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Jon Remmerde

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Amanda's Effective Education

Amanda, 16, hiked twice that sunny day, on Magic Sky, the ranch we took care of in the Rocky Mountains. Most of the rest of the day, she wrote, building a novel. Laura asked me, "Do you think we should insist Amanda use some of her time to learn science and math?"

I said, "I think we should let her do what she's doing. When her interest in writing isn't so intense, she can study math and science."

Juniper, two years older than Amanda, decided to try public school, enrolled for her junior year of high school, completed that year, then skipped her senior year and started college. Amanda also tried public school that year, stayed until she knew she could handle all the teasing she received, mostly for being different in dress and manner from the other students, and until she knew she could handle all the academic work.

Though she enjoyed most of her classes and liked her teachers and many of the other students, she was not happy, because she had little time to write songs, poems, and stories, to draw, to read what her interests led her to, to practice piano and guitar and singing.

Mid-year, Amanda left public school and returned to home schooling. At first, she worried about a need for direction. She said, "I think you'd better give me assignments."

I said, "Okay. I'll put something together as soon as I finish a couple of short projects on the ranch." My statement was a transparent stall. Help with education almost always stood higher

than projects on the ranch in our family's priorities, because ranch work could always be caught up later.

Amanda had effectively directed most of her own education before she started public school. I wasn't particularly interested in helping her hang onto patterns of education she learned from public schools. She was distracted by fear that she wouldn't learn on her own and didn't see through my tactic. She happily renewed her exploration of the mountain around us and the worlds available in whatever reading caught her interest, confident that, within several days, I would present her with a sense of direction brought by assignments.

By the time I finished my couple of short projects on the ranch, she had settled out of public school routines and rediscovered the sense of direction she had temporarily put aside. She realized she didn't need assignments. She again had time to pursue her own interests. She learned, and her muses fed her all day long.

Three years before that, when Juniper was thirteen and Amanda eleven, we lived in Oregon. Our daughters took tests required of home schoolers. They did well in everything but math. Their low math scores ignited their interest in learning math. They didn't want those low scores.

We bought Saxon text books, that I thought were very good for self-directed learning, and I helped them. They learned math as they had learned to read, rapidly, stimulated by their own interest in learning the subject, with very little repetitive study, called "review" in the public schools.

When they started public school, Juniper and Amanda both took first-year Algebra. What they learned in the class and their grades (above 3.5) satisfied them. They did well in Algebra because, though we started late, we built a solid foundation in math.

From their earliest years of home schooling, when we searched for and began to find an effective approach to education, they built a good foundation in knowing how to learn.

Early in her day of long walks on the ranch and of writing, Amanda closed a book about forests. She said, "I know most of that from being out in the forests." And, I'm sure, from other reading and from our conversations as we talked about what we saw as we walked through the forests. She did well in Biology in public school, because she is interested in all forms of life, observes life around her, and reads extensively about it.

Learning to read was not a long process for Juniper and Amanda, developing over a period of years as they gradually learned to read ever more complex books. It took them less than a year to learn to read anything their interest led them to. They rapidly expanded their vocabularies. Our tattered dictionary testifies to their early and sustained ability to help themselves when their reading led them to words they didn't know. Laura and I also helped them with vocabulary.

I think the example of how quickly they learned to read defines what is possible for interested learners who are not encumbered by ideas of how much a student can or can't learn at a particular age and who are not encumbered by being part of large classes, where the teachers' abilities spread over thirty students, and lack of time limits individual attention and help.

Lack of cultural encumbrances on their time and interest also helped them learn effectively. We don't watch television, because anything we can get from it is so low on our list of priorities, we don't have time for it. The absence of television supported Juniper's and Amanda's pursuit of knowledge through our own classes when Laura and I worked with them, through experience with the world around them, and through reading.

The public school Amanda attended didn't offer a class in theology, so she pursued the subject on her own after she withdrew from public school. Among other books, she read Mohandas Gandhi's autobiography, which gave her insight into religion, history, politics, the power of non-violence in solving world problems, the place of politics and religion in community, the power of morals and ethics in the world community, the definition, place, and power of human compassion in dealing with world problems. The history she learned from that book included much about the British empire and India and sent her to many other books.

I think our culture has lost touch with classical education, the objective of which is a broad understanding of the world, of humanity and our achievements, that can guide us into the future with moral and ethical literacy, and with an understanding of ourselves in relation to family, community and the world we live in.

Amanda's education at home came closer to classical education than what she received in public school, because she had careful, individual guidance into wide fields of knowledge, and she had freedom to follow her interests into education in depth. Learning largely directed by her own interest fired her enthusiasm.

Amanda did lack some education she should have had. Laura and I speak only English, so we couldn't teach her a foreign language. She wanted voice training, and she couldn't receive that at a professional level at home. I didn't worry about what her education lacked. She learned to find what she needed. A long life lay ahead of her. I was confident she would find and learn what she needed and wanted to learn.

Her education gave her a cohesive structure of values and knowledge within which everything she learned and experienced fit. Her education will continue all her life, because she has a

deep-rooted habit of learning and a well-developed ability to learn what she needs to learn.

I think we defined an effective education by our experience. We achieved an effective education, not because Laura and I were brilliant teachers, nor because our daughters were exceptional in their abilities, but because intelligence and enthusiasm for learning are natural. Starting our daughters' education early, in our home, helped us avoid many of the most common distractions from learning. Keeping the primary responsibility for education within our family helped us nurture everything natural to growth and learning.

Our daughters thrived on learning, and they continue to learn enthusiastically. I worked with their education long enough to know that, while mass education might not work for many students, individual education based in love and interest works very well.

Obviously, to teach as we have taught our daughters, parents must shift their priorities and values, so love, family, and education of their children mean more than material gain. That shift contributes to the effective education of their children and to a culture based more in sustainable, rewarding values than the contemporary culture is based. If we hope for a culture based on values transcending the most material values, everyone gains from effective education.