SelfDesign Learning Through the Heart

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Video Presentation

To view over fast internet only
(800x600, 10MB quicktime, 2 minutes)

If this video does not run on your machine you need the latest Quicktime 6.1:
Text from the script of the multimedia presentation:

**the pedagogy of the heart**

as if one learns through one’s heart

The question is ... what and where is the heart?

the distinctive, significant, and characteristic center of a system ...
the human system, considered as the source and center of emotional life, where the deepest and sincerest feelings are located, the ability to feel humane and altruistic feelings ...
the universe system and the human system - the center - the still place - the heart …

out of the heart emerges the living story

the universe is not made of atoms...

... it is made of stories

... and the story of the photograph of earth from outer space  is probably the most important experience in the past century and thanks to scientific thinking we have accomplished much in this last century ...

yet in this same century we have virtually destroyed

the harmony and integrity of our home ...

something is out of balance in our way of living ...

Our scientific thinking is without heart;

it does not include or come from the heart.
Let’s look at the story of science in its search for the center of the universe, for the still point - for the heart.

Long ago the earth was the still point - the center of the universe.

All the planets and stars moved about the earth, the heart of the universe.

It was Copernicus, using new scientific thinking, who proved that the earth is orbiting around the sun. The sun became the still point, the new center, 93 million miles away.

It was a heliocentric universe.

Hundreds of years later, scientists realized that the sun was just another star swirling about the center of the Milky Way galaxy. The center of the galaxy was the new heart of the universe.

Within a few years, it was discovered that the Milky Way is a galaxy like billions of other galaxies. Each of these galaxies is rushing away from the origin of the universe, the Big Bang. The new still point is 10-15 billion years from here.

Human beings have become insignificant individuals on an insignificant planet, twirling around an average star in an insignificant galaxy, on the edge of the universe.

Until one day when one insignificant human being said that, ‘time and space are relative to the point of view of the observer.’ Now, in my way of thinking, this brings the center of the universe home. The still point is now back here within human experience.

The universe swirls around and through each one of us.

It took me many years to realize that Einstein was talking as much about observation as he was about energy fields and the velocity of light. It wasn’t until I researched native perspectives that I realized how language constructs perception.

Benjamin Whorf, in his study of Hopi language, effectively said: that every Hopi parent teaches the Theory of Relativity to their two year old child. It seems that the Hopi stay still in this present moment and bring the world through them. They have remained at the still point - they live through the heart.

As a personal practice I began living in the moment, staying present and becoming the still point.

I discovered that I had returned to my own heart and that I had become connected to the universe as one.

In 1972, I began my first experiment in designing a learning environment around each child as a legitimate center of the universe. The heart of the child is experiencing the universe as if one is the center ... the still point.

However, it was my daughter who transformed my understanding of human learning. In 1983 I began
working with her and other children in a new model for learning that allows the child to live from one’s center, to learn from one’s heart.

In order to illustrate learning through the heart we would like to share one story of one boy.

This is about Donnie who was losing his heart.

One day Donnie’s parents found their son hiding in the bushes because he didn’t want to go to school. They knew something was seriously wrong. Donnie was in Grade 3, couldn’t read, couldn’t understand math and could hardly answer a question. He hung his head in despair most of the time, his eyes were beginning to cross and the doctors were recommending surgery. Every expert found something wrong with Donnie and the hours and hours of remedial education were only making matters worse.

His parents heard me speak at a local convention. They were so desperate to find help for their son, that although I stated ideas that were contrary to the experts, they decided to try something different and a week later they brought Donnie to see me.

To his parents surprise, I did not test Donnie. I got down on the floor and played with him. After about an hour, I pronounced that there was nothing, absolutely nothing, ‘wrong’ with Donnie. I choose to believe that ‘all children are born geniuses’; first because it is probably true, second, and most important, the assumption gets better results. This idea shifts the responsibility on adults to respond respectfully and appropriately to the essential integrity of every child.

While playing with Donnie, I noticed that he composed information predominately using his visual imagination. When I asked him a question, he would roll his eyes back and spend as much as ten minutes looking at the incredible detail of his inner pictures before he would come back with a response. The reason he couldn’t talk was because no one knew to wait while Donnie did his inner work.

Can you imagine a classroom teacher with thirty restless children waiting ten minutes for Donnie to give the answer to 3 + 4? Imagine how Donnie felt never having his inner world legitimized, unable to communicate what he saw to the outer world. Imagine how his parents felt, cut off from his inner world, left to witness the physical symptoms of Donnie’s frustration.
All his symptoms disappeared while Donnie worked with us in Wondertree. Wondertree is a place where children are legitimate and are enfranchised to design their own learning adventure.

I remember that first year, we gave Donnie all the space he needed to do what he loved doing. He and ‘Hopper’, his rabbit hand puppet, spent about half of the year sitting up in the Magnolia tree in the backyard. Many times I would go outside, climb the tree and sit with Donnie staring at the clouds. I began to sense his loneliness and his innocent, independent spirit.

One day, the children all wanted me to give them math questions, ‘like they do in school’. I made up some questions and handed them out to each child. Donnie, who thought he was in heaven since coming to Wondertree, looked down, saw the math papers and burst into tears. I rushed over and dramatically tore the papers into shreds. I told Donnie that his happiness was the most important thing in the world to me, far more important than any math questions. We became friends. Donnie had lots to do, he drew pictures, built clay models and played with the other children. Each morning we would sit at the round table to plan our day and after several months, Donnie began talking with the group, by talking through his puppet ‘Hopper’.

I can assure you that my expertise as an educator did not come from ‘anything’ I learned in university, it came because I am a father. I learned everything I know about children from children, first from my daughter, then from the group of children I have worked with for the past 20 years.

Since the day my daughter, ilana, was born, until she was 6 years old, she, like virtually all children, figure out pretty much how the world works and how to talk intelligently about the whole process. Adults trust young children to learn to talk, to do what psychologists consider the most difficult learning task of a lifetime. This awesome learning event is achieved by children out of their joy, their curiosity and out of their enthusiasm to understand and create relationships. Why do we let schooling interfere with children’s natural ability to learn and teach them to become dependent on instruction?

My daughter walked out of school, feeling disrespected after only two weeks. I had a choice; to trust the school system that doesn't trust children to learn naturally, or to trust my daughter and support her natural ability to learn. She had already taught me to absolutely trust her ability to design her own learning process. I also remembered that I felt disrespected in school, and when my daughter came home frustrated and asked to learn at home, I decided to support her. I committed to a one year experiment to work with her at home. As my commitment grew, I began sharing my philosophy about “learning as an enthusiastic process” with other parents.

Within a year, I had ten children in my basement working and playing with me each day. We created Wondertree, a small learning community, out of our curiosity and our need to understand.

Wondertree is a place where enthusiasm is sacred. Our hearts proved to be the best guide for designing our curriculum. For example, my daughter didn’t decide to read until she was 10, yet within a month she was reading at a Grade 7 level. Within three years she enrolled herself in a second year university English course and excelled at it. Because we let the curriculum emerge from our enthusiasm, each day became a learning adventure. Learning made sense as part of a growth process. Each day was filled with meaning as the children learned from their passion.

One day, I showed the children how to do video animation by putting a rock in the middle of the floor. I filmed it for a few frames, moved it - filmed it, moved it - filmed it. Donnie got the idea immediately, built a small movie set, painted faces on a couple of rocks and began shooting his first movie.

I entered the movies that the kids made in the annual provincial student film festival. The first year we won two awards and Donnie won first prize. Each year, for the next 4 years, the kids made videos and more often than not, Donnie was awarded first prize for his video starring Hopper.

When Donnie was about 13, he began building his sets and filming his video four months before the annual contest. On the award ceremonies evening, Donnie and the group were sitting in the audience full of eager anticipation. The winning movies that year were terrible and Donnie’s wasn’t even shown. At the end of the screening, I approached the head judge and stated that in my opinion, Donnie’s movie -
was far better than any of the winners. She agreed and explained that the judges loved Donnie’s movie and also thought it was the best. She added that they had decided not to award him first prize in order to discourage him from making movies about his rabbit in favor of a more ‘mature’ subject. I stood aghast. I looked long and deep into her eyes and said, “I am so glad that none of you met Jim Hensen early in his career.” I went back and told the kids how the judges had come to their decision. We decided, then and there, never to submit any more films to the festival.

It was relatively easy to let this incident go, because we were still creating Wondertree as the greatest learning adventure of our lives. Each September and each January, we invited up to 20 people to the learning centre and interviewed them as potential mentors for the coming season. The children would hire and fire artists, clowns, writers, potters, musicians, dancers and scientists to hold weekly workshops in the centre. One of their favorite mentors was Lawrence, a street clown, who was hired again and again for four years.

After we let go of film making, we discovered HyperCard, a Macintosh computer program that allowed us to design our own software. The children were so excited by this new interest, that soon there was a long line-up at our one computer. After several frustrating days, we began to discuss the problem at our daily planning meetings. We realized that we did not ‘have’ to hire our ten mentors this session and that we could use the money to buy more computers.

After a consensus decision, we negotiated a sabbatical with our mentors and bought five new computers. We began experimenting with the software and started several interesting projects. We worked intensely each day and the children shared ideas and built on each other’s breakthroughs.

Six months later, after one of the most exciting collaborative learning experiences that I have ever had the honor of participating in, we created a computer program that won the Canadian Northern Telecom Award for Excellence in Education. Donnie played a significant role as our graphic artist and mentor to the other children’s artwork.

The following year, we were approached by a representative from our electric utility company. They were looking for a software design company to create a computer game to teach children how to conserve energy in their own homes. After several months of negotiation, we got the contract. My group of twelve kids, ages 10 to 13, a couple of mentors and I, began to design a computer game with the first payment of our $75,000 contract.
We learned how to run a business and the children billed for their hours and formed work teams to complete the project. A year later when we finished the project, we won two national Canadian awards; a second Northern Telecom Award and a Marshall McLuhan Award. Needless to say, we invested the $10,000 in prize money in new computer equipment.

By the time Donnie was 14 he was an award winning video artist and an international award winning computer graphics designer. He was the youngest winner of a MacWorld and Apple Computer contest in California.

As his learning consultant, I was aware that Donnie was still virtually unable to read, however staying true to our approach of supporting learning that emerges from enthusiasm, I continued to focus on what he loved doing. Appreciating his ability in design, I arranged for him to apprentice with one of Canada’s most famous architects. Over the next months, while looking through the amazing books on architecture in their office, Donnie became fascinated with architecture and its history. He became frustrated with just looking at the pictures and drawings and wanted to read the accompanying text. Driven by his own desire for knowledge, and given the space and support, Donnie learned to read by himself, just as he learned how to do computer graphics.

Donnie, with his eidetic memory could take one glimpse at a freighter in the harbor and draw every detail of the entire ship. Every rust spot and every window would be accurately illustrated, however he would leave out all names and numbers from his drawing. Although he became an excellent reader, his inattention to words prevented him from learning to spell, even his last name. Aware of this, I guided Donnie to imagine his father’s workshop filled with pieces of soapstone. One by one he carved each letter of his last name and placed them on display on a shelf. For years afterward, when filling out his name, Donnie would stop for a second, look up into his father’s imaginary workshop, dust off the soapstone letters and copy the letters onto the paper.

I haven’t seen Donnie for about a year now, although I ran into his father just the other day. Donnie, who is now 27, has had a remarkable ten year career as a graphic artist. At 23 he was the Senior Graphic Artist at a top international consulting firm in Vancouver. He has designed work for clients around the world from Japan, to Saudi Arabia and Germany as well as across the US and Canada. He is currently a graphics animator with a small company doing special effects for the movie industry. He is earning a great living doing what he loves. Donnie never graduated from Grade 3 and has never looked back. His father feels that I saved his son’s life by focusing on what his son could do, rather than on trying to fix what he couldn’t.

Donnie learned to live each day of his life out of his enthusiasm and fascination with the world. He grew to trust himself and to work cooperatively with others. He learned the value of his gifts and how to earn a living sharing them. From his ability to design he became a SelfDesigner and one of the pioneers of the work heartfelt.

Wondertree Foundation for Natural Learning

www.wondertree.org and www.selfdesign.org

learning as a sacred act …

beyond the paradigm of schooling

Credits

Photos: Maureen Cameron and Brent Cameron
Flute Music: Brent Cameron
Text: Brent Cameron
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About the Author

In 1982, my daughter walked out of kindergarten after two weeks because she realized that she would lose control of her life if she went to school. Along with her birth, this event changed my life because she asked me to be her teacher and to keep doing what we had been doing for the past five years. I began a learning experiment in honour of the ability of every child to learn naturally from their enthusiasm to understand and their curiosity about how the world works. For the past 20 years, I have been engaged with children and teens who learn outside the school system yet inside the domain of their heart and their neurology. I am inspired daily by the amazing intra- and interpersonal events that occur when one lives in a learning community based on fascination and fulfillment. I am writing a book about my journey which I hope will be published in 2003. The book will be called SelfDesign - The Wondertree Story.