difficult it is to go into the unknown and to take the leap. You recall the one that says, "I led my students and I told them to LEAP! And they flew!" It gets a little sugary, but the first time you hear it, it can be very powerful.

R: So, do you have any final words?

TA: Just one: Joy!



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