A DIFFERENT EDUCATION

BY Jeffrey S. Cramer

Kazia was learning to add. "What is three and five?" I began.

"Eight," she replied.

"What is two and four?"

"Six."

"Great. What is six and three?"

"Four."

My eyebrows went up slightly. "Four?" I asked.

"It's a miracle!" she answered. She was right, it was a miracle, but the miracle was not that six and three after centuries of equaling nine somehow now equaled four but that, given that she knew she was wrong, she was not embarrassed. She did not try to guess at a new sum quickly until she hit the right one. She confidently made a joke and then proceeded, after we were done laughing, to try again. Being wrong was okay sometimes. It was not the end of the world, although for me, when I was young, it was certainly close.

I can recall the embarrassment of being wrong in a classroom. I might be told to stand up. I might be told to stand in the hall. The day of the dunce cap was not that far behind. The teacher might have a belittling remark about my not paying attention or ask me to repeat the question I only half-heard while thirty pairs of eyes, hanging over thirty smirking mouths, watched intently. The answer was not what they were intent on. It was the fact that if I was told to sit down, they might be told to stand up and all eyes would turn on them.

If you were right, you were right, and that was the end of it, unless of course you were right a little too often, in which case you became labeled as a "smarty-pants," "nerd" or "teacher's pet." If you were wrong, you were a fool, and your wrong answer, if excelling in wrongness, might take on mythic proportions as it became part of schoolyard folklore.

"John said that plastic grows on plastic trees!"

"Betty said fish don't drown because they can hold their breath a long time."

If you were crowned a particularly great fool, your name would then become a further hook for ridicule.

"Hey, Scotty. Wipe my ass, Scotty tissues."

"Ronald. Hey, Ronald McDonald, burger-brain!"

In time we learned that mistakes are things to be ashamed of, hidden if possible, and that, if you happened to have the upper hand, it may be the best time to kick the person who is down. It makes good business sense, as all adults know, and helps make the world go round to take advantage and make sure you come out on top. It is a dog-eat-dog world. Competition is what makes it all worthwhile and the purpose of competition is to win at all costs, to come out ahead, be first, be best. The trouble is that if you have a classroom of twenty children and you have one winner, you have nineteen losers.

To accept that we live in a dog-eat-dog world is to accept our situation as blindly as those who believe that boys will be boys and that girls will be girls and refuse to try to make this a little better place in which to live. That we now live in a world where, albeit slowly, boys can be sensitive without being sissies and girls can play baseball without being butch shows that our consciousness can change, even if it is only one child at a time.

Although my wife, Julia, and I are not unaware of the competitiveness that surrounds us, we do not want our children to feel at the end of every task begun that if they haven't won, they have lost; if they haven't

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accomplished, they have failed. Certainly our children are being deprived of some aspects of competitive socialization by our choosing to minimize the rivalry that is everywhere prevalent, but we will have to live with the consequences. If our children grow up just a little more compassionate and respectful, perhaps a little more sensitive and responsible, we have only ourselves to blame.

Although these truths may not be self-evident and, like any generalization, they do not hold true for everyone, still we do not want either Kazia or Zoë learning these lessons of competition and contention so early in their lives, whether they are being taught outright or subliminally. If they have to learn something about hard knocks, they will have to learn it later. Childhood is a time for exploring, being free, being open, but the stigma of being wrong quickly changes that, making it more important to be right than interested, more important to win than be fair, more important to shine than be responsible.

When I am asked if Kazia is going into kindergarten, as if this were the only choice, I respond, "No, she's homeschooled." Sometimes I get looks of confusion; other times, questions aimed to make me see the errors of our ways. Although there has been an increase in the number of homeschoolers every year since the early 1980s, there is still a long way to go before it becomes as commonplace as other formerly foreign things such as bagels or pizza. I use the term "homeschooled" loosely, in the broadest possible context, to include all children who are not enrolled in either a public or private, formally structured institution of learning; the notion here incorporates such terms as "unschooled," "natural learning," "experience-based learning" and "child-led education."

Many parents of schooled children, whether those children are publicly or privately schooled, feel threatened or challenged by the presence of homeschooling families. They hear an implied, and sometimes spoken, criticism by a parent choosing to withdraw her or his child from the school system that they, the schooling family, accept. Like discussions of religion or politics, debates about homeschooling can quickly become fuel for a feud as real as that involving the Hatfields and McCoys. Although we live in a country founded on certain freedoms, we are not necessarily tolerant toward those freedoms which challenge or question whatever the commonly held beliefs are at the time, and we work hard to either absorb or, if that fails, dismiss, or even punish, through legal action or social exclusion, those who won't conform.

Although we do not choose to send our children to school, I do not wish to completely disparage those who do. I don't want our children to say, as Margaret Mead did, "My grandmother wanted me to have an education, so she kept me out of school," but more simply, "My parents wanted me to have a different education." I understand that for some school is the best, and for many the only, possible option. For us, homeschooling is the best and therefore the only option. In the same way that simply the presence of a vegetarian can sometimes make a carnivore defensive, our reasons for homeschooling might appear as a criticism against persons who choose not to homeschool, but this defensive position on their part is only the nature of the beast. A plus on one side must always appear as a minus on the other.

When we first thought about the idea of being a homeschooling family, I began to ask the question: what is a homeschooler? I wanted a clear-cut answer such as "A homeschooler is one who ..." What I found was a question as unanswerable as "What is a woman?" "What is a Native American?" "What is a Jew?" There were too many answers. There were no answers.

What I found was that as soon as I began to define my idea of a homeschooler around one homeschooling parent such as Amy, I would look at David and see something different, so I would redefine and look at Jenny, and then back at Amy, and need to redefine again. Then there were the different methods: some persons followed a strict adult-led curriculum by virtually

recreating the classroom in their home; some followed a freer, more child-led style, joining in whatever educational adventure their child wished to pursue; and many fell somewhere in between.

The redefinitions I created were endless. All or most homeschoolers shared certain general characteristics, but their motives were individual. All or most homeschooling parents tried to fulfill certain roles, but their needs and the needs of their children were all personal. Similar goals may have been set, but their time frames were all unique. At best, when all was said and done, when all the questions were asked and all inconclusive conclusions considered, I could only define them (soon to be us) as a group of individuals whose most common interest, like that held by most parents, was the welfare of their children, even if their ideas of what best constitutes that welfare are disparate and sometimes diametrically opposed both to those within the group and to those without. Their common ground was nebulous, at best.

And for the homeschooled children I knew it was the same: Emily, Ari, Sarah, Eli…Their needs were so distinct, what they were getting out of being homeschooled was so dissimilar, that I came to no conclusion other than that, if the needs of two children in one homeschooling family were so vastly different, if their interests and pace of learning and exploration were so varied, then it could not be possible for one teacher in one classroom not only to meet their needs but even to discover what those needs might be.

Despite the embarrassments, the pain and the less-than-ideal opportunities for learning, I harbored some fond memories of my school years, so the idea of not sending our children to school was still somewhat foreign to my nature. Yet, as our children slowly approached school age, I began to look back over my own schooling, however cherished at times, and question the skills that I had developed to cope with or otherwise make my way through school: my adeptness at staying in the good graces of my teachers; my defense mechanisms that protected me from embarrassment; my ability to learn what was needed for the grade; my techniques for not getting caught at whatever I should not have been doing; my drive to compete and win.

I learned in school that worth comes from elsewhere, from outside. What we all strove for sitting in that classroom, when all was said and done, was not knowledge, but praise, the star on the forehead, the holy "A." We learned because if we learned we got a pat on the back. This is not to say that praise is an unworthy thing, but when we value what we are doing solely for the praise from others, then our motives, intentionally or not, are wrong, self-demeaning and unhealthy. What I hope our unschooled children will come to understand is that the best value placed on what they are doing comes from within themselves. Until self-approval is deemed higher than the approval of others, there is often little value to what we do

Kazia is learning to read. The first thing she did was to memorize her favorite books. She would sit down with one of them and pretend to read. As she recited the book from memory, she would try to pick out the words on the page. Sometimes she would be right, often she would be wrong, but soon her ability to recognize the letters and match some of the word sounds with the letter sounds gave her the ability to point to each word correctly in turn.

Eventually she began to know when something was wrong. She couldn't quite remember the right word and would have to guess, but her guess was often an unconscious rudimentary reading of the word. She may have felt as if she were guessing, and in some cases she was, but in other cases her brain, without any fanfare, was reading. She didn't know it, but she was beginning to read.

We don't grill her with rules of grammar. We don't teach her which letters are silent when, which vowels are long and which short, until needed. When a word has a peculiar spelling which doesn't reflect its sound, we just tell her the word so she won't waste time getting frustrated over it. When she is stuck, we help her sound things out by reminding her of other words that are spelled similarly or maybe, at this time, teaching her some rule. I write her Seussian-type capitalized rhymes to have fun with—"I HAD A PIN. IT WAS THIN. IT WAS A THIN PIN. THIS THIN PIN HAD KIN. IT WAS THE THIN PIN'S TWIN." They are short enough to read through and long enough to give her a sense of accomplishment.

When I bring books home from the library, she will sit on the floor with them all spread out before her, then pick out one with pictures that appeal to her and try to read. Each day, each hour, she propels herself on to a new level. Like climbing in our backyard or walking on a balance beam, each day her reading adventures bring her a new accomplishment. Each little setback remains little and temporary. Each minor advance is a step along the way to new levels of confidence and joy.

Self-motivated interest, as I have come to observe, is the strongest impetus to a child's, or anyone's, learning. It is that which makes the idea of child-led learning so appealing. Discovering something on one's own, without being led to it, without being taught it, can fill a person with curiosity and a natural desire to learn. "It is a miracle," Albert Einstein once said, "that curiosity survives formal education." Thoreau tells the story of how his free time in the fields, out of his Concord classroom, led him on to further study:

> I well remember with what a sense of freedom and spirit of adventure I used to take my way across the fields with my pail, some years later, toward some distant hill or swamp, when dismissed for all day, and I would not now exchange such an expression of all my being for all the learning in the world.... I suddenly knew more about my books than if I had never ceased studying them. I

> found myself in a schoolroom where I could not fail to see and hear things worth seeing and hearing—where I could not help getting my lesson—for my lesson came to me. Such experience often repeated was the chief encouragement to go to the Academy and study a book at last. (1980, 248)

This excerpt provides just one example of how experience leads to learning, not the other way around. The real world versus the world of the classroom: there is no competition. Perhaps, in part, this is why children in a classroom are often made to sit with their backs to the windows.

In the middle of my junior year in high school, we moved. The school I had been attending was very progressive; my new school, much less so. What I had learned in my math class in the first few months of my junior year in my old school put me far ahead of where most other students were in my new one. It took two months for my new school to catch up. Since I already knew what was being taught, although I had been just an average student in my old class, I appeared a genius in my new environment.

For two months I could sit back and not have to exercise one brain cell, and so I didn't. There was nothing to challenge me in that classroom, so for fifty minutes my brain shut down at least as far as mathematics was concerned. Sure I thought about other things—my girlfriend, Saturday night, the latest Stones album—sure I wrote poems with half a brain, doodled doodles with the other half, but these things I did almost on automatic pilot. If I were caught, even though I knew the answer to any question the teacher could ask me at this point, I would be reprimanded, showing that order was of a higher consideration than knowledge. There was little to excite my interest because there was no opportunity for me to work ahead of my classmates at whatever my own pace might be. Boredom and learning became synonymous.

What I learned most in this math class was about the lowest common denominator. I was appalled by this equation. When it comes to Kazia and Zoë's education, we do not want the lowest common denominator to dominate their learning. Each is to be the only denominator in her own life.

"The chief, if unadmitted, purpose of the school system," Wendell Berry wrote, "is to keep children away from home as much as possible" (1981, 157). In 1995, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 60% of all children under the age of six were in some kind of non-parental arrangement, fewer than one-third of whom were in the care of a relative. As if school were not enough, we have invented preschool, and if that were not enough, we have created day care institutes, euphemistically referred to as school by many parents, that start almost from day one. Granted that some home situations necessitate the use of these institutions and that for some families there are no other options; still, it is difficult for me to accept that 60% of all children live in households in which some kind of home care is not possible.

Berry also wrote that "Parents want their children kept out of their hair; education is merely a by-product, not overly prized" (1981, 157). My wife and I knew that the purpose of sending our own children to school was, first and foremost, for them to receive a good education; yet, every mainstream and not-so-mainstream publication has carried articles about the failures of the public school system. Just look at reading skills alone: a 1990 study released by then Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos reported that 42% of all thirteen year olds lacked reading skills at what is considered, by those who consider such things, the appropriate level and that 58% of seventeen year olds were not reading at their appropriate age level. Seven years later, in 1997, Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley stated, "Forty percent of our children are not reading as well as they should by the end of the third grade."[1] The following year, in the Fifth Annual State of American Education Address, Riley relegated this failure rate to the euphemism, "Reading scores are not where we want them."[2]

If parents are shown these facts and still send their children into the schools, one has to at least question their purpose. If your auto mechanic has a 40% failure rate, would you bring your car to him? If a third of your attorney's clients go to jail, would you want her defending you? If your pediatrician loses a quarter of his patients, would you still put your children in his care? Then why, if education is the purpose of schools and the schools are shown to be failing at such rates, do parents continue to send their children there? This is a question I can only ask. Or perhaps the better, although more frightening, question is: What is an acceptable failure rate where the welfare of our children is concerned?

Occasionally my wife and I hear words of support from parents who admire what we do, although they seem to feel that, for whatever reasons—economical, psychological, physical, sociological—they cannot teach at home. There are those who, with a little encouragement from family or friends, might give homeschooling a try. Sometimes, however, a reaction is vehement. One person asked, "How can you do that to your children?"

There is an apocryphal story about Thoreau, who, when in jail for not paying a poll tax supporting the war with Mexico, was asked, "Henry, why are you here?" He replied, "Why are you not here?"

How can we do that to our children? I am tempted to paraphrase Thoreau's response: "How can you not?"

We want to regain responsibility, to actually share the mantle of responsibility with our children, for not only their education but also their lives. Learning at home is not just about learning to read or write. It is not just about learning how to add two numbers together or knowing why a whale is not a fish. It is about learning to live, to interact, to be a part of a community that is comprised not just of children doing children things, but also of people doing people things. Not being

labeled and thereby limited—as a student in a particular grade, as a jock or a nerd, or even merely as a child—is part of what homeschooling has to offer.

Homeschooling encourages children to question and then to search for solutions and answers. It encourages children to challenge first and then accept, or not, afterwards. It enables children to follow their instinctual desire for learning and discovery and to work toward a fulfillment of their personal needs and interests. Homeschooling empowers them to explore with the sole purpose, not of achieving teacher or even parental approval, but of achieving knowledge, understanding, and a love of learning that will not stop when the bell rings.

Notes

1. http://www.ed.gov/Speeches/02-1997/StateofED.html
2. http://www.ed.gov/Speeches/980217.html

References

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