

Culture Shock

Because we lived away from most people, taking care of ranches, and because we didn't watch television, Juniper and Amanda were not much acquainted with their peers or with attitudes prevalent in the culture. They stepped into the midst of the culture and into the midst of their peers by age when they started public school, Amanda as a sophomore in high school and Juniper as a junior. They rode the bus more than an hour each morning and evening.

The bus drivers devoted their primary attention to driving. The students, in close contact with each other, had little supervision.

Amanda and Juniper said that, except for them, the girls on the bus accepted harassment from the boys. Amanda said, "They liked the attention. They agreed with what the boys said, "Yeah, I'm fat. Yeah, I'm dumb."

A boy put his arm around Amanda and said, "Hi sweetheart. I really like redheads."

Amanda stamped on his foot. He let go of her. Amanda told him, "If you ever do that again, I'm going to deck you." He left her alone after that.

Two boys in a seat behind Juniper and Amanda pulled Amanda's hair. Juniper turned around and slugged them. They didn't bother Amanda again.

Amanda's and Juniper's reactions to sexual harassment were effective. I could not advise my daughters not to react with violence. I will never be where they were, needing to deal with sexual harassment quickly and to the best of their ability to avoid escalation into more serious sexual harassment or into violence against them. I support their decisions and actions to protect themselves.

After those first encounters, Amanda and Juniper were largely left out of interactions among students on the bus. They sat in the seat directly behind the driver, because discipline waned as the distance from the driver increased. One driver put boys on one side and girls on the other, which reduced the problems but didn't completely solve them.

Gender stereotyping and actions based on stereotyping disturbed Juniper and Amanda and permeated classrooms, halls, and gymnasiums. They said most of the girls seemed to accept

most of the stereotyping. Adults at the school also often acted on gender stereotypes. Often, teachers expected boys to lead classroom discussion, and girls allowed that pattern to exist.

“In Physical Education class,” Juniper said, “The boys say, ‘Stand up close and throw the ball easy. She’s a girl.’ If they have to hit the ball, or throw any distance, the girls say, ‘I’m just a girl. I can’t do that.’” Juniper asked, “How can girls learn to be the best they can be if they give up before they start and if they’re encouraged to give up by everyone else’s reduced expectations?”

Amanda and Juniper found it particularly offensive that the function of the two sexes for each other in this culture is seen to be romantic love, so that “mere” friendship between a boy and a girl is nearly impossible.

Juniper started to develop a friendship with a boy, but comments from fellow students about “Your girlfriend” scared the boy off, and the friendship died.

In their home schooling, in our lives together, from our spiritual teachings, Amanda and Juniper learned that all humans are worthy of respect, with equal power and equal treatment, from the government, from other humans, before God.

Our friends, male or female, young or older, treated our daughters with respect. Since Laura and I treated them as equal human beings, our friends also treated them as equal. People who didn’t accept them as equal weren’t usually our friends for long, because an approach that excluded children from adult occupations and conversations meant we tended to share little common ground.

From their reading, and from what they saw and heard of the world around them as they grew up, our daughters knew our approach to living, to each other, to education, and to gender was in many ways not typical of the culture, but experiencing the difference on the bus and at school startled them.

They knew the students around them were not completely responsible for what they believed and acted out. They act as they are taught to act. They reflect the culture. If television and movies show a crippled, limited relationship between the sexes, and if the students watch television and movies, they will act out what they have learned. If parents and friends live, communicate, and act in ways that express less value for females than for males, except as possible partners in romantic love, then the students will also express less value and respect for females until something stops them and makes them think through what they live, communicate, and act out.

Juniper and Amanda expected peer pressure to attempt to push them toward change, and they started their public schooling with determination to maintain their values and their individuality. They adapted well to the world as it came at them and as they approached it. They did maintain their values and their individuality.

Amanda returned to home schooling midyear, but sexism around her played only a small part in her decision. Her loss of time to pursue her own interests and her own education meant most to her.

She returned to public school her senior year, and she did well academically and socially. She had several excellent teachers, including a woman who had overcome many gender stereotypes in her own career and taught her students as intelligent individuals. Amanda graduated from public school. She thought that year was time well invested and excellent preparation for college.

While Amanda completed her sophomore year at home, Juniper completed her junior year in public school. Juniper skipped her senior year and started college. She attended the nearby college and commuted. During a vacation, when the campus was nearly deserted and Juniper was home, an unidentified man raped a student.

I read about the rape in the newspaper, and I called the college and checked all security procedures on campus. Juniper and I together covered details of existence like requesting an escort around campus after dark, checking the inside of her car before she got in, and other practices for safety in a sometimes dangerous world.

When Juniper and Amanda and I looked in the library for Naomi Wolf's book, *The Beauty Myth*, an important study of the position of women in our male-dominated consumer culture, we also found *Back Off*, by Martha J. Langelan, a book about effective techniques to end sexual harassment, from verbal harassment to attempted rape. I ordered two copies from the book store and sent them to Juniper and Amanda after they returned to college in Illinois.

The book does not immediately solve all problems. But now that book circulates on campus. From the book and from many other sources, awareness among the students about their right to be free of negative influences from the culture grows. On the small, conservative campus where Amanda and Juniper attend college, students have a Sexual Harassment Education Committee that meets weekly, circulates printed material, and

operates a hot line on campus.

Awareness that women need not allow any degree of sexual harassment and that boys and men do a serious disservice to women and to themselves when they participate in any form of harassment increases on campus. Amanda tells me her male friends have given her some of the most sensible advice and staunch support in dealing with sexual harassment. Despite what many of the students see as lack of support from the administration and an unwillingness to admit there is ever a problem, students have formed a women's rape support group on campus.

Our daughters pursue their education. They participate in a surge of awareness of problems in the culture and problems in the institutions of education. By their activities, by their pursuit of education, by their participation in the dissemination of information about the problems they and other students around them see, they attempt to reduce the severity of those problems. They see progress, and through them, I see progress in increasing awareness of problems, and in starting to solve some of those problems.

They also pursue extra-curricular activities, maintain high grades, develop friendships, and pursue their own creative desires.

The question that so often concerned Laura, "Are we doing okay at our daughters' education and at raising them?" seems to have a clear answer. Juniper and Amanda have become adults, and they walk in good directions, with strong, positive values. They have some positive influence on the world around them, and that is what education is about, and that is what life is about, and that is what love is about.

Now we can say, "Yes. We did okay with education and with life and with love. Now let us celebrate the work we achieved together, the life we have lived and continue to live and the love we built that spreads around us and still continues."