



## ***Herding Cats?***

A friend who works largely in the sector of alternative and small schools education recently commented to me that trying to organize home educators is like trying to herd cats. He has a point; we're an independent minded lot and sometimes that makes the things we do together just that bit more tricky, but for all that I still thought, 'and long may it continue'. Cats, after all, are not setting out to be deliberately awkward, just autonomous. Being autonomous and independent, however, for all its undoubted benefits, can sometimes leave home educators vulnerable to self doubt in the face of a mainstream educational establishment that sees education as a product to be consumed in exactly the right amounts.

Despite the growing reality of post modernism, society around us still seems very keen to decide on what is the "norm" as opposed to what is marginal, alternative, cranky or even off limits. In Britain, for example, the government seems to constantly strain after more and more conformity in education and in some European countries home education is difficult or even illegal to practice. The pressure to conform comes in a variety of packages, but most home educators feel it at some point. We've personally experienced it from good friends who feel that our decision not to use schools reflects badly on their continued use of school provision. They are particularly uneasy when they know that their own children are unhappy or deemed to be failing at school and our home educating lifestyle seems to them to be a threat - often leading them to believe that attack is the best form of defense. In the past, we also experienced it from my former employers who felt that home education was an over-protective indulgence and that we should be taking a lead in making our children join in with the local culture even if it meant they were unhappy, frightened and not thriving in education or life. Our children have experienced the pressure to conform for themselves, from school going friends who wanted to prove that they were getting something worthwhile by being forced into school. Other families are put under pressure by their extended family or neighbors, often in the name of the children's 'best interests' although words like 'conformity' and 'fitting in' are never far from the surface. In the face of all of this and given the constant media attention to educational standards and testing, it is no wonder that home educators, especially those of a particularly autonomous persuasion, should sometimes ask themselves if they are really doing the best for their children.

So it is always a great relief to meet with other home educators, who, like us, are as difficult to herd as cats. The summer (the one that you might easily have missed if you live in an area like Snowdonia, North Wales) will be coming to an end by the time this article is in print, but it has been another wonderful opportunity to catch up with other home educating families at summer festivals and camps. One of the things that I always value at these gatherings is the sense of reassurance and even "normality" that we gain every time we're in contact with others who home educate in a similar style and share some of our philosophy of education and life. "Normal" is a slippery term and one that isn't always easy (or even desirable!) to appropriate, but when we spend so much of our lives stepping out of the mainstream a little reassurance is no bad thing.

Having moved to rural North Wales this spring we thought it would be a particularly good idea to go to the Welsh camp this year. Fifty families perched together on a windy, but sunny cliff top for ten days of simply hanging out together. Some people got together to go coastering (an extreme water sport involving diving off cliffs into the Atlantic.) Some people chartered a speedboat to visit some offshore islands that are home to several species of rare and uncommon birds. There were bike rides, walks and expeditions to the



local rugby club, which had a large TV for viewing world cup football matches. My own family spent a good deal of time swimming in the sea in newly acquired wetsuits, whilst I managed to read two long novels and do a lot of journaling, There was a fire on the beach every evening and a scratch ceilidh (folk) band formed itself most evenings. Between the activity and inactivity it was simply good to soak up the atmosphere of a place where people could be themselves, thriving and learning through a vast array of interests and everyday living which defied the neat boxes of educational conformity. It was good to experience again that we can go on being out of step with the educational establishment and still resist being labeled "abnormal."

After the summer camps we settle back into the routines of autumn, my favorite time of the year and after the reassurance of the summer, meeting lots of people who are learning by living in a great variety of ways, the pressure to conform that soon creeps back into our lives is just that bit more easy to withstand. In the film, 'You've Got Mail' Joe Fox (Tom Hanks) writes an email to Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) about how much he loves the fall in New York and then goes on, "it makes me want to run out and buy school supplies." He continues by telling her that if he knew her address he would send her "a bouquet of sharpened pencils". That urge to run out and buy curriculum materials, and all the other 'back to school' paraphernalia that is advertised so loudly in every shop almost from the moment the summer holidays begin, is another symptom of running with the herd in educational conformity. We live in western cultures that have made deep links between the turning of the leaves, the shortening of the days and the beginning of the new school year. Newly sharpened pencils, empty school notebooks and shiny new shoes are as seasonally evocative as piles of golden leaves and pumpkins. So if we're not out there buying crisp new school clothes and cute little backpacks are we missing out on something?

For thousands of years the seasons have had major importance in our lives. The Celts who spread through Britain and into Europe implanted in western culture a cycle based in agriculture; life has been seasonal for a very long time and the strong pull of the seasons has hardly dissipated with industrialization and continued human movements to America and Canada. We may be postmodern, but we've got used to the notion that the seasons have meaning and impact for us. Whether we are celebrating the Christian festival of All Souls or the modern Pagan version of Celtic Samhain or nothing at all at the end of October we will still be bombarded with Hallowe'en advertising and still be aware that the year has a kind of cyclic patterning to it that. Schools have been with us for a very much shorter time than our awareness of the seasons, but they too have become culturally normative and have wound themselves into the pattern of the year so that we can easily feel that we are losing something cultural, evocative and meaningful when we don't take part in all of the back to school rituals. We can feel out of step and abnormal again. We are not!

Making meaning happens in many different ways within families practicing autonomous home education. Some home educators do buy school supplies, some even use them, but many of these supplies are destined to sit on shelves unused, symbols of our insecurity in the face of the new school term with its mainstream insistence that learning is a matter of filling in the right boxes. Those of us who resist the urge to buy bouquets of sharpened pencils and other much more expensive supplies can still feel the turning of the seasons and can still find pattern and meaning in our quests to live as families of autonomous individuals. Those of us of a more autonomous bent who value intrinsic motivation highly in our children's learning and our own learning are, after all, experts at questioning everything.



Are the seasons meaningful for our families at all? Does our independent minded approach to life and learning mean that we have no connection to a great deal of normal cultural currency? In the homes of some of my home educating friends you might not be able to tell from their houses or activities what time of the year it is, but that is still unlikely to mean that they are cut off from the cultures in which they live. Most have developed their own patterns to suit the preferences of their own family members, some related and some totally unrelated to the changing of the seasons, some linked with religious festivals and others arising purely from secular or personal considerations; all of them anchored to culture, but not unquestioningly, not uncritically. Some home educators start the year together, not with curriculum supplies, new shoes and designer lunch boxes, but with more of those reassuring camps - "not back to school" weeks where home-educated young people can celebrate their learning freedom together and signal both our independence and our increasing confidence in alternative learning exploits.

Our own family pattern does have a seasonal tie. We don't buy curriculum supplies at any time of the year, but the store cupboard and art cupboard tend to suddenly get some attention at this time of the year. Colder days tend to make us feel like cooking warm comfort foods. Summer wetsuits, rock-climbing, exploring beaches and castles are traded in for days around wood burning stoves exploring new interests in art techniques like printing, turning clay into pots or taking in stories from books and videos. After a summer of catching up with friends and having opportunities to network and live in temporary home education communities, we regroup as a family and this tends to be the time of the year when new interests will suddenly emerge or threads of learning will be picked up again. We make our own meaning within the forms and patterns that make sense to our life style. We live within a culture and take a great deal from it, but we, like autonomous home educators everywhere, never cease to ask questions.

What home educators miss out on is not some deeply valuable cultural experience, but simply homogeneity. What we lack, or rather eschew, is the common belief that children can be fitted into neat little boxes and that their minds are no more than empty buckets waiting to be filled with the prescribed list of so called 'essentials' that so often turn out to be little more than a veneer for control and dumbing down. That is no loss at all, but is rather another sign of our independent minds and autonomy and a gift to the communities in which we live.

As home educators we network, we support one another, we share skills or resources, we share ideas and we participate in common activities where they nurture and coincide with children's intrinsic learning motivation. What we don't do is surrender that basic learning autonomy which makes home education such an exiting, unpredictable, but still eminently 'normal' human adventure. AS home educators we live within given cultures in which there are huge reservoirs of accumulated knowledge; we don't through it all out, but we do ask questions, we do criticize, we do offer new insights.

Trying to make home educators conform might well be like trying to herd cats, but there is a wonderful poem by A.S.J. Tessimond that begins,  
"Cats, no less liquid than their shadows,  
Offer no angles to the wind."  
And goes on to describe a creature that slips through loopholes, will not be pinned to rules or routes for journeys, will not learn to answer to names and is seldom truly owned. For those of us seeking to respect and nurture our children's autonomy; for those of us who believe that each person's intrinsic motivation is the core of life long learning, that's not such a bad analogy. We may want to gather together to reassure and



support one another, to share our resources and test our ideas, but we remain difficult to herd, at least as difficult as cats - and long may it continue.

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