

Freedom And Education

Written by Administrator
Monday, 01 December 2008 00:41 -

BE: Since my mindset is on alternatives-to-education I'll take "Learning & Freedom" as my topic for this forum and avoid the oxymoron of the other. This gives me two learning/freedom threads, to develop one is the freedom-to-learn ; the other is learning-to-be free.

FREEDOM TO LEARN

Freedom to learn has been a topic of a long list of critics of education including Froebel, Goodman, Illich, Holt, Friere and others. It has also been the cry of an increasing number of today's activists. My concern here is the gap between the wise men of the past and the activists of today. Although the leave school advocates and activists is rising at a impressive rate with the advent of homeschooling, charterschools, cyberlearning, vouchers, and a conglomerate of other educational modalities, very few, if any, have escaped the syndrome of educate/teach/school. Christian schooling is the whipping boy for a different purpose for brain washing. But nearly all other school refusers are based on the non existent "parental rights" -- the right of parents to teach whatever they want to their children. They are almost paranoid in choosing or designing a curriculum for their children to follow. Ofttimes the state demands such a curriculum before they will recognize the right to homeschool.

Unschooling was used by some older critics to emphasize the student's right to learn what they want, when they want, and how they want. Unschooling was meant to let the student from birth to practice hir own choice of learning. The parent was expected to be a mentor only help the children find the resources to learn whatever came to their minds. In practice "unschooling" has been only a slightly modified form of homeschooling. In a recent listserv for unschooling weeks were taken discussion how a parents could be sure that their children were learning the correct code of ethics. At some times it went further to discuss how parents could be sure that a sound basis for a future job was being built.

I think my own idea of unschooling, or freedom to learn, came during a three month stay at a hotel run my a Buddhist monastery in Katmandu during a U.N. project I was working on. Every morning I awoke with the chanting of the monks. Before breakfast the waiters lined up at one end of the dining room holding the spread out table clothes high above their heads. With the doors open at the other end of the room they wiggled the table clothe the herd the flies out. That was a lesson on refusal to kill. But my unschooling lessons came from a series of lectures held in the third floor library. While I an other listeners sat cross legged on the hard floor, the lead saffron robed monk sat on a silk cushion slightly higher than the learners. Since some of us spoke only English we had an interpreter. After each short pronouncement from the leader the interpreter would follow with "Articha says" and give us his translation. The eight lectures were on the Eight Fold Path -- right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

I went in to each session expecting some clear guidance on how to live the right life. But Articha never lectured in good American school or church style. There was no preaching or teaching of what would happen if we did or did not follow the Eight Fold Path. No talk of rewards or punishments. Articha told stories, often funny stories, of his own life and that of the monks with whom he had learned. I learned by listening to examples. Perhaps my epiphany came near the end. I never did learn the name of our unassuming monk. I did learn that Articha was the

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pronunciation our translator had for "our teacher."

LEARNING ABOUT FREEDOM

Learning about freedom is the other juxtaposition of learning & freedom. This to my mind it calls for the same action as freedom to learn. Both call for personal freedom. Freedom to learn IS learning about freedom.

Today's school/teach/educate syndrome does neither. Locking young people away in authoritarian, hierarchal, competitive, materialistic schools not only stops one from learning but it also stops any thought of freedom or joy of living. It is exactly the opposite of learning about freedom. It teaches one to be on time, do what you are told, do not skip work, start and stop by the bell, neglect your own creativity, and subdue your desire for learning and freedom. It is good for training willing workers for a bring life of boring jobs and boring work.

But we should not blame only the schools. We need to look at society as a whole, particularly the home. Young people may need guidance. We don't want them to run in the street in front of a speeding car. We want them to eat good food. We want the to learn to be good citizens. For the very young we tend to think it is difficult, and often a waste of time, to explain the reason behind every issue they face. It is easier to bark a command. "Eat your food." "wash your hands." "get dressed." "go to school" "say your prayers, and "go to mass," are easier to say than explain. The often used reason is said, or implied, "Because I say so." There MAY be, or at least we tend to think, that there is a reason, if not a responsibility, to limit the freedom of the very young.

For most parents the issue of learning about freedom comes at a later date. Too often the pattern is too rigidly set by whenever that time comes to bring it about. Being controlled is set in the minds and actions of the young who have started their lives being taught that decisions are made for them. Even more critical it is set in the minds and actions of the parents or other elders who have grown into the habit of seeing and expecting their orders to be obeyed. Sometimes the orders are not expressed in words. They are inherent in what we do. Often they are just the way the family lives. We all go swimming after work every day. We all go the the library, to church, or shopping, or to grandma's when the elders decide. There is nothing wrong with saying or doing whatever parents think is good. But it IS wrong to stifle natural curiosity and the feeling of freedom. There are many ways in which freedom -- the power to act without compulsion -- are limited for those growing up. If we want people to be free we have to at least be aware of all the ways that freedom is limited.

This comes more and more crucial as children grow up. At what age should parents give what freedom? In my view it is always too late. The sense of freedom should be with us from birth. As our culture exists we wait for a time of rebirth into freedom. Our love for our children and desire to protect them subsumes any transition into freedom.

EDUCATION/CONTROL OR LEARNING/FREEDOM

Freedom like Education has an obverse side. The obverse of freedom is control. In starker

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terms we might say the obverse of freedom is slavery. But neither education nor control is the bad side or the good side for, learning freedom. They are both processes as compared to goals. Education has the goal of learning. Parental control has the goal of freedom. The difference is what is given, and what is taken. In the end both learning and freedom have to be taken. It up to the individual to accept, and seize, the responsibility for ether learning or freedom.

Manish Jain, a home education advocate in India, developed the concept of "unlearning." Jain's concept is along the lines of Illich's deschooling society, Gandhi's honest reflection, Toefler's de-conditioning, Buddha's letting go, and other oft used terms like conviviality, de-institutionalizing, voluntary simplicity, re-patterning, and others. Unlearning is the process of moving beyond all the limitations instilled in a student by school, home and society. It is not about forgetting, emptying, destroying. Nor is it simply about critical thinking, positive thinking or problem-solving. At its most basic level, unlearning starts with looking at the realities and possibilities of life from other points of view. It involves becoming more conscious of different cultures and mental models, assumptions, generalizations, sacred constructs, cognitive blindness, expectations, anxieties, etc. It's escaping the influence how we have been taught to understand reality, to create knowledge, to make choices, and how we grow. It is not an educational modality as much as it is a new social paradigm and worldview.

Jain's research is the study of people, particularly young adults, who have escaped the confines of the standard social paradigm in spite of the being imbedded in it. They have risen above the mindset, worldview, and mainstream culture that is perpetuated by the school/educate/teach syndrome. They have reached a new level of freedom. The goal is to learn how we can all unlearn or, as Einstein put it, recognize that ""We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.