

Weaving a Life

by *Luz Shosie*

Just before Cassidy left for college, a friend asked whether he felt unschooling had prepared him for life. He said it's impossible to prepare -- life keeps changing.

We didn't choose activities to teach reading or math or to prepare him for college. We weren't preparing for life, we were living. From the time Cassidy was born, he was joyfully engaged in finding out about the world. We included him in our work and play as much as we could. We nurtured his curiosity, encouraged him to follow his interests wherever they might lead and helped him gain access to the real world. We trusted that he was learning all the time, even when nothing he did looked anything like schooling. We knew he was learning because he talked to us about what he was doing, asked questions, showed us his projects.

He immersed himself in a series of projects for varying lengths of time -- building with blocks, making a big hole and dirt pile in the back yard, building a tree house, origami, Legos, video games, Tin Tin comics, Star Wars novels, Magic cards, volunteering at the Peabody Museum, and a very intricate, complicated role playing game called Warhammer. If you watched him for a month, you might say that "all he ever did" was play this game and wonder how he'd ever learn to get along in the "real world." But every one of these activities is connected to everything else in the world and we could see that he was learning concentration, following directions, patience, perseverance, calculating, measuring, reasoning, judgment. Most important, he was learning that his ideas and ways of learning, doing and being were valid.

I will follow a few threads that lead from one game to another, one activity to the rest of the world. These strands woven together become a rich and varied life worth living and lead to work worth doing. Learning math, reading, geography, etc. happens as a result of living life. It is incidental -- it's not the main point. If we had "motivated" (or bribed, coerced, tricked, etc.) Cass to stop his play to do a few math problems or a page in a reading workbook every day, we would be teaching him that we knew better than he how he should go about learning to be a grownup. We would be teaching him not to trust his own instincts, follow his own passions, but to depend on someone else to tell him what was important. We would be dumbing him down.

Warhammer is a game that takes far more time to prepare for than to play. It's played on a four by eight foot battlefield with 2 to 3 inch figures, a two inch thick book full of rules, magazines, accessories. Cassidy spent many hours building scenery, painting his armies, and of course finding ways to earn money to accumulate all this stuff. While he worked on his armies he listened to music and books on tape. Playing the game involved getting friends together, choosing teams, setting up the battlefield, rolling dice, calculating probabilities, strategy, timing, negotiation.

When Cassidy was 12, we went to England, where Warhammer was invented. There is a convention every year, and 20 or more stores around the country are devoted just to the game. We visited several of the stores, Cassidy would stay a couple of hours and join in the playing, preparations and conversations while I went to visit the local museums, cathedrals or shops that held no interest for him. Then together we would explore the castles, stone circles, and other sites we both enjoyed. We also attended the British Origami Society convention and stayed with five homeschooling families.

When we returned home, Cassidy began his writing career by writing to his aunt and uncle about his

trip. His interest in origami led to classes and conventions in New York City, where he decided to live.

When he was about 6, he started taking classes at the Eli Whitney Museum. As he grew older, he moved from student to apprentice to paid teacher and at age 15, he was invited to teach origami to a group of public school teachers (a part of their Enrichment Day). One of the Eli Whitney staff had a friend who made and sold jewelry and needed an employee. Cassidy worked part time in the small cottage industry for more than three years. I believe it was his employer, Lisa, who convinced him to go to college. She paid for a session with her former high school advisor who helped Cassidy find the colleges that might suit him, sort out admission requirements, testing information. He said it was helpful and it probably saved a lot of time because she had all this information readily available.

He decided on Hunter College in mid-town Manhattan. They ask for a high school diploma and SAT scores, so he bought a couple of books about how to prepare for those tests. We don't know how much time he spent with the books -- taking practice tests, following the reviews and lessons. But he was working two jobs at the time, so it probably wasn't much. He scored almost perfect on the GED test and got his high school diploma "with honors" (and the official gold seal) from the state. On the SAT he scored higher than half the high school valedictorians in CT and high enough to satisfy Hunter. Somewhere during the admission process he was asked for high school transcripts. He said he didn't have any because he was a homeschooler. That satisfied the admissions office.

In his early teens, Cass took a class in video production at Creative Arts Workshop. He enjoyed it and made a couple of videos with his friends, but it didn't seem to be one of those all consuming interests. Then at 18 he went to work at Tommy K's video rental store. One of his fellow employees was a film student and their conversations were another incentive for Cass to go to college, study film and computer science (in case he needed a day job). His college roommate got him interested in the political science club (something he was definitely not interested in at home) and now he's decided to major in film and political science.

We didn't test him, but in many ways and for his own reasons, he tested himself. When he was about ten, one of his homeschooled friends went back to school and told him about the standardized tests she took. He was curious, so we got a test for him. He took it and played with it and made his own evaluation. I don't remember whether he came up with a score -- that wasn't the point. He was just interested in finding out about that aspect of the world. He enjoyed puzzles of all kinds, including IQ and personality tests. He learned that there as many ways to measure himself as there are to measure the world around him.

Were there "gaps" in his education? Things we "should have" taught? Problems we might have avoided? Of course. In a freshman English essay Cassidy wrote: "...I think that my difficulties are my own, and I prefer not to look to others to take care of them for me. I'm not saying that everyone should deal with their own problems by themselves, or that we shouldn't help each other, but I wouldn't have the confidence I have today if I hadn't learned to help myself."

What did we teach him? In another essay: "...my parents never set down strict guidelines of what I should or shouldn't do.... They've always just been excellent examples for me--I've learned from them how ... to be accountable for my actions."

