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Jon Remmerde

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Essays From a Family of Four

I dig traps for myself. When I forget where I dug them and fall into them, I have the opportunity to remember the process of digging, to decide if the reason for digging was valid, and to examine the quality of my own workmanship as I attempt to find my way out of the trap or decide to accept that particular trap as part of my existence.

In addition to writing the essays that several newspapers and magazines have published, I write short fiction and poetry, and I have written several books. I've been at this with varying degrees of intensity since before our daughters were born.

I have attempted to sell my writing most seriously in the last five or six years. I've published twelve short stories in four magazines. I've sent many other stories to many magazines, without good results. Sometimes, I say what I think about attempting to market essays, stories, and books, that the process uses a lot of time I could better use writing more stories or essays.

Our daughters were entirely home schooled until they decided to try high school so they would know what public school was like before they started college. Amanda started as a sophomore and Juniper as a junior. They came home with the information that career counseling was part of their schooling. People at the school tested them and advised them to direct their education and talents into channels aimed toward particular jobs.

I said, "This culture is far too oriented toward jobs. It's too early to be thinking about career choices in anything but very general terms."

The ensuing family discussion brought out several interesting points. During the process of selecting classes at the beginning of the semester, teachers and counselors emphasized the importance of math and science classes, at the expense of art, voice, drama and literature classes. To meet requirements for graduation in three years, Amanda went without an art class and a drama class, where her interests actually lie, so she could have a biology class and an algebra class, where her interests are not.

The solution to the nation's difficulties with low scores in science and math among high school students does not lie in insisting that all students gain advanced knowledge in those subjects. Not all students can make a career in fields that rely heavily on math and science.

Someone has forgotten we also need singers, authors, painters, actors, and musicians. One who intends to concentrate in one of those disciplines

needn't spend undue time with science and math, assuming a basic acquaintance with both, which Amanda has.

I told Amanda and Juniper they should achieve a broad educational base during high school, and they should decide how to earn a living when they go to college or after high school if they decide not to go to college, an idea Amanda entertained after what became a somewhat sour experience for her in public school. Students should not focus on earning money at this early an age, we all concluded after discussion. Education should be first, with the freedom to still be a child also having considerable importance.

Everyone in this family writes. Laura has published three essays, and Amanda one. Amanda has fiction scheduled to publish in *Creative Kids* and in *Brilliant Star* Juniper has published letters in *The Christian Science Monitor* and in *The Atlantic Monthly*. With two other students, based on one essay written at leisure and another written against the clock, she was chosen to represent her school in an international writing competition this spring.

Impressed by all these achievements and realizing that four people trying for publication might increase the income from writing, I attempted to get four to produce and send out many essays.

I made almost no headway. Juniper and Amanda are not interested in writing for money. "I want to write what I want to write. I don't want to design anything to fit an editor's standards," Amanda said.

Amanda and Juniper both said they had seen how much time I put into attempting to market the products of my writing, and they had no desire to use up their time attempting to market when they could be writing. Besides, Amanda said, if high school students are too young to direct their energy and attention toward careers, then they are too young to be concerned about publication for financial gain.

As I said in the beginning, when one finds oneself in a hole of one's own digging, it is a good time to examine the history, the motivation, and the quality of workmanship.

I asked myself again, "What are children for?" and the answer still seems to be, to learn, to love, and to be children. I asked, "How long are they children?" and the answer seems to be, "Until they become adults, by their decision and by ours, working together." I'm as unconcerned as ever about what the rest of the culture might think of our answers and methods. Our approach to education and to living has worked well for us and continues to work well for us.

It surprises me that some of this entrapment I have fallen into pleases me. The history makes good sense to me, as does the motivation, and a careful examination of the workmanship shows it to be not perfect, but far

from shoddy.

Juniper and Amanda are right in what they say. They have learned self-motivation and accurate and critical thinking, and they put what they learn to work.

When she withdrew from public school and returned to home schooling, Amanda said we would need to give her regular assignments, because she had some fear about letting go of all the structure of public school. I think she caught her fear from people who feared the change, as if education were held captive by public schools.

Now Amanda is out of public school, and she remembers she can trust herself for motivation and direction, so she wants to back away from assignments.

Before she remembered she could trust her own motivation and sense of direction, I did get one essay from her, on why she withdrew from public school. Just this evening, I got a commitment from her to revise it so it might be publishable, because I think what has taken place and her view of it could be important to people who are concerned about education and because I want her to pay for her own piano tuning next time the tuner comes up the mountain.

Juniper still attends public school. She said the educational experience, including the opportunity for some social education, is important to her, but she will not be molded to anyone else's concepts of careers nor to anyone else's concepts of how she is to make her way in the world.

She isn't interested enough in money to attempt to write essays to sell. She does hope to work next summer as a wrangler or a ranch hand at the camp she went to last year, for the love of the experience and for money, with money far secondary.

So, the fact that I can't get essays written by anyone but me and, occasionally, Laura (we adults value money more than our daughters do), is, in part, my own doing. I might be able to talk Amanda and Juniper into more essays, but I would have to back up and disown a large part of what I've said, that reexamination tells me is valid; I don't want to disown it.

So, most of the essays will continue to be what I write. We will have to settle for that.