The Art of Learning and Becoming

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What inspires me as an educator—shaping young lives—is to bring forth the essence and radiance of our most highly educated selves for the betterment of each and of all. The world, especially now, needs original thinkers who know themselves and can listen to one another, seeing the perspectives of others.

Parents today live under extraordinary pressure. They are bombarded with messages about what and how their children should be learning and all the extracurricular activities their children should be doing. We live in a culture that worships happiness and "good jobs." From picture books and Instagram feeds to parenting blogs and motivational posters, parents are urged to choose joy, think positively, and smooth away the rough edges of life. Parents are tasked with tracking milestones, monitoring behaviors, and preparing children for a competitive and unpredictable future. These messages pile up and, with them, a bubbling up of much anxiety: *Am I doing enough for my child to succeed?*

Beneath the noise lie quieter, more enduring questions: How do we help our children learn not just for achievement, but for the spirit and love of learning? How do we help them become well balanced and well-educated people?

But what if education is not only about *what* children learn, but *how* they learn and *who* they become in the process?

Humanistic education and social progress are inseparable, for when children are invited to join intellect with empathy, knowledge with imagination, and rigor with curiosity, their learning becomes a journey of both mind and heart. In working this way, children learn to think independently, imagine freely, and pursue academic excellence with purpose and a strong sense of self. Throughout their learning experiences, students engage in deep thinking and rigorous scholarship across the disciplines and are helped to develop emotional and social intelligence, ultimately taking ownership of their education. They become architects of a better future: a more just and compassionate society.

One of our middle school students understood this process of learning and development, and reflected during his 8th grade graduation: "An education from the inside out: What does that mean?" He continued, "Well, after eleven years, I think I might've found the answer. The approach to helping us grow is centered around *how* we learn, *how* we interact with others, and *how* we work. This is not to say that there's less of a focus on learning. It's quite the opposite, in fact. The teachers find out what's going on inside us and use it to find the best way to help us learn about ourselves and the world. Fundamentally, each student gets help with what they need to grow."

Such wise words from a young person. Growth, the emergence of the self and the unfolding of the mind, happens when we suspend our immediate agendas enough to become attuned to the interests, emotions, and ideas of our children. There are important moments of growth and learning in ourselves and our relationships that are both natural and filled with conflict. Nurturance and acceptance are much more effective than pressure and worry, both for our children and ourselves. When they experience OUR attention, feeling heard and seen, just as they are and where they are at, young people gain encouragement, security, and confidence. At the same time, we gain insight into how to best help them.

Another middle school student recalled, "I remember it like it was yesterday: My first Morning Group. I was scared because I didn't know anybody. Sixty-something faces I had never seen before, all sitting in a big circle. Ms. Rotter called my name for attendance, and everyone started looking at me. 'Here,' I whispered. I don't think anyone could hear me.

"Any time I would try to speak, Ms. Rotter would echo my volume back. After a couple of months, she asked me if I wanted people to hear what I was saying. I did, but I didn't think they wanted to hear me. It took me a while to know that what I had to say was important.

"Being able to speak up and ask for what I want is a tool that I know will benefit me as I enter high school. But it's not just my volume that has changed; I have transformed as a student. I have discovered that I have a fire inside of me that is ignited by learning. I now understand that my intelligence isn't defined by a score on a test but, instead, by my ability to think critically and express my ideas."

As these students have so aptly captured, it is patience, guidance, and structure across an engaging program of studies that ensures academic excellence and lays the groundwork for lifelong learning and achievement. Time and space to grow are essential, as learning is complex, with many twists and turns.

An education of one's own requires the freedom for everyone to choose how to respond to their experiences, rather than calling only for specific answers. To know and continue discovering themselves and the world, students, teachers, and parents alike benefit from asking open-ended questions like "What if…?" or "Why is it…?" rather than seeking the answer. The discomfort of wanting "perfect" answers, and the fear of perhaps making mistakes, or being wrong, inhibit us from imagining, experimenting, inventing, and growing a flexibility, resilience, and confidence inside that is strong. What is always remarkable is how each student interprets and integrates their learning and makes it their own.

Children grow into well-balanced, well-educated individuals when they are allowed to feel the full range of their emotions without those feelings being dismissed, fixed, or shut down. Well being is not the absence of struggle. It is the ability to navigate challenges and, with our support, practice and strategize how to solve problems, building strength and resilience. A child who wrestles with disappointment learns they can recover. A student who grapples with a math problem discovers persistence. A teenager navigating friendship conflicts and misunderstandings, learns to listen, compromise, and set boundaries. In their simple, unguarded wisdom, children hold a truth that adults often lose sight of. Life is not only pure joy and positive feelings, but also joy braided with sorrow, delight tangled with disappointment, beauty marked by loss.

So, the next time you ask yourself, "Am I doing enough?" Remember that the most important work is often invisible: the listening, the presence, the patient guidance, and the encouragement of curiosity. By allowing children to fully feel their emotions without judgment, fully express their thoughts and ideas through work and play, we help them develop resilience, self-awareness, and the courage to explore themselves, relationships with others, and the world.

While stages of development are sequential, learning and growing are not uniform processes, but highly individual ones. They require us to understand how each child's brain is wired, the developmental stage the child is navigating, the social and emotional context in which they are working, and the next step on their academic continuum. When we address all of these dimensions, we can create the conditions where learning lourishes.

By valuing the process of learning and fostering authentic relationships, we give children the tools to thrive, not just solely academically, but emotionally, socially, and morally. This is the gift we give our children: an education and way of learning that nurtures the unfolding of their whole, best selves.

As parents, we long to prepare our children for a world we cannot fully know, control, or even imagine. What we *can* do is nurture their minds, strengthen their connections, and root them in welcoming communities. In doing so, we give them resilience, conviction, know-how, and courage—the qualities that will allow them not only to navigate uncertainty, but to shape it.

Education, at its best, is a wondrous process that sustains us throughout life, creating a climate in which diversity, equity, inclusion, justice and belonging can truly progress. Together, we can raise children who are not only well-educated, but also deeply grounded in well-being—young people ready to meet the challenges of our time with thought, creativity, ingenuity, and great determination.

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