

OAKTAGE AND EYEBALLS:
THOUGHTS ABOUT CHILDREN, EDUCATION, AND SOCIETY

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(NOTE: This file contains only the last three chapters. The first three are
in another file.)

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CHAPTER III: THOUGHTS ABOUT CREATIVITY

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”.

“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 which 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 it!” 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. Indeed, I have found it necessary to do. 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 have formed any firm opinion. For example, I haven’t yet decided whether or not 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 or not there’s a word for “creativity” in every language. I do feel strongly, however, about many other things; for example, we need not look to judge children as to whether or not they’re creative (especially at any particular moment). 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”. In other words, I have strong feelings about how NOT to proceed with respect to creativity.

THE OAKTAG SYNDROME

When I was a child, 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 seemed 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 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 at all but an end in itself. Oaktag qua oaktag. I probably spent a total of days and weeks just fiddling with the oaktag, or perhaps doing predictable and non-creative projects.

Four 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," and soon afterwards 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 decades.

If 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 to that AAUW 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," only 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, and 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 truncated, especially if you held the pencil at a certain angle. I haven't yet written a poem about it 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 tells me how, when she was in first grade, she loved the letter G, the way it curled in like that, so fancy, like 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, she tells me, she used to write pages and pages of "her" type of G, and she somehow 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. 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, "the way," I later 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." Maybe someday 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, of coming up with a definite product, especially right then and there. Creativity can be of the oaktag, or the eyeball, variety. It isn't always obvious, at the time, what's creative and what's not, nor 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 doesn't mean that it's not, nor that it's not useful in some other way.

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 was not considered enough. And perhaps the pottery was like my oaktag. Perhaps he needed or wanted it for some emotional, or psychological reason. As is often said, maybe the pottery was "therapeutic". Maybe, even, he needed something to NOT be creative with, to relax with -- in order, perhaps, to be creative with something ELSE. Maybe the pottery was a kind of complement, or catalyst, to something else. (And perhaps, 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 judgemental about it, seems like developing a pre-natal test to determine whether or not 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”, and also 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, 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 that creativity meant “cute”; I did not think of it as being serious.

Indeed, throughout my early childhood two themes ran parallel; (1) I had serious thoughts (For example, at age three I would sit on the livingroom floor drawing and cutting, simultaneously contemplating things like how far down the ground went and whether other people were conscious as I was, and chanting “Cut a scissors with a scissors.”) (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 when I began writing my own diary.

It's fine, maybe even advisable, for children not to 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. Or at least adults need to get rid of any “cute-ness” or accomplishment/performance mindset concerning children's creativity.

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 the same thing that'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 itself 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. It's a kind of gearing up. There seems to be at least some corollation between creativity and certain disorders, such as ADD, autism, and bipolar disorder. As with much living and learning, disorder in one sense often means order in some other sense.

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 went, there would certainly be exceptions and additions. There do, however, seem to be certain ingredients common to the experience of many creative people. and we shall see that giving creativity authority status tends to deny children, and adults, the full scope of these ingredients. This (longer than usual) 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 are not discouraged -- from happiness and sadness to anguish and obsession to the more subtle "oaktag type" of emotions. 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 on paper, 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 about the experience of being a mathematician, and of the process of math research, and possible metaphors in non-mathematical life (independent of whether any theorem gets proven or published). The subject per se is emotional, 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 child, my mother told me about an artist she had read of who alternately painted and rested for ten-year periods. "I guess that's the way his inspiration works," she said. In waiting for the products of creation, the world (meaning parents, teachers, friends, colleagues, and other adults) often needs to be patient. So does the creative person herself. 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 forty 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 (especially in the case of childhood creativity) 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." 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." For example, 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 "a writer," "a painter," and so on. Not knowing in general might be an important stage in anyone's development. Perhaps, in fact, 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 her creativity BASE, her emotional strong-hold. 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 will 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 potchkying with oaktag. But it is 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.

For example, as a writer, I sometimes simply write my journals, or make up stories, often non-creative, for my kids. As a mathematician, I often go back to problems I worked on as a teen-ager, or indulge in memories of sitting in fifth-grade math class working out whether there was such a thing as "Mr. Magic 4." I am 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, just as Kitty, an advanced quilt-maker, is still fascinated by the fitting together of two completely different ("clashing") prints. And most creative, or non-creative, people like to putter around the house.

(4) Periods of feeling like the ONLY creative person: Going the other way, I also believe that creative people need to go through stages and moments when they think or feel, at least on some level, that they're the ONLY ones creative.

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 could certainly relate to that and I don't think of it as being self-indulgent. It is 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 perhaps were STILL there) threatened that privacy. It sort of took my creativity, my projects, my very thoughts and self, AWAY from me.

I think, now, of something that happened this past weekend with Devin, now aged ten. In a book called "The Junior Encyclopedia of Authors," I happened upon the Hugh Lofting page, in which he related the very interesting and politically, personally, and historically relevant, 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, and writing illustrated letters to his children back home. I found it fascinating, and I also thought it would make a good, and short, thing to let Devin know about, and then enter into our home-schooling log under Writing, History, and Civics.

I didn't want to be obviously educational about it, nor invasive or dishonest in any way, so I decided to let it lie for awhile. A couple of hours later, Dev and I were riding in the car with another mother and her children, and I began telling the other mother about the interesting things 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 way, said (and I realized that I wasn't at all surprised at this), "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 Dev'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, the 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 had done "wrong" -- or at any rate what the kids were being such good sports about -- was not that I had been invasive or dishonest or too educational, but that I was piling "the giants" on their shoulders.

When I was a kid, there seemed something moralistic and invasive about this "shoulders of giants" business; it sometimes made me feel small and inconsequential. Moreover, it felt irrelevant, in particular irrelevant to whatever creative projects I was working on at the time. "So?" I might have thought. "I didn't say I WASN'T sitting on the shoulders of giants. I never said I made it up myself."

Indeed, 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 been done before. In some sense my projects felt like REdiscovering, or REinventing. Perhaps, even, my fantasy was that the person who had done it first would somehow, like a teacher, NOTICE that I had also done it, and without being taught by her; perhaps she would be impressed with me; perhaps I would "creep into her heart." (I realize that a lot of this has to do with my own psychological issues, or former issues; to a large degree 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. Still, what I am saying seems to hold water, for many people. In fact, in our schooling society, EVERYBODY to some extent is brought up on admiration rather than love.)

So, in apparent contradiction to the title of this section, I did NOT feel like the only creative person. Perhaps I felt like the SECOND creative person, or the second one to come across this ONCE-explored territory. I was the only SECOND creative one; there were often, in my childhood self's inner life, TWO creative people. Or maybe, all told, there were two creative BEINGS, myself and some sort of God which I somehow sensed, even though I came from atheist parents who did not teach us, at least not at early ages, about any concept of God. I remember, when I was three, sitting on the living room rug, drawing and cutting, and feeling that there were in the world two conscious beings, myself and this God (I didn't actually think the word "God."). The others were like dolls -- robots, as kids would say nowadays. Indeed, over time, I had various impressions concerning the way things were, and many of them were dark, and some contradicted others. And I didn't, not just yet, need any adult to interfere.

Now that I am an adult, there are still moments when, in my creative life, I need to invoke these impressions -- to forget, for example, that there are other books on home-schooling, or other "poet mathematicians," or even other people. And I try to allow my own children their impressions, however unrealistic or even self-centered they might seem. (I think, right now, of Bret at five, "aligning" himself with God and the tooth fairy, being the THIRD creative being!)

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 (and coming pretty close . . . , also proving other theorems which I have yet to encounter in math literature). And taking young children to concerts has been the first step in the making of a prodigy.

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 for kids to be creative. There's a difference between taking a five-year-old to a concert because, subtly or otherwise, we hope or expect that she will become inspired and turn into 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 baby-sitter. The difference, I believe, is the difference between authority and life.

Adults need to be sensitive; I can't say that enough times. We need to try to get rid of our agendas, and/or to understand what our agendas are. And we need, again, to separate out our children's needs from our own. Looking back at my own childhood, I feel that my parents, though they firmly believed in not pressuring children, nonetheless had their needs and frustrations around classical music and culture in general. I can remember them saying, about some of my creative endeavors, "Oh, that's wonderful. [Pause.] Of course, it isn't Mozart." (My therapist, when I was in therapy, once remarked, "it's amazing that you still love classical music!") I was always, at some level, aware of my parents' needs and agendas. When I was very young, maybe five or six, I had a dream which I believe is at least partly explained by this phenomenon, in conjunction with Freud's wish-fulfillment theory of dreams. What I wished, I believe, was that I loved music even more than I did, in order to please my parents even more than I already was (since, so was my perception, I wasn't already pleasing them enough.) In the dream I had been taken to a children's concert, and at the end of the concert, someone told me that afterwards there was to be an "after-concert concert" in one of the rooms upstairs. The person didn't say which room or what music, but as soon as we were let out of the "first concert", I raced to find that "in-group after-concert." As I ran I called out, "Music! That's for me I still remember the crowds, and the curve of that stairway on my left. As clear as yesterday is the blur and the rushing, the rushing towards that proving-myself-once-again room. And then the arriving at some small chamber, in which I saw no piano, no violin, no musical instrument at all, only an electric chair. Just before I woke up, a man forcibly picked me up by my armpits and began putting me on that chair.

Through the years, I have also felt that perhaps that electric-chair part at the end of the dream was about my being punished for pretending to want to go to that after-concert concert, or for exaggerating my already present but too meager desire to go.

When we take children to concerts to inspire them, are they truly inspired, or do they only WISH they were inspired, or inspired enough to please us? And do they TRY to be inspired, perhaps PRETEND to be inspired? Whose needs, indeed whose inspirations, are these children fulfilling? And at what cost? Moreover, would 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"?

(5) Freedom from too much input: Chapter I 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. This, I believe, could apply as well to older children, even to adults.

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. In actuality, as many parents have observed, these things are not ALWAYS over-stimulating. When kids are enjoying something, or when they're interested in it, or have chosen it, the rules concerning "over-stimulation" sometimes need to be waived. Adults can be more flexible when they decide what is over-stimulating.

Going the other way, we can also be more on the alert for less-known over-stimulating phenomena. I'm thinking along the lines of what I said in the previous section. Too much emphasis on "the giants," for example, or too many giants, period, can be over-stimulating. Sometimes ANY amount of this is over-stimulating. 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 add them." "We've finished our math; now let's tackle science." How often are children talked to like that, in and out of school?

I feel especially sensitive (perhaps even too critical) about writing classes, or workshops, for children, even for teen-agers. Certainly I believe the input in them should be minimal, and given only when asked. (And consider the question: Are the classes or workshops themselves asked for by the kids?) 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 (because the books were usually unfinished) that I had written when I was a kid, along with some writings of my own children or other children I knew. I did not say anything about how THEY should write, either grammatically or creatively, nor did I say anything about WHETHER they should 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; for the class I reserved my more ordinary writings. Also, 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 does not 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 one sentence. And it doesn't occur immediately; it's a delayed reaction. Common questions often asked in workshops, or by well-meaning teachers, or workshop leaders, or home-schooling parents, are often on the order of "Are you expressing what you're feeling?" To me this seems a trite and invasive question. (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 ordinary -- in fact, I've used them in my present-day writing and some have been published.)

The poet Anne Sexton's psychiatrist, the one who first advised her to write poetry, chose not to "go over" that poetry with her, chose 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. I believe that most times are to be left alone. The times to be stimulated are exceptions, punctuations. A creative ADULT knows how to monitor as to when she needs stimulation time and when she needs alone time. A child hasn't learned how to monitor yet, at least not consciously. Thus adults need to be careful about introducing stimulation in children's lives, whether in the form of "inspiration", suggestions, writer's workshops, or whatever. 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, or at least not HINDER them from feeling secure, in their creative lives.

What do I mean by "freedom to feel secure?" I mean, in Nancy Wallace's words, "freedom from fear." Freedom from judgement, freedom not to THINK of terms of judgement, 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, or freedom 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 (and can even be considered one of creativity's passions). This phase is natural and unavoidable as a part of the creative life. Society doesn't have to force or cultivate it, nor should it.

Adults don't need to get all worked up if a child's drawings are or seem ordinary, or if they continue to be ordinary, even forever.

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 still hold. (For everything created / is something forgotten / especially if created too soon.) 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 what it feels like to simply hear the words as SOUNDS (as adults 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 many 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 a final, non-creative stage. Sometimes, even, a creative child becomes a non-creative adults,

and vice versa.

There are several 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. For example, as an eleventh grader at a 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 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 (amidst my A’s in everything else besides Ceramics). 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 in fact creative, though creative in a different way from writing or doing math. For another thing, the throes of my creativity FEEDS on thrifting and mothering; thrifting and mothering serve as subject matter, images, background, sources of emotion, and so on, and NOT only as slower-downers.

There is a difference between the kind of ideas a creative person gets when, say, she’s thrifting (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 time per any particular time period 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 is a maximum point, an equilibrium point, beyond which it is pointless 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 third purpose of stints of non-creativity is simply to relax, and build oneself up for the next “creativity session.” A fourth reason is to build a basis. My mother used to say (and I’m not sure I entirely agree with this; I certainly resisted her, if silently, at the time.), “You can’t create in vacuum.” Perhaps the non-vacuum in which things are created is that basis and, by definition, is itself non-creative, or rather created by someone else, namely the giants, or dwarfs, on whose shoulders we stand. 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.

When Devin was four, he loved to buy stickers. I would get all excited and get out various NON-sticker things, like buttons, multi-colored paper clips, pictures from magazines, and so on, 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 smirkingly. But what Devin was doing, perhaps, was getting to know stickers per se, perhaps so he could later do more creative variations on them. (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. Like Kitty's clashing prints coming together in a seam. And perhaps even the impression, the emotional surreal impression, of a scene without color, consisting only of outlines, is an interesting idea, a serious idea that could be, say, a poem.

When adults overly concern themselves with a kid's "creative potential," or whatever, when they worry every time they see him not being creative, when they again and again step in or discourage him from doing something non-creative ("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

Much of this chapter up to now has been devoted to DESCRIBING this mania. In summary, it's 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", often literally ready to pounce. Articles on childhood creativity abound (most, in my opinion, maniacal), usually how-to approaches peppered with phrases like "have your child write...", "have your child draw...", or even "have your child keep a diary" or "have your child ask, at the end of each day, 'What did I do today that was creative?'" Sometimes these articles refer half-facetiously, perhaps slightly condescendingly, to "your budding Rembrandt."

It's a trap, a little like the work ethic. 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 (understandable) insecurity, or guilt, or embarrassment. Sometimes creativity is virtually used as a crutch.

I believe that parents need to ask themselves questions: 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 drawings on the fridge door so that company might notice and comment, "It's 'cause 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, how much of it was that I love re-defining my 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 need to ask and analyze. What it amounts to is: How much of the creativity mania is for the kids and how much for ourselves or our agendas? Indeed, whose creativity are we really wrapped up in? And how, then, should and do we choose to proceed?

Parents might start by asking 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 is no difference in reading "ability" between these kids who just caught on to it and those who have 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 a class of students. And often the ILLUSION of creativity will work just as well for them; I think of school hallway displays, drawings by kids of all types and qualities, the differences among them barely noticeable because of their thick frames of brightly colored construction paper. Of COURSE the halls look attractive and impressive, because of those FRAMES; it’s not really the KIDS’ but the TEACHERS’ “creativity” that’s being displayed. This might feel insulting to the kids, even if it does get the teachers and the schools praise, 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. The other day Kitty and I were talking about a large toy store in her neighborhood, in particular a section marked “Creativity”. “It’s mostly to sell parents things,” Kitty laughed. She went on to describe various pre-assembled kits, not, in her opinion, creative at all. She calls these kits “officially creative.”

We lapsed into a conversation about how our own kids have often demonstrated true, though not official, creativity. Devin makes “paper sculpture”; Bret used to make “scotch-tape sculptures,” and, said Kitty of her ten-year-old son, “Jimmy makes little characters out of dustballs.” (“So now he can go into 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 names. 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 modelled 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.

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 and use it for some purpose other than what it was intended for, or if they’re allowed to quit when it’s time to go their own way. As with anything else, there are undoubtedly instances in which products associated with the childhood creativity mania have been beneficial for children. And all can be like oaktag, or like Devin’s (and any other kid’s) stickers. But I believe that this is the exception rather than the rule.

In my experience, a child’s most creative work is not done out of any kit or art class. Again and again home-schoolers and others have testified 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. (Indeed, my “oaktag” might be somebody else’s papier mache.) Adult society infiltrates kids so much; I often wonder whether I would have been more creative if I had never heard, or heard later on, the term “creative writing.” And what kinds of work would Kitty have done if she had never heard of “quilting”? I have said that Anne Frank’s diary inspired me, but perhaps I would have been even more inspired if I hadn’t been shown it; 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.

(I) 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 label of what Kitty and I facetiously call "creativity kits," but often creativity needs more than "hours": it needs days, weeks, years. The very fact that someone 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 in the kit.)

(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 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, at art classes, and so on. The kids get to meet accomplished adults, too. As Kitty says, "perceived inadequacy" is often the message. And the fact that one such "creativity store" is called "Einstein" shows how businesses make use of the giants.

Perhaps I'm making "too much of a big deal." I don't mean to say that any of this is necessarily harmful to kids, but I am saying that there are implications.

(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" and art classes?

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, nor even wait until they seem to want your input to stop leaving them. 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. Moreover, as discussed earlier in this chapter, inside every creative adult is the creative (or non-creative) child she once was. For example, 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, at least to some extent. But certainly every adult, creative or otherwise, is haunted 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 planned 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 “cute”. It was a 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.

Adult creativity is more conscious, more committed, and must be fitted into reality. Part of that reality is society's attitude towards that creativity.

Thus the years of working through the ideas in this chapter have been very helpful to me in my own creative life. in dealing with 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 -- they're barely describable as “mania” -- but they're still there. And “creativity businesses” do 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” (although what seems to get grants and publication is often what's closest to “mainstream”). It is a mania, but only in certain circles.

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 unconsciously used it to “creep into the teacher's heart.” But in junior high there were fewer teachers who had “creep-able into-able” hearts. Likewise college. The older a student is, the less 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, the less mania.

A fellowship to graduate school was a little harder for me to get than the scholarship to undergrad school. And my PhD was held up BECAUSE of my creativity. (Indeed, naive to the workings of graduate 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, 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 oneself in favor of a more innovative person to do the job. And when I apply for jobs or even gigs (poetry readings or 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.) 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. (Also, as a teacher, I now see that “creeping into the STUDENTS’ hearts” is an inappropriate and futile thing to try to do.)

Indeed, no one has a STAKE in adult creativity. Parents, 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 they pursue careers in art, music, and so on. 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? Are they maniacal about it? Is there that personal involvement? Usually not.

No, there doesn’t seem to be an adult creativity mania. 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. What KINDS of creativity does society want from adults? HOW creative does society want adults to be?

Many adults are disparaging about 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.

Many people seem to think that 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. (Just as women are often lumped together with children.) No wonder there’s all this talk about “childhood creativity” -- as though that’s the only kind of creativity there is (or should be). No wonder adults are so often frustrated, and no wonder they NEED childhood creativity, in the same way and ways that they need children, period. No wonder there’s such a mania.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CREATIVITY AND LEARNING

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 of learning also. And I’ve wondered whether the two are not, on some level, the same thing; at any rate, they seem quite 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.)

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 if there is anything we have to GIVE it. (In a sense the creative person is part of the subject matter to be learned.)

It is often said that, in order to be creative, one needs to have learned; what we need to have learned is that part of the world to which we give. Thus, at least to some extent, the “better” a person is at learning, the “better” she is at creating.

Conversely, in order to learn, we often need to be creative. That has certainly been my own experience. Whenever I’ve learned something important, I often feel a great need to write a poem. More subtly, I remember my college and graduate student days; in every math course I would not only take notes, but I’d 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 other than the problems at the end of the chapters or those given to us by the professor. I felt that 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 creativity and learning. 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 I created as well.

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 above 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.” 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. It seems that for each letter, Devin needed, certainly wanted, to go through some kind of creativity process -- to truly claim it, to make it his. And now I think sadly of how some teachers in school, including some home-schools, say “Don’t doodle on your paper” or “Pay attention to your work.” Indeed, “paying attention to your work” is exactly what the kids wanted to do, and teachers, in and out of schools, would do well to realize that “your work” INCLUDES doodling, “messing around,” and creativity.

Yes, creativity and learning are very much connected. Each is often necessary for the other. Thus it is not surprising that, being as big a topic as learning, creativity has needed this entire chapter, in order to be explored at length.

CHAPTER IV; NEW HEIGHTS IN NON-STRUCTURE

This chapter is not about chaos or anarchy. Nor is it a call for home-schoolers or anyone else to compete over who has been most 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, or the fears of authorities, described in the previous two chapters.

Such heights are available on a minute by minute basis, as they have been available to me in my life with my two home-schooling children, in particular with Devin, who has never been to school. To me being permitted to not-teach him “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. As I soared through these heights, I wrote a collection of poems, with the same title as this chapter. The feelings described and analyzed 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 aspects 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 tells me that when she was reading to her son Jimmy, then aged seven, the book "Sounder", 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 the conditions of blacks in the south.

I'm thinking, however, about even subtler emotions. Many parents have noticed the 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!") I mentioned Devin's eyeball stage" in an earlier chapter; enthralled and delighted as he seemed to be about eyeballs, I'd notice that, at night as he fell asleep, he would cover them with his hand ("eyelids," as I wrote in a poem, "not being enough.") And last year Devin went through a burping stage (and his doctor 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 the various mannerisms of kids; 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 school. These deep and subtle feelings will probably not be expressed by the kids themselves; kids seem not to be articulate in that way, and will not 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 until I was eleven that it occurred to me to put the two together and write ABOUT serious thoughts, or express serious thoughts in any way.

Besides starting a diary at age eleven, I also, in celebration of the discovery that serious thoughts can be written down (and can represent an accomplishment), wrote my autobiography. Not for school, as our class had done the previous year, but my REAL autobiography. My inner life. Here's a 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 and that I didn't feel any exaggerated separation anxiety when I did. 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 would 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. 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, "Does she play?" By that I think I meant "Is she okay? Is she happy? Is she loved? 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 I probably realized that. But somehow the sentence, "they made themselves" is what stuck in my mind. I remember feeling troubled. (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 say, "open doors," but sometimes these doors lead back inside.

When Devin was four and his next-older brother Bret eleven, Bret (having been to school through fourth grade and both of them living in this schooling society, not to mention sibling rivalry) 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." (The ol' potential bit.) 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..."

This reminds me of something that Bret himself said when he was five; he was talking about how, before he was inside me, he lived inside the moon with God and the tooth fairy; the three of them, he explained, worked together processing the teeth and the quarters. He had been very happy, he said, except that eventually, "the moon was high, really high, almost two million high. That's why I came down to live with you guys [pause], because that was too high." As he said this he sported a dreamy look and rested his head on my shoulder.

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. "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 Z, though it has that crossbeam so cannot fold, still it doesn't have cannisters; they don't provide letters with cannisters so A can still bore. . . and drill . . . 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 BOND emotionally with what they learn; they truly love it.

Emotion can get into the matter of etiquette, too. (Yet another similarity between etiquette and academics). 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 did not insist on my saying "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 used to say "Please don't say hello."

Kitty Anderson tells 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; to me it seems like 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, out of my control. I dreaded going to the Girls Room.

Kitty points out how younger kids like to talk about what their favorite numbers are. But what about UN-favorite numbers?, we asked in that conversation. ADULTS 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 is something scary about the number twelve.

Schools and home-schooling parents often act as though learning, and reading, and experiencing (and being creative, as in the previous chapter) is always wonderful and/or 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. 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 do. 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 entitled "The Fuss and the Fury." I meant "fury" in the sense that Anne Sexton uses the word, which to me is "passion". 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." "that you can't see what you hug." Is it bewilderment that babies feel? I don't know for sure but perhaps it's bewilderment that children and that adults often 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 questions 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 any exam.

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. And later on 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 is pointless to formulate rules for grieving, even that "the five stages" do not always proceed in any set order but are more like five ASPECTS of grieving. (Acceptance, for example, 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 with its griever, and has found that this pays off. So why hasn't society come to have that attitude about ALL thought and feeling -- in particular, about learning and education? 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. I used fewer and fewer items of “baby equipment.” I breastfed in more and more places -- the ultimate was the bus. In other words, 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. In particular, I thought of that 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 in my mothering. 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 this in any absolute or rigorous way. My babies crawled, walked, and talked at “regular” ages. They observed and loved to play with older children. They also learned most of the alphabet as toddlers. And I allowed this; I was not subconsciously trying to “hold them back.” I simple DIDN’T FORCE THEM FORWARD. And when I say that 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.” As I said earlier, their bewilderment (that, for example, “the room is not symmetric...”). Their vulnerability, the fact that they’re frightened, or might be frightened. That sadness about them, and the 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. (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 not to 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, or to get them to do things in grown up ways, to sidestep certain stages, to read early, and so on?

One of the things I appreciate about them is their “little ways.” I love babies for SERIOUS reasons. It’s not that I think they’re cute, 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 inside me.

Part of what gave me the courage and mindset to begin home-schooling was the baby- and toddlerhood of my youngest child Devin. I might describe it by saying: 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 (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. 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 thinking of children as babies) has served as a good APPROXIMATION, or a good MODEL, to my approach to parenting, and it has been one of my “heights”. 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.” In that same sense everyone is a baby.

As for relations among children themselves, when the school (or home-schooling) 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 did not 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, possibly discovering a whole new path that would work (if not in solving that particular problem, then perhaps another). 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, something so obvious that everyone just takes it for granted. Why, I wonder, should people ADD? Maybe, if left to themselves and not taught to add, some children would do something else.

This might be construed as partially selfish. For it's true that I myself, as a mathematician, was interested in seeing what would happen, whether and when and how Devin would come to these ideas himself. And then, of course, I could write about it -- for example, in this book. 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 and exponentiation).

Nonetheless, the unselfish part of my plan was for HIM. I didn't want him to be indoctrinated. I wanted him to discover addition for himself (which he eventually did. One day -- age four or five -- walking through a parking lot, Devin spotted a station wagon. "Three seats in front," he mused. "Three in the middle, and three in back. That's -- uh. . . nine seats.") Still another unselfish part of my plan was for the world's sake; perhaps someday he -- or I, observing him, or both of us conversing and working together -- would come up with a truly new and unique viewpoint as a contribution to "the world's research."

There were also other things which I didn't teach Devin. For example, 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 that stage by himself, to wonder on his own who created things, and to wonder these things when he was naturally and emotionally ready. I did not want him to have to reach that stage BEFORE he was ready. I also wanted him to have the time and the space to ask all the OTHER, perhaps more interesting and less typical, questions, the ones he did ask, such as "Why is air invisible?", "Do I have a brain?" (preceded by "I'm sort of afraid of brains."), and "Why do trees and ground always go together?"

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, things like who created the universe? There might be so many OTHER things to wonder first.

(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 that it can act as an authority. Religious parents usually want their kids to be religious, with the same religion. Thus they indoctrinate; they nip in the bud the more interesting and less typical questions (and answers) by rushing to explain 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’s research.” I believe that parents can be religious without this happening, but in actuality this does happen most of the time. It can also happen with atheism, though possibly not as much.)

For similar reasons, it was several more years before I showed Devin maps. Why, I asked myself, would a five-year-old believe in North and South America when he barely believed in North and South PHILLY?! Why would he know, truly know, that what houses and trees stand on is the same thing as what North and South America stand on, much less that it’s a ball? 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 about planets and maps, I probably wouldn’t have believed it. I’m sure I would have felt alienated and not ready to learn this 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?

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 are 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 was what I might call a “new height in humility.” What I learned was a difference in attitude. Rather than associating discipline with anger, or with punishment, I felt as though I were merely TELLING him something. (After all, he was non-verbal and new to this world; how, without my telling him, 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 I hadn’t been breastfeeding, I’d have taken him up and held him.) “I’m sorry,” I’d croon. “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 bannister would still be dangerous, or the strawberry chapstick would still be Bret’s.)”

It was a lament, a sad refrain. Moreover, the loss was mine as well. I had undergone losses like that forty years ago in my own childhood and I was reliving them now. And not only did I want to be able to give him the world; I wanted him to KNOW that. Even if I couldn’t ACTUALLY give him the world.

With a slight smirk I’d also qualify, “I don’t mean I APOLOGIZE. It’s not MY fault, either. It’s just the ol’ many-body problem, a mathematical theorem that, if you hit Bret, Bret gets hit by you.” Then I’d croon again. “But all is not lost. Even though you can’t have everything you want, you can still have SOME things. For example, you can always cuddle up like this, any time you want. That’s something I’ll never say no to. That will never be poisonous or dangerous or exclusively Bret’s.”

It worked. Devin learned discipline and manners 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. I’d try 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 everyone’s TV’s.” But Devin only looked increasingly upset and 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. This time he understood. He kept nodding, 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 would try the following strategy. "When you're older," I'd tell him, "you won't say that; you'll help out because you'll realize that I need you to -- that I don't feel like unloading the groceries, either, especially all by myself."

I'd speak matter-of-factly, non-judgementally, and non-bitterly. I was mostly trying to DEFINE the situation, perhaps also to preserve everyone's dignity. Again, it was INFORMATION I was offering, information that I knew would take him years to process. I did NOT mean to be telling him, "You need to unload the bags now in PREPARATION for when you're grown up." On the contrary, I meant to express, in a positive way, some form of confidence that he WOULD unload the bags when he grew up, 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's often what happened.

I call this USING HIS FUTURE SELF AS A ROLE MODEL. It often seems to work, possibly because Devin then decides to "play grown-up," perhaps thinking, "Let's try it NOW, and not wait 'til I'm grown-up."

I have, true, wondered whether it's wise or advisable to make a kid conscious that some day he'll be an adult, and I have played this kind of thing by ear. I have tried to be careful not to overdo it, and I have been aware that if I did overdo it, I might not catch it. However, my gut feeling is that in fact I have not overdone it.

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 A.M. for work if you can't do it for school or for piano lessons?" "How will you learn responsibility if you won't even unload the groceries right now?" Adults are constantly throwing their kids' futures in their faces and, in my opinion, giving 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 remind them, especially in invasive ways. Devin, all on his own, has stoically talked 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 sooooo far into the future that I might as well not think about it. It seemed as far forward as my birth 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

Around thirty years 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 pencilled 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 do. 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 I did feel guilty and uncertain, I gave myself permission to not-teach (and 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 called for or, if we want to put it another way, when teaching CONSISTS of doing, and when BEING taught consists of watching -- in particular, watching the interest and passion that is going into the doing. Perhaps, anyway, the best way to learn something is to watch 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. knows how to do it, and who likes doing it. We can all give ourselves permission to go along with that flow.

ABOUT CHILDREN WHO 'RESIST BEING TAUGHT' (and more about permission to not-teach)

Every once in a while a home-schooler writes in to Growing without Schooling or Home Education Magazine something to the effect that her daughter or son is not behaving like a "model home-schooler." Not, for example, doing "all those wonderful things" that so many other home-schooling parents report, such as "devouring books," carrying out projects, initiating independent study, writing letters to politicians or businesses, 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 to specifically not look through it. He even, as I will go into later, didn't like to be read to, and I mean stories, not history texts. (Perhaps he associated ALL being read to with being read history texts. O well...) I also remember Marielle as a toddler; if anyone 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, and sport a kind of coy mischevious look.

Later I will 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. Neither home-schoolers nor schoolers need to hold to expectations, or to any set of stereotypes, concerning how a home-schooler or any child "should" be. Attributes such as "eager to study," "trying new things," "inquisitiveness", "active-ness," and "creativity" don't have to be shared by ALL children, and activities such as reading, writing, travelling, farming, and even oaktag-potchkying don't have to appeal to everyone. Certainly not at all times, nor through all the ages and stages.

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," 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 in her road to adulthood, and that schools often don't allow for these differences and changes. Home-schooling teachers 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."

Schools and home-schooling parents alike seem to be fond of saying that children, or that a particular child, "loves to learn." Why is that? Perhaps it serves the adults' agendas. But is it true?. Or is it true for all ages and stages? And even if children do "love to learn," one might still ask, "Do they love to BE TAUGHT?"

Even by parents. Even in "gentle", "low-key" ways. I'd like to brainstorm about just what being taught entails, and what it feels like -- concentrating for our purposes here, 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 decides what you should or need to know, that she knows it better than you, and that she will teach it to you. In other words, being taught often entails a loss of control, and a loss of dignity -- especially since, once a "lesson" has

begun, you feel as though you're committed to it for a certain length of time, which to a child can, perhaps, feel like an INDEFINITE length of time.

Being taught also 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 shouldn't, know that she doesn't know; that's something that comes with maturity, usually adulthood, sometimes LATER adulthood. So being taught can feel hypocritical, or purposeless, to a child. In other words, perhaps being taught itself, not to mention the specific subjects being taught, often might not fit into the developmental stages that children go through.

Moreover, a child also usually senses an adult's agenda, whether that adult is a teacher in school or a parent. A child might sense, for example, that the adult isn't truly enthusiastic about the subject. 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 cursive yet?")

Perhaps much of the time being taught feels 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 want to choose their form of entertainment themselves -- often, as we know, TV, which kids have the power to turn on and off).

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 kids feel the same way about being taught as they sometimes do about being babysat for). 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 degrading, insulting, and, again, unnatural for both parties. At support group meetings, it is often emphasized that members should not give unsolicited advice; this, it is claimed, does not feel supportive. Why, then, does society seem to think it's okay for teachers to teach without being asked? At very best, this is a delicate matter, and I'm not at all surprised when children, home-schooling or not, "resist being taught."

Then, too, the act of being taught -- and of CALLING it being taught, however that calling is done -- 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, 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 (again, like "creativity"). The equation seems to be: Learning is good; not-learning is bad. Judgement is automatically implied. Why is everyone so anxious for children to learn, or to "love to learn?" Suppose a child did NOT "love to learn?" Would that be so terrible? And remember how Devin 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 told him about learning. I had not made him self-conscious about it. I myself was not particularly self-conscious about it. Devin didn't yet know that 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 better than not-learning. He didn't, in other words, know that

learning was any big deal. (And perhaps my “credo” of “thinking of children as babies” was helpful in keeping him that way for a while.)

What IS the big deal? Why is the “joy” and the importance of learning so exaggerated? 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, at least for a little while, after learning something and just relax and enjoy that knowledge?

It’s just this PERMISSION that I’ve given myself and my children to NOT learn, not be taught, that represents this section’s “height”. I do not 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 SPECIFICALLY teaching and SPECIFICALLY 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 my youngest child 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 did not 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 even get to just sit still and do nothing. Devin got plenty of cuddling and "quiet time" without being read to; he slept in our bed and was breast-fed for seven years; my "work" was writing and he was with me during most of my work time. (And I did things this way partly for SELFISH reasons; I wanted to be with him; it's not that I had any particular theories or beliefs, although I did.) I like to think that Devin didn't need "reading time" for cuddling, and that that was at least 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 "lullabye time" as a kind of transition between nursing and reading.)

Perhaps all this is a metaphor for something larger; perhaps we can substitute "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 home-schooling (or schooling) 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 teaching -- or, getting back to the subject, being read to.

I'd like to talk about what being read to might feel like to a kid. (Again, as with learning in the previous section, I'll be concentrating on negative, rather surreal, "deep", aspects.) When a parent reads to a child, her voice might be different from her "regular" voice, which 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 she might be speaking in the voice of one of the characters in the story or book (perhaps the voice of an EVIL character) -- especially if the book is written in the first person (an "I-book," as Devin says). 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 to a child, or the child simply might not like it. Indeed, to a child, "reading together" might not FEEL together.

Diverging slightly, SINGING to a child might also, during certain ages and stages, feel frightening and alienating. I think of Devin telling me "Don't sing" (And again I flash on the autistic child saying "Please don't say hello.") Just as a parent's reading voice might be strangely different from her regular speaking voice, so also might be her singing voice. A singing voice might, for example, sound ghostly, or as though it's coming from another (or no) direction. In a poem I once asked the question, "When I sing Bitties a lullabye / 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 parents 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, especially in a specific "teacher-like" way, by a parent might wonder, however crazily, and however subconsciously, "Who or what does she love more, me or this history book?" This "parent / child / subject-matter triangle" is not

meant to be a reason for not home-schooling, as many experts might believe; rather, in my opinion, it's a reason to take the "school" out of home-schooling (and to keep the "home" part). (It's also a reason that, in schools, many teachers try to be less "teacher-like".)

Thus "reading together" or "singing together" or "learning together" might not be as emotionally satisfying as often and as much as is commonly believed. And a kid can go through stages when there are other "together things" which are more enjoyable and more beneficial and less alienating.

Society seems to have a "reading mania." Summer reading clubs at libraries, literacy campaigns for adults, slogans and propaganda about "the family who reads together," and so on. As Devin has now discovered, reading together CAN be a wonderful thing, but it's still not the ONLY thing, nor must it be compulsory. 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.

PERMISSION TO NOT WRITE IN CURSIVE

This short section is meant to be metaphoric. It is one example of the questioning of, and the IMPLEMENTION of that questioning of, a SMALL matter, and it describes how the adjustment of small matters can sometimes have large and far-reaching effects.

One summer day Devin was wondering whether or not he wanted to learn cursive. He knew that cursive existed, many of his friends knew it, so he had the feeling that he should learn it. But he wondered why people needed it. After a while, I began to wonder, too. I decided to do an experiment; I would write the sentence "My name is Marion Cohen" five times, first in cursive, then in printing; Devin would time me, using the second hand of the nearby clock. We found that cursive took slightly LONGER.

This, of course, does not mean that cursive takes longer for everyone. Nor, even if it does take longer for everyone, does that mean that cursive doesn't have other advantages over printing, nor that people shouldn't write in cursive. (Some people might simply feel more comfortable with cursive -- as later conversations with various friends confirmed; it's probably about 50 - 50, at least in my crowd.) However, it does mean that cursive is not the be-all-and-end-all. It is not written in stone. It is something about which we have a choice, and which needn't be an authority.

In fact, I had noticed vaguely that I ENJOYED printing more than cursive. I've always preferred the neat small letters, along with the freedom to stop and rest in the middle of a word if I wanted to. Printing feels less slippery, more under control. In fact, since doing that experiment with Devin, I've written a poem about how perhaps one of the things I like about math is that it's not written in cursive. "Each little bug is free to crawl. Each little stone is free to roll." Whereas with cursive, "every plunge down is such a commitment." Exploring cursive in this way with Devin has in general given me a new view of this area of my life; it's a small matter but it still feels important. As with oaktag, who knows where else it will lead? It has, for example, caused me to do the first draft of this book in printing. This has, among other things, made it easier to type the second draft, since it's easier to read. Moreover, recently I've been writing my DIARY in printing.

In a sense, this "new height in non-structure" has become a "new height in STRUCTURE." Along with writing in the middle of the night or at 5:00 in the morning, it is about the structure of my writing life -- that is, the structure of my WORKING life. It doesn't have the distaste that structure is often thought (especially by me!) to have -- indeed, it's interesting and romantic. Again, it's a height. For sure.

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-month 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. She kept checking my belly, taking my temperature, bringing me meals, admiring Devin, as well as admiring the way I handled Devin. In general, Devin's and my love for each other was understood, appreciated, allowed, 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 cold as an excuse to do what I called "play hospital." I climbed into bed with Devin, spend the entire day there, brought diapers, change of clothing, and my lunch into the bed with us, and pretended, on some level, that we were still in the hospital and that things were as in the dream described above.

In some metaphoric way, I believe that 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," both in home-schooling and in other aspects of parenting, and for all that emphasis and fixation on curriculum, adult-organized children's activities, tangible achievements, and the general bowing to authorities. This is a sweeping statement, 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 sound less far-fetched, I'd like to describe in more detail these very intense motherfeelings, at least as I feel 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. And perhaps 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 oppotunity to talk about these feelings. Each friend or acquaintance would listen, either dutifully or fascinated-ly, but only ONCE, to my account of the labor and delivery, how much the baby weighed, and so on.

Do and can mothers EVER get enough? I don't know. But this kind of thing has continued over the years. It gets lees intense, and it gts replaced by other intense things; it also varies from mother to mother. But I believe it's still there, even if surpressed. Or we WANT it to be there. Or it's still there because we never quite 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 SOMETHING; I call it "the post-partum fetish." We've given birth, then had to STOP giving birth. Or we've adopted and then had to stop adopting. We made these beautiful babies and God or somebody grows them up. As the poet Sharon Olds says in "Young Mothers II," "they have torn her soul out of her body and said / the child is the other one."

Perhaps not all mothers feel this "post-partum fetish." Perhaps our obsessions with our mother-ness take different forms for different mothers. Perhaps, even, these feelings are society-induced rather than inherent. And certainly not all mothers have had the glorious experience in the hospital that I had in my dream. But what I'm saying is that this society doesn't provide mothers with enough opportunity to express these intense and far-reading motherfeelings, or to show off our mother-ness. Indeed, society doesn't ALLOW any of this.

So we channel it into the accepted “opportunities” that society does allow and provide. Thus, instead of our very motherness, 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 with. And our natural, genuine, and good motherfeelings get lost in the shuffle and paradoxically channeled into things that work AGAINST these feelings. In fact, society and its authorities PLAY INTO these motherfeelings, and we often can’t help but allow it.

NOT allowing that to happen has been one of my “new heights.” If 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 I dreamt about, then I can give myself permission to, actually and metaphorically, crawl into bed for a little while and play-hospital just with Devin. (As Peggy O’Mara, editor of MOTHERING magazine, wrote me three months after I bore Devin, “Stay secluded with Devin for awhile.”) In general, I (and any mother) can celebrate mother-ness, and children’s children-ness, if only with a few select family members and friends.

MORE ABOUT “CONSPICUOUS CONCERN”

As described in other chapters, conspicuous concern is often just plain unnecessary and inconvenient. It is usually associated with authority, and feeds on and is fed by worry, guilt, embarrassment, and so forth. But let's look at 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.” And I’d think or feel, “Uh-oh.”

Concern smacks of fuss or 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 now and crawl into bed...” Indeed, concern can be quite 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 or bored-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?

Another interesting question might be: Do KIDS ever use the word “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.” “What’s wrong?” I wondered. “Aren’t I doing enough already? What aren’t I doing enough OF?” And also, I’m thinking right now, why isn’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, indeed, I believe that I AM doing more than I was doing back then -- with or without their “concern”.)

In general, all this concern might convey, to the kids, dissatisfaction. In actuality, it often comes from dissatisfaction with the adults’ own lives, but kids possibly read it as dissatisfaction with THEM. “Aren’t I smart enough? Aren’t I artistic enough? Social enough? Happy enough? Creative enough? Just plain ENOUGH?” As adults know from relations with one another, being the object of concern can feel like a burden. It makes 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. My own mother used to frequently sport what I called at the time, “the um-hum look,” or the “mad mood mommy look.” That look made me feel scared and unloved. How often, I wonder, does concern feel like the absence of love? I don’t know. I do know that it sometimes seems to me that parents (in the form of concern) do everything to show how much they love their kids except actually directly express this love.

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.” (“Concern is a social worker word,” says my friend Relli Katz.)

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 great. “You’ll be fine. You ARE fine.” Children need to hear that more often. Perhaps we should tell children, more than we do, that we’re not concerned. Perhaps, in fact, we can give ourselves permission to ACTUALLY not be concerned, or not be concerned SO MUCH -- to substitute, sometimes, for conspicuous concern, conspicuous hanging out, or conspicuous post-partum fetish, or conspicuous happiness and confidence in ourselves, our children, and our various processes -- something that belongs to US, and our children, rather than to authority.

CHAPTER V:
THE POLITICS OF HOME-SCHOOLING
(CAN HOME-SCHOOLING IDEAS SAVE THE WORLD?)

The purpose of this chapter is to begin to show how home-schooling issues and ideas -- meaning the various things discussed throughout this book -- connect with and enhance other important current societal issues. Much has been said in earlier chapters to lead up to this; I hope that this final chapter will begin to clinch things.

At this point, I would like to confess to and warn readers (with whom by now I feel comfortable and well acquainted) that the subjects in which I am probably least proficient are history, politics, and current events. Just as some people have, for example, math anxiety, so I seem to have "social studies anxiety." (My then-therapist used to say that that could be because my father was a history teacher! Moreover, he approached the teaching of history through the reading of The New York Times!)

In a sense, it is not only myself for whom these modern issues have acted as authorities. People -- radicals, liberals, conservatives alike -- often say things like "Why put our energies into home-schooling (issues) when there are so many bigger and more important things to be concerned about?" Sometimes these people have turned accusatory: "HOW CAN YOU think about home-schooling when children out there are starving?" However, isn't that a little like asking a slave (a century ago), "How can you be thinking about everyone's freedom when you have your own family to think of?" Indeed, was the real issue slave-abuse or slavery itself? My contention is that home-schooling issues TIE IN with the "more important" issues, and that the "more important" problems could possibly, and/ or in part, be CAUSED BY failure to pay attention to the kind of problems considered throughout this book. Another possibility is that the more fashionable modern issues wind up acting as AUTHORITIES, which like all other authorities divert both people and movements from what is truly needed.

In these last pages I will try to elaborate on the ideas touched upon in the previous paragraph. In compiling notes for it I have perceived that the issues at the forefront, inasmuch as they pertain to home-schooling, seem to fall into five broad categories: (1) minority issues, (2) economic issues, (3) domestic abuse issues, (4) gender issues, and (5) conservation issues. These 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.

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 has of the person being talked about. (For example, if I say "doctor", many people immediately perceive a white straight male non-disabled doctor.)

Some minorities, such as black, gay, and disabled people, are minorities on a less subtle scale as, say, well-spouses, grieving or emotionally stressed people, or women interested in math. And some minorities are less persecuted than others, or have been persecuted for shorter time periods, or their persecution is more escapable. And, for some, the onset of the minority status occurs later in life. For example, I was not BORN a well spouse. I became a human being first; I had a long time to adjust to being a human being before becoming a well spouse. Thus I could form my thoughts, feelings, personality, and opinions beforehand. I'd had time to prepare, time to fight the battle on only one front. That's a big advantage. (Perhaps, also, there are ways in which it's a DISADVANTAGE.)

All these considerations make a difference but as matters pertain to home-schooling and home-schooling issues, the gist, even if not the degree, is similar. I say this because I want to address people who are members of more subtle minority groups (in particular, STRESSED people who, like women, are not LITERALLY in the NUMERICAL minority, but who are minority in the above sense of "other"). I want these people to realize that minority issues pertain to them also, and in particular could affect how they feel and what they do about home-schooling and home-schooling issues.

Many poor and minority parents have either never heard of home-schooling or 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, puts it, "several African American homeschoolers 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 borne out by my contact with some of the essayists and potential essayists for this book. If more black homeschoolers (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 homeschoolers to feel that it's safe for them to give their kids more freedom." She also goes on to say that the situation might be more complicated than that, that perhaps distrust of society is not the only reason why black home-schoolers tend to be more structured.

Indeed, oppressed people very often internalize society's attitudes, at least for a while. Moreover, consider the phenomenon whereby an oppressed person needs, and sometimes tends, to find someone else to oppress. This eases the feeling of powerlessness and of downtroddenness. 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, the phenomenon takes a more subtle form -- namely, the talk of discipline so common among black home-schoolers (and black 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 power trip. All this seems to reflect the very understandable need to feel in control, a need far from satisfied in our society, for both minorities and non-

minorities. But think of the sad trade-off: This way of satisfying that need means that children's and family's lives are more rigid, less joyful and loving. And then, of course, when the children grow up, they'll have the same need (self-perpetrating) to control and oppress their own children.

One other consideration, also touching on control issues: Minority parents are understandably more afraid to 'take chances.' They're ALREADY "out on a limb" because of being minority. There's less leeway. Thus, for example, single parents might be particularly careful to do "everything ELSE the regular way." For a long time I was afraid to introduce home-schooling into my family's lifestyle; in the face of my husband's illness and disability, the prospect of home-schooling seemed to be one more thing that would be different about our family. Of course, there are many factors involved, not only one's ethnic and societal group, but everything else being equal, minority status can tip the balance in making various decisions regarding home-schooling. For example, the kind of person who, for whatever reasons, 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 well-spouse) home-schooling parent, I have tried to understand at least some of the reasons why a black or minority home-schooler (or non-home-schooler) might tend to be more structured and more reverent toward authority. Perhaps part of the picture is expressed by a black father who, several months ago, contacted Center City Home-Schoolers by phone. He'd heard of us, and of home-schooling itself, for the first time the previous day via the internet, and was extremely interested. "You see," he explained, "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. [Emphasis his] 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 the next meeting and re-iterated his message to all of us. Other minority members of our 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 the words that come to mind. To some extent everyone, minority or not, feels fear and worry about children's futures. It's probably inherent to the human condition, or at least to the position laid upon children 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 be great and these inherent fears, whatever form they take in him, must be 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). And, although he was the very opposite of hostile or unfriendly, he seldom smiled. The other people at the meeting, from unstructured home-schoolers to the more structured "school at 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 our kids, 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 that something was not so much to GAIN information as to GIVE information. He seemed, indeed, to have quite an agenda.

The 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 I couldn't help thinking, "But did you feel that THEY loved YOU? Did you grow up feeling secure in that love?"

Certainly, then, this father would not and could 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 be too much input, too much learning, too much doing. "Conspicuous concern" might feel to him like an opportunity (and might get mixed up with true concern). "The potential trap" would not feel to him like a trap. He would not 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. Resisting these authorities would not for him take priority. He was caught up in authority on the FIRST level, the authority of earning a successful living.

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. Yes, there are blacks who are "imitation whites," women who are "imitation men," "homophobic gays," "anti-semitic Jews," 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. (Just as with reading and other "academics" and just as with creativity. That is, the evolution of an oppressed group can be thought of as a learning process.)

I'd like to delve into this "imitation" stage a bit more and see, if we haven't already, how it pertains to the home-schooling 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 on the order of equal pay, equal access, right to be in the military, and so on; in short, the same rights that non-oppressed people have, no less and NO MORE.

It's hard to fight the battle on all fronts, especially at the same time. And it's understandable that oppressed people go through this first stage, this fighting for "rights" before considering that these "rights" might indeed be "wrongs". The military seems metaphoric of that and perhaps, for some, it figures instrumentally towards moving into the second stage in the movement, 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 home-schooling issues: JUST AS BEING IN THE MILITARY IS A 'RIGHT' WHICH MANY 'SECOND-STAGE REVOLUTIONARIES' MIGHT REJECT, SO PERHAPS IS THE 'RIGHT' TO 'A GOOD EDUCATION.'

And so, in their anxiety, and in imitation of authority in the person of non-oppressed groups, many "first-stage" poor and minority parents talk about "a good education," "good schools," and so on. As Kitty Anderson says about the educational reform debate, "everyone gets a right to be equally oppressed." And, I would add, ALREADY-oppressed people get a special brand of that oppression.

The previous chapters have, I hope, raised serious doubts as to whether schools are "good," whether there's such a thing as a "good school," or even a "good education." Is a "good education" what minority and disadvantaged people really want or need, or is it just 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 is it something else? As said in Chapter II, we all have to keep analyzing, and members of minority groups have the additional (and phenomenal) task of bringing that minority experience into the analysis.

I'd like to say more about the second stage of rebellion. This is not 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 (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 HOME-SCHOOLING IS SOMETHING OUTSIDE THE CULTURE.

Many members of minority groups, in this second stage of revolution, can find themselves in a dilemma: They've rejected the idea of a "good education" in the schools (as a wrong disguised as a "right"), but home-schooling 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 the above statement. There ARE phenomena which cause minority parents to feel alienated from the home-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 "white male straight stamp collector," and so on. Thus if someone says "home-schooling child," people often read "white male straight home-schooling child."

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." That is, home-schoolers constitute a minority group. Again, it's hard to fight the battle on all fronts at the same time.

Moreover, black people know that many white home-schoolers have decided to home-school specifically in order to avoid school integration. 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 riff-raff" and worrying about schools being "unsafe"; I believe that non-minority parents who talk about the latter are sometimes masking the former; it can be very subtle. There's no question that there's a large racist and classist component to the home-schooling movement.

And it's not hard to see why "second-stage" minority parents are wary of home-schooling and would rather place their energies and their trust in their group's culture. But 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 culture can 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 home-schooling. Thus might she realize that the fact of racism and other isms within the home-schooling movement, as well as pure bigotry, does not prove that home-schooling 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; to do that one would have to delve further.

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 home-schooling as a means to “beat the system;” she can view it as liberating and empowering. Like the black father who came to our meeting. she can consider it “an opportunity” to do things “the way I think they should be done” (although analyzing more closely the way “I think they should be done”). And she can consider herself part of, for example, the BLACK home-schooling movement, even if she does not (yet) feel comfortable with the home-schooling movement in its entirety. Many black home-schoolers have in fact done this.

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

It seems to me that in our society few people feel safe. Most individuals (minority and non-minority, middle- and working-class alike) 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 understandably FEEL plagued. 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 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 most 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 (especially if the children are disabled or on drugs). Not to mention the coming of illness into the picture. Society and its laws are constantly adjusting (ot NOT adjusting) but there is always a backlog, and too many variables. To put it very simply, there are too many things that can 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, that taxes pay for our roads, streetlights, and curbcuts for disabled people, it is said in general 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 begining, meaning when one is just out of high school, or college, or graduate school -- it is usually discovered that, again, there are just too many variables. 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 while 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, most, but the root of that worry is very real; we are most of us in very precarious positions. Too many variables. 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 get the "EOB's" from our insurance company (EOB stands for Explanation of Benefits.), it shows all the figures; I SEE how much money is being laid out for my husband's care, and it scares me. "How," I think, "can the insurance company afford it?! Indeed, is the INSURANCE COMPANY secure?" (Well, in 1932 the BANKS weren't secure...)

Let's leave financial insecurity aside for the moment and talk about emotional insecurity. Indeed, do people feel emotionally secure? So many of us seem to feel guilt-ridden, judged, "inadequate", "nervous", "like a child," "not quite ready to grow up yet," and so on. Our positions in our families and in society does not feel secure. We don't feel very sustained-ly accepted or loved. Even after psycho-therapy. Books are written about "Math Anxiety" or "The Hurried Child" (and much of it seems to also be tied in with financial stuff). 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.

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 recurring. Security, financial and emotional, seems to be something that makes a rare appearance in our lives; it seems to be the exception, in our society, rather than the rule.

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 in our society, both children and adults, are literally suffering. As I hope we have seen, 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 those conditions; we feel as though it's OUR FAULT that things are such that we feel that way. (We didn't "live up our potential" or "apply ourselves" or "earn our A's.")

Then, too, as Kitty says, "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.' So this situation CAUSES 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.'

I believe that it is quite possible that this suffering from insecurity is a chief cause of the atrocities in this world. That is, the main "bottom-line" reason that 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 those variables so much, perhaps most would be satisfied. (Again, I'm talking about both financial AND EMOTIONAL hoarding. I'm remembering, right now, writing in my adolescent diary, "I told my mother about the C in algebra. Maybe it partly makes up for not telling her about the D in history." That's 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 over-ly ambitious and exploitative businessmen and politicians to drug dealers and murderers. (In my classes at Drexel, when a student acts hostile, I read "afraid" and "hurt", and when I act in a way as 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 used to tell my 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 thing. I spent three years in therapy learning to feel adequate, just plain adequate, and now that I do I am freed from the BURDEN of feeling "great". I still DO feel

great; I still “love myself,” etc., but I don’t feel the same NEED to feel that way. It’s less desperate, more in perspective. In other words, I feel 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 enough, and that they don’t need to strive, or steal or murder, or hoard, to get TOO much. (Again, 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? How big a house or apartment do we need? Do we need a house or apartment at all? What IS our potential? How much of our potential do we need to actualize? What and how much or how little do we want? And what can the world gain from our existence? Society, too, needs to ask itself questions, but this is a more complicated task.

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). 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 learn and live, 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, telling everyone to just go and take what they want (of objects, movies, college courses, medical consultation and treatment, and so on) AND do whatever work they think they can or would like to do to benefit themselves and others. I believe that it is very possible that, at least after a while, 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, would prevent us from wanting TOO much.

Whether or not this fantasy could ever come true, or whether it could be true in some METAPHORIC sense, I like to speculate further details. I, for one, would still choose shopping in thrift stores over department stores and boutiques. I would still write, sew, sing, do math, clean house, and mother. 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 Temple’s “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 Temple’s “cutbacks”). As for my writing, perhaps that would flourish even more, because publishers could publish more of my books (in particular, various books I’ve been trying to place for decades); they wouldn’t have to worry about “marketability”. (And readers might feel more inclined to read my work, feeling perhaps 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 we 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 down

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 second part of the fantasy/plan.

Again, this is all a fantasy; maybe it's naive; there's no way for anybody to know how it would work out in reality. However, if we ask, "Isn't the idea highly impractical?", we might also ask, "Isn't our PRESENT system highly impractical?" For example, 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?

Would such buildings serve better as housing, day care centers, libraries, and so on? How expensive (but then, remember, we'd have to have a new meaning of "expensive".) would it be to put in kitchens? (Would, indeed, 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? (Gads! How many such people are there? To me it seems such a waste.) Would the fact that they don't NEED jobs make up for the fact that they'd be (temporarily) 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 "jobs" and endeavors, such as home health aides (of which under our present system there's a gross shortage, as I well know, mostly because home health aides aren't paid enough, nor given benefits -- that is, security. Hm.)? Would the ones who had been in such jobs because of the unemployment situations with respect to jobs relating to their actual skills, talents, and interests actually now seize the opportunity even remotely according to my fantasies? Would "human nature" take the form which it takes in my fantasy?

I haven't the slightest idea. This is all fantasy. Brain-storming. 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.

Further questions and speculations: For example, the question I foresee in readers' minds, 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 a 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 and nicer our houses look. -- and I like to believe that people would do it. Moreover, trash collecting would probably not have the negative connotation that it does in our present system (in some circles); again, it would be like housework; everyone would know that it needed to be done, there would 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 would 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”? My cousin the anesthesiologist (We know him too well to trust him to be OUR anesthesiologist.), another relative who hates his lawyer job so much, he can’t possibly be putting much energy or talent into it, and the obstetrician who was responsible for the death of my third baby? And what about self-proclaimed experts? (I’m thinking of 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 system to discourage them. For another, there could still be standards, review boards, and so on. But there’s an even more subtle consideration: People wouldn’t NEED to have the jobs which they didn’t want in the first place. Even the “self-proclaimed experts” wouldn’t have the emotional need to try to make money, or create a *raison d’etre*, in that way. There are, for example, an awful lot of people (No one, of course, knows how many.) who are frustrated artists or perhaps people who are great with children but who don’t have teaching degrees or certificates, who turn, say, to Herbalife for the possibility of both income and validation.

Would eliminating money all by itself solve all of society’s problems? I doubt it. (Again, remember, I said FIRST educate people... But again, it’s something to think about, and to think about without the shackles of authority.)

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.

ABUSE ISSUES

What happens at school to children who are abused at home? How do they relate socially, especially to peer group? Are they ABLE to relate socially? Does school help, even in that vein? Or does it only aggravate the problem? Rub it in, somehow? Deepen the feelings of abandonment and alienation?

For one thing, 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, the school might fail to recognize when a child is being abused at home, or it might not believe a child when she reports abuse at home, or it might re-enforce and cooperate with parents' unreasonable policies and/ or methods of "discipline". It might even be directly abusive. (There is a book titled "Abuse in the Schools.") Certainly a child who is abused and who continues to be abused at home might, despite the refuge of school during part of the day, feel that school is somehow IN COHOOTS with the other adults in his life. Indeed, schools often ARE in cohorts with the other adults in children's lives, and no one makes any bones about that. And so children might perceive that school CONDONES the abuse.

There ARE cases when 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 bigotted household, and who never ascribed to those values. School for her was a place to meet and read about different kinds of people. (None of this, however, is 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 -- whether, that is, kids avoid it, or ignore it, simply because it's DONE IN SCHOOL. 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 abused. I'm wondering whether that's because of all the "things wrong" described in Chapter I; perhaps society CREATES an environment where kids don't tell, and/ or where adults don't believe when kids do tell. Chapter I 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 (or what they might perceive to be psychological abuse, whether or not they know the TERM "psychological abuse") in the schools, then how can these kids trust their adults to protect them from abuse OUTSIDE of school?

Moreover, as I talked about in the last chapter, 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. 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.

GENDER ISSUES

There are feminists who are very wary of home-schooling, who feel that home-schooling is "just another thing that keeps women down." Indeed, home-schooling, like just about everything else, CAN feed into the oppression of women.

For example, as described in Chapter I, home-schoolers are often led to believe, by society and by authorities within the home-schooling movement, that a "good" home-schooling parent (which usually means mother) spends lots of time, energy, money, and self on her children, and thus has little or no "free time." Also, our society operates under the myth that home-schooling is not an option for working mothers. Completely forgotten or ignored are playgroups, exchange baby-sitters, older siblings as babysitters, or neighbors, relatives, and friends, or collectives and communes, and working with children present, even involving children in the work.

Then, too home-schooling laws (such as the Pennsylvania law, which requires the home-schooling supervisor to have a high school diploma) as well as general attitudes prevalent in society have led to the myth, oppressive to women, minorities, and human beings in general, that the "better-educated" a home schooling parent is, the better a "job" she can do as a home-schooler. 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 by traditional or alternative methods, they can direct independent study, they can encourage interaction with others outside the family, and so on. Also, they can merely decide not to be hung up on "education".) Then, too, 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, home-schooling runs the risk of contributing to the oppression of women (and everybody else) and it has actually added to the oppression of SOME. Or rather, the kinds of oppression which certain women already suffer extend into the arena of the education of their children, both home-schooling or not. For example, the parent who worried and nagged about school homework might, upon beginning home-schooling, do this worrying and nagging (about home-schooling work) six, or twenty-four, hours a day.

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. In the Introduction I described how home-schooling can SUBTRACT from oppression and be a subversive activity. Far from "keeping women down," it can bring women UP. To review, I described 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 not having to nag about homework. I also described the LARGER freedom -- freedom of choice, freedom from "the system." Subsequent chapters have gone on to describe the "questioning everything" which is what goes into this freedom.

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 personnel. Perhaps it is now time to question, as many home-schoolers do, the educational system, along with the authority of teachers, principals, and school boards, and to do such questioning 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 through the history of the world. 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 with the family-centered education movement.

When Bret was about a year old, I wrote a poem titled "One Year Post-Partum." I wrote about how I had felt, since Bret's birth -- namely, very much at one with many of the other mothers who hung out at Rittenhouse Square. We had all been very concerned with matters like "natural childbirth," "liberated Cesareans," breast-feeding, and so on; we had been, in other words, very caught up in the emotions, and the wonder, of being mothers. We had talked ad infinitum about our own feelings, and in doing so, we had "questioned everything," or so it had seemed to me. But at around "One Year Post-Partum," I began to notice a few subtle 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 of the mothers enrolling their toddlers in things like infant swim classes, with pep-talk-y explanations such as "They 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, as described in chapters II and III. 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. I won't," I added slightly bitterly, "be fooled next time." (And with Devin, 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 schools. 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 education, 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 terminologies such as "disruptive behavior," "lack of motivation," 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 NOT to be fond and proud of. It can still manipulate parents with talk of "potential". 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 boys and girls lines, but WHAT they teach.) True, many teachers strive to bring feminism into the classroom but, as with "tolerance education" and "abuse education," any "non-sexist lessons" taught in the schools probably never get learned by the students because, once again, it's "just something they try to teach us." I once sat in on a Women's Studies class in a supposedly-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. In

general, authority cannot teach feminism because authority cannot teach ANYTHING.

As for “positive role models,” I have said in the Introduction 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 them relax. They might even get to see their parents laugh and cry. In short, they see the whole of their parents’ lives. Children who go to school, on the other hand, often get a more distorted view of what their parents’ lives are like; in particular, parents are doing the things they enjoy or are expert at (for example hobbies or outside employment) WHILE THE KIDS ARE IN SCHOOL (or extracurricular activities). So what these kids see of their parents is 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. Thus they often see a far more negative picture of their parents’ lives and work. Where, I ask, 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 -- in particular, by the motherguilt our society induces.

For example: 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 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 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’s a vicious cycle: We feel guilty, so we do things that are hard for us (home-school burnout), so we feel bad and resentful, so -- BECAUSE OF these bad and resentful feelings -- we feel guilty. And how does the vicious cycle start? We need to catch it when it does, or stop it when 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.

ECOLOGY ISSUES

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. Does it seem farfetched to draw the following parallel? Society often tries to make people be something other than people. Also: Society tries to make children be something other than children.

In the previous chapters I have tried to describe the various ways in which society does this. I have talked about how, for example, it tries to get children to grow up, or to 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 to 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, they are one and the same battle.

ONE IDEA

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 adult? The centers would be open twenty-four hours a day, and they would include college and, as we'll see, many other things.

This needs further qualification. First, they 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, whole families or households would have the option to LIVE in a center. (That could 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 "babysitters" 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 would 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 playgrounds. 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 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 nickles are as much fun, and as educational (if that's what we want), as Fisher-Price and Child Guidance miniature cities. Thrift store materials and materials brought from the kids' homes, or even no materials at all, would also work. How many objects do children need?

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 so 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 school-like and authoritarian). It might also incorporate, and in the same buildings, elder daycare and nursing homes. In fact, the services of 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 what is called "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. 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 is comfortable and does 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 home-schooling per se save the world? I'd say no. But what about home-schooling IDEAS, in particular the questioning of authorities big and small as described in these pages? I'd say very possibly. It might be interesting to at least fantasize, or even -- in small or in big settings, whatever is feasible -- give it a try.

