

A TALE OF A SELF-DIRECTED LEARNER

By Ned Vare

Our son, Cassidy, was born in April 1979 at home on our ranch in Silt, Colorado, in a high-altitude, sparsely populated valley out in the middle of the Rocky Mountains. In September, we moved to the nearby town of Glenwood Springs. There, we had a fairly typical life -- small house, small vegetable garden, small town neighborhood. I often carried Cass around town on my shoulders, reading the signs, watching all the action of a bustling county seat with a busy main street. We went into stores and talked to people and in one store were asked by the sales person, "And who is this?" Without hesitation, the child said, "My name is Cassidy, and I'm eighteen months old." It was a question he had heard often, and he finally decided to answer it himself, instead of hearing me do it. The person was duly surprised, as was I.

Using the many street signs (STOP, Bank, No Parking, SHOE STORE, Post Office, etc.) it was clear that he was becoming a reader. He knew the letters and their sounds, and he could read all the children's books in the library by the time he was about three and a half. He enjoyed reading them many times over. I used the plastic letters with magnets on the back to make short words on the refrigerator to make sure he knew the principles of phonics. The key was nonsense words, like ZOT, or PIM -- if he could pronounce such words, then I knew that he understood how our language works. He did not tolerate my "teaching" for long, though, and I, too, was satisfied quickly that he "got it."

Luz and I were inspired by the writings of John Holt and James Herndon and a few others, and we decided to make school an option for our new son. He did attend a Montessori school (twice a week) that opened just across the alley from our house when he was 3 or 4. After about two months, he dropped out. I believe he decided that he already knew what they were trying to "teach" him. We told him then that he would be in charge of his own learning. He said, "Great." He liked being trusted and has always been comfortable with responsibility.

His education was totally self-directed. We didn't call it education, though. He simply took part, at his own level, in whatever we did. He went where we went. He rarely had a baby-sitter. From early on, we read to him, all the usual kid stuff. As I said before, Cassidy learned to read early by watching as we read to him.

Once, when Cass was four, I asked him to read part of the newspaper to me. He easily read parts of the sports page to me, but he didn't appreciate being tested. So I didn't do any more of that. Cassidy went to the library and chose his own books. He loved reading, and he read a great deal -- sometimes several books in a day. Even so, until he was about ten, he still enjoyed listening to Luz read to him.

At about ten, Cassidy read many of Shakespeare's plays and understood them well, enjoying the old style of language. I know he understood them because I once asked him to write (translate) a page for me into plain contemporary talk, and he did it with ease.

He never wanted, or used, school books, and yet he seemed to be learning the "subjects" well. He could use basic math skills easily and well. At age six, I gave him our restaurant bill to check, and he found a five-cent error. I asked him how he found it, and he looked at me quizzically and said, "Dad: Addition." That was the end of any worries about whether he understood math. I didn't know that he even knew the word addition, even though he often made purchases, computed distances on maps when we traveled, was aware of measurements, and so forth. We could tell that he was learning whatever he needed or wanted to know,

and he showed an interest in a wide variety of things.

When Cassidy was five, we moved to New Haven, Connecticut, and lived in a house in the city. We made new friends and had new work; there were big libraries, lots of cultural activities, several colleges including Yale, museums, art galleries, arts and crafts centers with classes and fairs, big theaters, a multi-ethnic population. Wow -- an intellectual explosion compared to small-towns out West. Cassidy, with good luck, found a boy his own age and they became "best friends." He knew others, but having one who is special, I believe, was very important. He often, in these days, used the names Scott and Greg.

Like many kids age ten, he became a world-class expert in dinosaurs. He went to Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History and, with Luz, became a part-time volunteer. On weekdays, they worked with entomologists in the dusty attics classifying beetles in the huge bug collections, and on weekends, the staff gave Cass a white coat with his name tag and assigned him the job of explaining the fossils and the dinosaurs to the public in the Great Hall of Dinosaurs. As I said, he liked responsibility. This was a significant experience, being the resident expert on a world-famous exhibit at a prestigious museum. He took it very seriously, and was well respected by the scientists, at eleven and twelve years old. Homeschooling parents are finding these kinds of opportunities for their kids across the land --ways to participate in "real life," instead of being locked away in schools where "life" is synthetic, artificial.

Another place Cassidy liked was a small museum dedicated to New Haven's famous inventor, Eli Whitney. The curator taught children's classes on making devices and/or machines out of scrap wood and metal and other recycled materials. Again, it was a good fit, and the man soon was offering Cass (actually, he used the name Tim during this period) the chance to instruct, or facilitate, in the classes.

At around this time, origami (the Japanese craft of paper folding) also got Cassidy's attention. He loved taking the two-hour train ride to New York City for all-day gatherings of the International Origami Society and folding paper into exquisite bird and animal figures with a few hundred other people. For Cass, that was pure recreation, a creative thrill. He would take a new set of instructions into his room, and emerge many hours later with a new "model" of astonishing beauty, done with incredible skill and obvious dedication to the craft. When Cass was 14, he taught a two-hour class in origami at the Eli Whitney Museum. It was for public school teachers on their "enrichment" day. The curator didn't tell them that Cass was a homeschooler until after the class, after they had said how much they enjoyed it.

"Perfect the first time" has always been Cassidy's way. He is not a person to rush into things. Early on, his tendency was to observe and listen first, to assess a situation before deciding to join in. He wanted to know just how to do a thing before doing it. It has always been amazing to me -- someone who practiced things for long hours (tennis, piano, woodworking, etc.) -- to have a son who chooses to do things that he could do correctly, without practice. This connects to my own schooling. I remember that I was "taught" math every year in school. Most of it was math that I knew perfectly in second grade, but I was forced to review it every year thereafter. Cassidy learned it all incidentally, as part of his living, and never had to suffer the tedium of all those classes, homework, tests and grading. Like John Holt said, "All of arithmetic (add, subtract, multiply, divide) can be learned in a morning." And when you know it, you know it --forever. This boy knew it, and didn't need to be taught it, as a subject, even once.

The same can be said for all the other school subjects. The substance can all be assimilated simply as part of living a regular life. They do not need to be separated from living and "taught" as distinct things. Once a

child learns to read, he takes off on his own, learning what interests him. The content does not need to be programmed (in such subjects as "social studies") because if he reads - no matter the subject -- he learns about many things in addition to the book's subject. Every book is another window on the world that broadens our experience. If I have advice, it would be not to decide what knowledge another person should have, unless your opinion is asked for. The adult's job is to demonstrate, to be an example, not a taskmaster, critic, judge, or nag.

Looking back, I realize that Cass (who now wanted to be known as Jonathan) was academically prepared for college by about age fifteen or sixteen. Whenever the subject of college arose, we decided against it. We believed he would not really need college for his formal learning, but maybe, if he chose it, college might be a good social experience. But not yet. His general knowledge was extensive, even though he did not seem especially studious or scholarly. We knew he was bright and inquisitive (just like he was at birth), but we also believed that most kids are. What we understood was that we were not dumbing Cass down, as schools do, seemingly on purpose. Our role was to make as much of the world available to him as we could and then keep out of his way intellectually -- to let him get his own impressions, and make his own choices and decisions. Luz and he traveled across the country twice by car, and they also toured England and Scotland for a month, staying with homeschooling families whenever possible (families found through the Holt magazine, Growing Without Schooling, and the English group, Education Otherwise). He related strongly to Britain, where Shakespeare came to life in the many castles and dungeons. Heaven for a young lover of literature.

After six years, we moved out of New Haven to the nearby suburban town of Guilford, CT. Cass spent time making and painting small models of soldiers and bizarre battle equipment for a large format board game that fascinated him. He also enjoyed a card playing (and trading) game for which there were organized tournaments in various towns, and annual conventions in Baltimore. Those events provided opportunities to test his knowledge and skills against many peers and to experience much else besides. It was a good example of "Access" that kids need. The reason for it (the game itself) might have been seen as frivolous by some, but that wasn't the point. What mattered was his interest, commitment, and our trust that it was meaningful to him. It turns out that we were justified in that trust. During the same period, he listened to books on tape while making his models. His literary taste was maturing, we noticed.

At fifteen, Cass found work in a small cottage industry in our new hometown of Guilford. He strung beads for necklaces alongside the owner, a young woman. They became friends, too, and she eventually was helpful in finding him guidance about college. At the same time, he added another job -- clerk at the local video rental store. This was his true introduction to the world of commerce and his first taste of the public. He learned fast and was the quickest to rise to assistant manager in the store's existence. He had watched many movies on TV, had become very knowledgeable of them, and this job spurred him to become a real expert in film history. It has remained his passion as he is studying film making at college and expects to be a cinematographer/director. He got along well with the other employees, and took control as needed, once again enjoying the responsibility he had.

From early on, Cass has wanted to be financially independent. He used his allowance wisely, and with his salaries he bought his own clothes and eventually a computer, which he taught us how to use. Later on, when he graduated to a more advanced model, he gave us the old one. We use it still.

College reared its head at age seventeen for Cassidy. With introduction from his lady boss, he met a high school college guidance person and learned some of the "ropes." He picked Hunter College in NYC because he knew he wanted to live in the city, and Hunter had a well-respected film department. He

decided to take the SATs and made his own arrangements. He borrowed a book from the library to familiarize himself with the format and content of the test. The math was particularly interesting to me, since I knew that he had not ever really studied math. From the samples and instructions, he picked up whatever he needed, and scored (to my mind) incredibly high, at 1390, for a boy who never had looked at a schoolbook. The Hartford Courant (CT's biggest newspaper) reported the scores of all the 160 high school valedictorians in CT that year. Only half of them scored as high as 1390. Cass was in very good company.

He also took the GED. The test took seven and a half hours, over three evenings. On the way to take it on the first evening, I asked him if he had studied for the test. "Study what, Dad?" he asked me. Right. He does seem to know everything. He scored perfect on all three multiple-choice parts and high on both of the essays. He got his high school diploma from the state of CT "with honors." Who knew? He was not surprised.

One day, I saw Cassidy filling out forms at the dining table and asked, "Are you applying to college?" He answered, "No, I'm registering. I'm exactly what they want." Actually, it was his application, but his confidence was such that he knew he would get in, and he considered the paperwork a mere formality. He was right. Hunter College, his only choice, accepted him almost immediately. One day, he told me, "Dad, I'm not just going to college. I'm leaving home." It was then I knew that we had done our job well, but I also knew how much we would have missed had he not been at home for all those years, instead of going to school where so often the experience alienates children from their parents. He was not leaving because he was alienated -- he was admiring and grateful to us -- but because he was completely capable and ready to be on his own. It was time. Once there, he quickly changed his residence to NYC. That was where he saw himself. He loves the city and all its action. He comes home for visits, charitably.

Perhaps by accident, perhaps not, he missed the cutoff date to get a dormitory room, so he needed to find a place to live in the city. It turned out to be a major learning experience. A message on the college bulletin board located a girl from California who also needed a home while she attended the same college. They became friends immediately and actually were forced by circumstances to start rooming together right away, while also following every lead to finding an apartment. The process was long, difficult, and frustrating; they were forced to move from one hotel to another and catch meals where they could, lugging their belongings from place to place. Yet they both came to know the city well during that harrowing month.

School started before they had a home, so for the first several days, they lived out of their suitcases in a small hotel room at Times Square, rented by the week, and started going to classes at the college. It was a half-hour subway ride away, happily with its own station stop deep under the campus -- three tall buildings in mid-Manhattan. They found an apartment in a new building, but to further extend the agony, and the New York education, it is in a building that will not be finished for another month. These students made yet another move to another hotel and made arrangements for the month, and they settled into a college schedule fitted into a commuter's lifestyle. In hindsight, those two months were perhaps the most intense learning months in both their lives. In process, it was extremely stressful, but having done it, it prepared them for almost anything. They were learning from life, faster than any text could teach.

The apartment has been just right for these two students. Living in the East Village where much social life is available for young people, they are happy and their lives are active and fulfilling. It is expensive (and we are going well into debt), but this is what we make our sacrifices for.

Just before classes began, three school years ago, Cass found out there was something called "dean's list" for the top students, and he predicted he would be on it. Right again. He has never missed, not even close. He's in the top 1 or 2 percent of this class of five thousand students. We have seen the comments on his papers from professors. All we can say, again, is that he was never dumbed down from the bright, inquisitive child we saw when he was born. He has retained his wide curiosity, enthusiasm, and good humor. He has had part time jobs in the city, works in the equipment center for the film department, is next year's head of the student film society, and is majoring in political science along with film. He is in constant demand as a camera operator (DP --"Director of Photography") on student films, and also works on other private film projects in NY. Just now, he's helping in a political campaign for a Democrat (unfortunately) running for Congress.

Recently, he said he has had enough of college, but he believes he will benefit from having the degree in film when he seeks employment in the field. He realizes that staying for senior year will not make him a better DP, but he sees the step as necessary for the career he wants now. I see this period as his time of gaining great self-knowledge and added confidence in himself.

So, we're up to date on Cassidy's learning. He has grown up now. He's a man at a far younger age than I became one. He has retained his passion, his good sense, his vast capabilities, his humility, and, maybe the most satisfying for Luz and me, his regard and love for us. We are the people he wants to share his secrets with. What more could we ask? He realized, soon after being thrown into the college world, that his upbringing was unique and that he, too, was not a cookie cut from a mold, but a one-of-a-kind individual -- just what this world needs.

When he was six, he worked with me to build a tree house -- really, a platform with a rickety railing in a tree. When we had finished, I turned to him with a proud smile, "OK, Cass, go ahead up." He looked back. "No, Dad. It's my life." Right again, Cassidy. It's hard for a father to forget those moments of truth.

Latest update: Senior year is going great. Cassidy is planning to spend another summer abroad and has begun making arrangements and forming a new group.

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