

The Learning Moment

by Theresa Willingham

Of all the discoveries I've made while homeschooling my three children over the last seven years, that of what I like to call "the learning moment" is one of the most delightful and useful. The "learning moment" is one of those effervescent occurrences like the precise moment a sunset is at its most beautiful, a piece of music is at its most moving, or shared time with someone is at its most memorable. It's one of those times you have to seize or lose forever. I guess I would define the "learning moment" as that precise instant when an educational opportunity naturally presents itself interestingly and in context, in such a way that it can be built upon and expanded with the maximum of learning obtained.

It's a "moment" that occurs in everyone's life at various times, and quite frequently in children's lives, but is viable only if recognized. To children ensconced in the artificial environment of a public school, such moments may be few and far between and then seldom caught when they occur. In the home school, the "learning moment" can be readily captured if we learn to recognize it, and it can make the difference between grasping a concept forever, or having to repeat it endlessly unless another fortuitous moment brings it home.

We recently experienced a good "learning moment" while the children and I were in a pet shop. "School" was the furthest thing from our minds as we admired the animals. Among the creature treasures was a terrarium with two young rats in it. My daughter, a big rodent fan, wanted a closer look and the pet shop proprietor cheerfully accommodated her, placing one of the rats in her cupped hands. We were enchanted as the creature sat comfortably and groomed itself in her palm. Its fur was silky and soft, its eyes bright and curious. As we were admiring the rat, another child walked by and reaching towards it, exclaimed, "Oh, how cute! What kind of animal is it?"

"A rat," my daughter replied.

As if she'd touched a hot iron, the other child's hand recoiled and she drew back in horror. "Oh, gross!" she cried and hurried away.

My daughter laughed and remarked, "That's funny. She thought it was really cute until she learned what it was."

Just like that, a learning moment was upon us and I automatically seized it. "Yes," I agreed with my daughter. "And is it really any less cute than she thought it was before?"

"No," she replied. "Why should it be?"

"It shouldn't be," I replied. "But sometimes, people have "preconceived" notions about things and that colors how they see things – or how things can seem to change before their eyes."

"What's preconceived mean?"

"That means making up your mind about something based on what you think you already know about it, even though sometimes what you know about it may be incorrect."

And now the moment was underway, and as we walked out of the store, our conversation segued into discrimination and prejudice. Now we were talking about how people sometimes feel about other people based on preconceived notions they have about culture and ethnicity. We recalled an event where a family member had enjoyed speaking to someone on the phone and then registered surprise when she discovered the person she had been speaking to was black.

"Why should that change the enjoyment she had when she thought the person she was speaking to had a different skin color?" I asked.

"It shouldn't," my daughter replied.

"Is that any different than what happened in the pet shop?" I asked.

No, my daughter replied. Someone had thought an animal was cute until they found out what the animal was and – though that specific animal itself had done nothing offensive – then it was no longer cute. We were even able to extend the concept to nations and their preconceived notions of one another that drive

foreign policy and fuel wars.

That single incident with the rat in the pet shop triggered a wealth of learning and conversation that even found it's way into dinner table conversation when Daddy came home, and he was able to add his own unique perspectives to it. I could never have driven home as much information and understanding about discrimination, prejudice, culture, tolerance and open mindedness from a book as that single incident accomplished hands on, in context and in real time. And even that would not have been as effective if we had not had other "learning moments" to recall and build upon (such as the telephone incident we drew on for comparison).

In the homeschool, few lessons will be as meaningful and memorable as those we draw from life itself. The secret lies not so much in knowing what to teach, as recognizing when a learning opportunity presents itself and acting on it. Lots of moments will escape us, though, despite our best efforts.

A few days ago, my husband found ants carrying aphids onto our citrus trees and called the children out to see. We were working around the house then, and only two of the children came and other things distracted us and we weren't able – or ready – to build upon the moment fully, so it was only partially successful. Other times, a moment presents itself and for various reasons, I can't share it with the children at all. And sometimes, I just plain get it wrong. The lesson I see in the moment isn't something that captures their interest or understanding, or is inappropriate for their ages and intellects.

Sometimes, the "learning moment" is a delicate balancing act.

With practice, though, and if we don't get too caught up in "book learning," we can learn to recognize those all important learning moments and run with them. Grasping a learning moment is a lot like running with a kite. You run and pull the string and dodge about, trying to catch the right breeze, watching the kite bounce higher and higher until the wind catches it. Then the string goes whistling through your hands and the kite is lofted up into the sky and your heart just soars with the accomplishment and wonder of it all!

Catching a learning moment makes both your children's and your own heart soar with understanding and delight. It's worth the slight extra effort it takes to recognize such a moment and run with it. And best of all, the memory of flying the kite of knowledge and understanding high and free with your children will be with you a lifetime!

Theresa Willingham is a freelance writer living in Tampa, FL with her husband Steve, and their three children, who have been homeschooled from birth. Theresa writes a monthly "Home Learning" column for the St. Petersburg Times, and has written for Home Education Magazine (where this article originally appeared), Life Learning and other periodicals. Her first book, the Food Allergy Field Guide: A Lifestyle Manual for Families (Savory Palate) was awarded first place in its category by the Colorado Independent Book Publishers Association in 2001.