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More to learning than schooling

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Life Learning

Living and Learning Mindfully

Unlearning Literary Analysis To Enjoy Reading

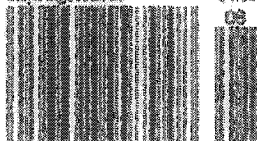
Nurturing A Musical Passion

Children and Power

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More to Learning Than Schooling

Danielle Peddle and Carlo Ricci



Carlo has two children ages one and three, and Danielle has three children ages 21, 23 and 25. When we first met, Carlo shared with Danielle his passion for schooling or life learning. He also said that for his children, schooling will never be compulsory and that he hopes his children will decide not to go to school, but that in the spirit of schooling, the decision will ultimately be theirs. In this article we would like to share Danielle's realization that an education doesn't have to happen in school, and how both of our families have discovered that it is never too late to reap the benefits of life learning.

Both families are at different stages of life, yet embracing learning plays an important part of both families' well-being. In Danielle's case, her discovery of life learning has ended her appreciation for her son Scott's dilemma about how to get an education.

From a very early age, Scott possessed a natural curiosity for the animal world, particularly insects and reptiles. He was fascinated with ants, for example, and would spend hours watching a colony lay eggs and build a colony. He had an inquisitive mind and at a very young age would read magazines and books, and share his new found knowledge with his parents. Since Danielle's family lived in the country, Scott spent much of his time studying animals. In the early years, he found school interesting and he did well in elementary and middle school. He was athletic, artistic and had many friends.

When Scott reached secondary school, he began struggling with mathematics and science. His struggle in science surprised Danielle, since he had what she considered to be a scientific mind, although he obviously shared her math phobia.

At age 16, he started questioning why he had to do lab reports in a certain way and why he had to follow routines and meet deadlines. Despite his questioning this oppressive nature of schooling, he was able to do well when he wanted to. At this time, Danielle thought the problem was a dislike for a particular teacher or teaching style, but even when he really liked his instructor, he would balk at having to do things a certain way. Scott's resistance to conformity would sometimes lead him to argue with the school administrator, though it never led to a suspension from school. At one point, it looked like he would not finish high school.

In a chapter of a book entitled *Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education*, University of Wisconsin professor Leslie Green Wilson writes of how, despite our society valuing individualism, many educators use methods that promote conformity and compliance of students, rather than encouraging students to think outside of the box and to challenge the status quo. After reading passages from John Holt's book *How Children Learn*, Danielle now realizes that Scott was bored with school because he found the tasks dull and trivial. He was not challenged by tasks that did not tap into his intelligence and capabilities. He did not see the relevance of what he was learning to what he really wanted to learn.

In grade 12, Scott had the good fortune of working with excellent teachers who saw his potential as an artist. He had the opportunity to do a cooperative course in visual arts. This would allow him to meet various artists in the community and allow him to develop and teach a visual arts course to children who

were ages six to 12, once a week for a term. He also developed an interest in the art of tattooing. During his last high school year, his art teacher allowed him to develop his own course of study in visual arts; his main task for the course was to prepare his artist's portfolio for entry into the honors visual arts program at University of Ottawa. He gained entrance in the honors program. Since he completed high school with an 85 percent average, he qualified for a bursary for his first year of university.

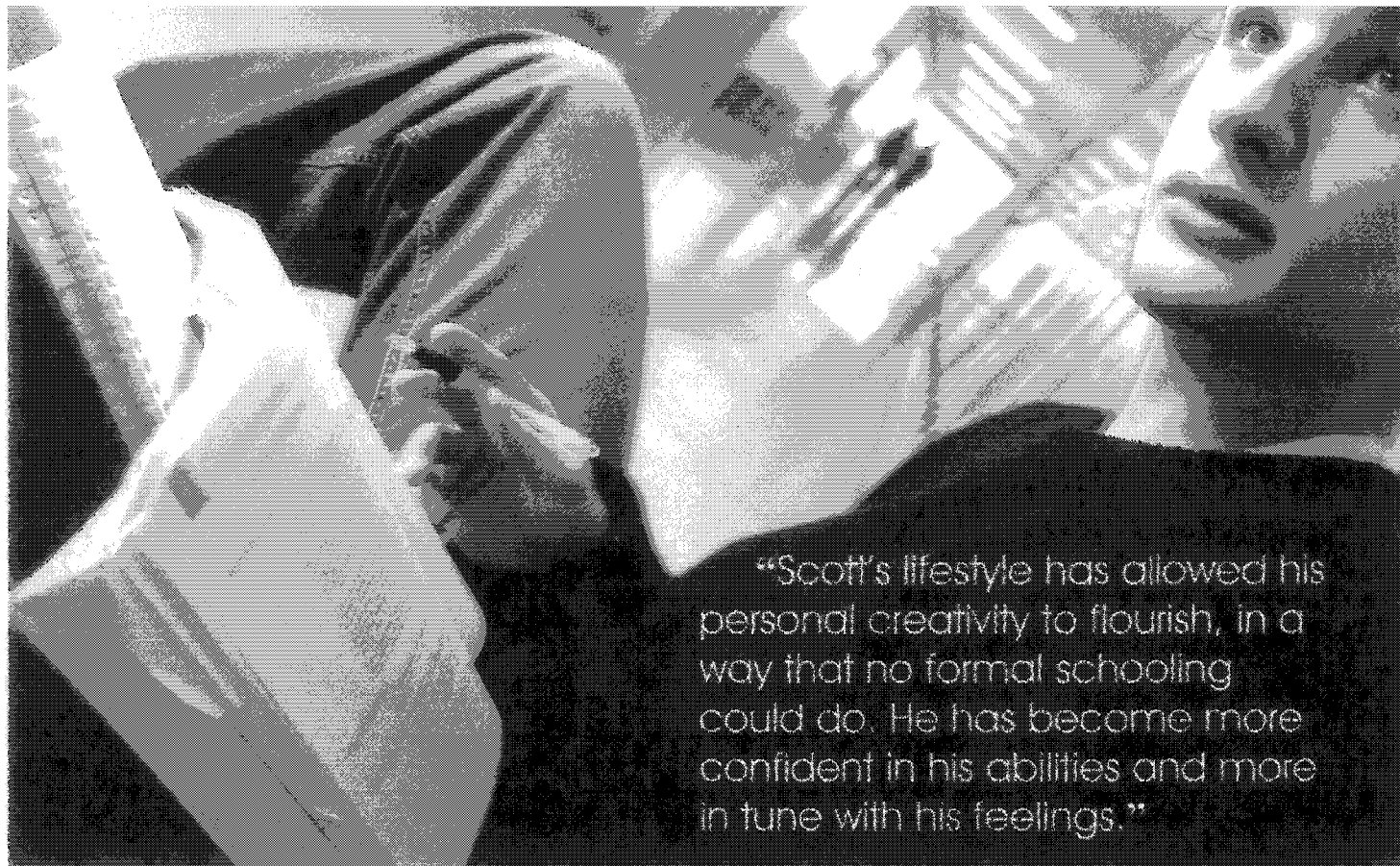
However, within a week of beginning university, Scott called home to say that he was not sure he had made the right choice. He found his professors difficult to understand, since the program was in French. Furthermore, he felt that his classes were not interesting, and he found residence life hard to get used to. He felt that his creativity was stifled by the rigid demands of the program and, once again, he balked at what was asked of him. Danielle encouraged him to see an academic counselor and perhaps switch to the English program or an alternate program, but he wanted to stick it out for a while longer.

By November, he was behind in his assignments, was not attending class and was becoming depressed. More than anything, he felt he had let his family down. That Christmas, he dropped out of university and has shown no inclination to return after now being out of school for four years.

“Scott was bored with school because he found the tasks dull and trivial. He was not challenged by tasks that did not tap into his intelligence and capabilities. He also did not see the relevance of what he was learning to what he really wanted to learn.”

When Danielle reflects on that difficult time, she thinks about Holt's words about how our children try so hard to live up to our expectations and fear our disappointment. All parents have high hopes for their children and want them to lead happy, productive lives. Danielle was raised to believe that the only way to gain employment is to attend college or university, since this will lead to greater job opportunities. Her son's experiences now make her realize that there are other paths.

Scott's experiences at university are not unique. Many of the students he met while in residence questioned whether they had made the right decision and some did drop out during or at the end of their first year. In his case, the secondary school guidance counselors had really advocated university as the only option, since he was graduating from the academic stream. This was not necessarily the best advice for Scott. ▶



“Scott’s lifestyle has allowed his personal creativity to flourish, in a way that no formal schooling could do. He has become more confident in his abilities and more in tune with his feelings.”

Alternatives

What alternatives does Scott have? In the four years since he left university, he has led a very busy, but simple lifestyle. He has learned that he has an affinity for tree planting and this has enabled him to support himself and to spend most of his time in the outdoors, living in a tent and communing with nature. Tree planting has led to making contact with like-minded young people who also lead a minimalist lifestyle. Through his contacts, Scott has matured and is sure of where he wants to go. He has traveled twice to South America, where he has become fluent in a third language. He has volunteered in an orphanage in the Amazon and has been able to survive on his own in an alien world. While in the jungle, he spent a lot of time examining and studying the fauna, which rekindled his interest in the insect world. Most of all, he has learned to appreciate another culture and has returned from his trips with a more spiritual outlook on life in general and a greater appreciation for life in Canada.

If anything, Scott’s experience in university made him realize that that path is not for him. He has been able to look at how he failed at university and to turn the experience into a positive event by seeking out learning alternatives. Thomas Hoerr, who is director of New City School, a multiple intelligences school in St. Louis, Missouri, recently wrote an article about how students need to learn to respond to failure. He states that high schools do a disservice to students when they are allowed to graduate from school with nothing but successes under their belts. These successes in school do not adequately prepare students for the pitfalls that are part of life. The real success is determined by how we handle adversity. Holt agrees: He speaks of intelligence as a style of life, a way of behaving in situations that

are new or strange to us. He says that the possibility of failure allows an individual to learn from mistakes without shame or fear.

In the last year, Scott has been investigating ways to study in the field of entomology without attending university. At first, Danielle was not supportive of his quest to find such an alternative. Being a university graduate, she knew how hard she had to work to achieve everything that she has in her career. She was also concerned that a college diploma or university degree is considered more important by society than personal knowledge in a field of study. In other words, no matter how knowledgeable a person appears, a certificate is the guarantee that he or she has spent the time and money to earn the credits. It is exactly that narrow way of looking at learning that Scott is fighting!

Of course, Scott is not alone. If a certificate is what you want, in *Bear’s Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Education*, Mariah Bear offers suggestions about nontraditional post-secondary education – education without sitting in the classroom – and how to earn credits for life experience and even for travel done before entering school. This alternative education looks at competencies and skills, rather than at time served in class and the number of credit earned. Bear also lists other ways of achieving credits or degrees that include distance education facilitated by the Internet, credit through guided private study under the supervision of a faculty member, credit for intensive study for a period of time, credit when working on a home computer linked to a school computer, degrees through correspondence and so on.

Another option that Scott can explore as an alternative to post-secondary education would be a situation similar to Allan Tough’s findings from his thesis on self-teaching. Tough, a pro-

fessor at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, examined 40 adults who were working on a self-teaching project and addressed questions such as which teaching tasks did they perform and for how long, what aspect of self-teaching caused difficulty or concern and how much assistance did self-teachers obtain with each task and from whom. His framework used to study these questions consisted of 12 teaching tasks, each being a major decision or action that could be performed either by a professional teacher or by the learner him or herself. The tasks consisted of choosing a goal, deciding which activities would be appropriate for the goal, obtaining printed materials and resources, estimating the level of the learner's knowledge and skills, dealing with difficulties in grasping certain parts, deciding when to learn, deciding where to learn, deciding how much money to spend, dealing with lack of desire for achieving the goal, dealing with the dislike of certain activities, dealing with doubts about success and deciding whether to continue. His findings clearly supported the hypothesis that self-teachers can perform several of the tasks of a professional teacher.

The more Danielle read about alternative programs, the more questions she had about Scott's chosen field of entomology. How can a person earn a degree or gain enough knowledge that would be recognized as sufficient to work in the field? John Falk of the Institute for Learning Innovation offers some answers about free-choice science education. In his book *Free-Choice Science Education: How We Learn Science Outside of School*, he states that science is not a topic that is easily confined to schools; rather, it requires a lifelong commitment to remain literate and knowledgeable. Knowledge can be gained from a variety of sources, including field studies, libraries, museums, various forms of media and community-based organizations. Falk writes, "Those concerned with science learning need to fully appreciate and accommodate the full complexity of the science learning infrastructure, particularly the considerable indirect contributions made by the free-choice science learning sector."

Finally, the importance of establishing a mentorship with an entomologist is an option for Scott that also needs to be considered. Mentorship programs are gaining in popularity, especially in the teacher education field. Scott has already found a true friend who has been his mentor through his travels and his journey towards self-discovery. Since he has already experienced mentoring and has the motivation to learn in the field of entomology, the next step would be to find a mentor with the knowledge base required for his own growth.

No matter where Scott ends up, he is experiencing life in a way that Danielle would never have anticipated. His lifestyle has allowed his personal creativity to flourish, in a way that no formal schooling could do. He has become more confident in his abilities and more in tune with his feelings.

Holistic educator Isabella Kates, writing in *Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education*, speaks of the way personal creativity can lead to spirituality and nurturing of the self, as much as being about producing works of art. It is clear that Scott has been on a spiritual journey to find himself, a journey that began four years ago, but one that will continue for a long time to come.

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Resources

Bear's Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Learning by Mariah P. Bear, Thomas Nixon (Ten Speed Press, 2006)

Mentor by Laurent A. Daloz (Jossey-Bass, 1999)

Free-Choice Science Education: How We Learn Science Outside of School by John H. Falk (Teachers College Press, 2001)

How Children Fail by John Holt (Perseus Publishing, 1995)

Failing Wisely by Thomas R. Hoerr, (in *Educational Leadership* 63(1), 2005)

Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education by John Miller, S. Karsten, D. Denton, D. Orr, I. Kates, ed (State University of New York Press, 2005)

Beyond Teaching to Mentoring by Alice Reinartz, Eric White, Eric R. (Jossey-Bass, 2001)

Learning Without a Teacher: A Study of Tasks and Assistance during Adult Self-teaching Projects by Allen Tough (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1967)