



Life Without School *elisabet rafols*

What I strive for is a peaceful world where everyone is free to choose their path to follow in life.

In order to pursue this goal, an alternative to the present compulsory school system is needed, because to my mind, freedom of choice and individual initiative is undermined by the hierarchical and coercive nature of school.

Ask your friends about their schooling experience, and you'll get answers that range from total amnesia to total boredom. Some will perhaps tell you, with not much enthusiasm, that it was alright. Of course, there will also be the lucky ones with fond memories of some kind of free and democratic school, and at the other extreme, the very unlucky ones who mostly experienced abuse.

I have been intensively schooled, and sometimes I wonder what I have retained from my elementary and high school years. My schooling meant a lot of memorizing, mindless work, and not much critical thinking. I was never asked what I was interested in, and all the forced learning was a complete waste of time. I passed many exams in my life, and most of the time, the next day I could not remember any of the information gathered for the event. Once in university, it took me a few years to find my path and make sense of what was offered to me.

The decision to keep my children out of school came quite naturally because I had seen other children thrive out of the system. Most importantly, I had seen them learn without being taught. Being around children has put

me in the privileged position of seeing first hand that all learning happens by observing and experimenting, not by being taught. What we see in babies can be applied to any stage in life: some talk right away while some wait for a long time, and the first sound they utter is an awesome and complicated sentence. When their time to read has come, they read if their environment is conducive to reading. They don't need lessons to sound out words. They learn to read by themselves, according to their own learning style, asking all the questions they need to figure out how it works. Later in life, the process is still the same, and we learn anything we want because we wish to do so, not because somebody else thought we should.

The idea of deschooling, the disestablishment of school in society, was first described by Ivan Illich in his book *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper, 1971) and has its roots in the progressive school movement in North America. It is also linked to the modern and new school movement in Europe at the turn of the 20th century. Those models of school proposed no compulsory lessons, learning by doing, no exams, participation in the communities, and democratic principles running the school.

A deschooled society is still a dream, but there is an increasing number of deschooling experiences across the world. One of those experiences is unschooling, the variety of homeschooling that isn't about "doing school" at home and doesn't follow any particular curriculum. It opts for the idea of self-directed learning.

Another one is the democratic school movement, including schools like Summerhill in the UK, or the schools, mainly in North America, following the Sudbury Valley school model. What those schools have in common is that they are run democratically and all decisions are made in the school meetings where everyone, from staff to students, has a voice.

Deschooling could include the option of community cultural centres open to people of any age to pursue their interests, whether it is a leather workshop, a video editing room, or just a space to learn Chinese with people that share the same interest. An example of a centre like this is the "Purple Thistle Centre" in East Vancouver, founded by deschooling advocate, Matt Hern, with seven teenage friends who wanted to set up an alternative to school (<http://www.purplethistle.ca/>).

It is with great optimism that I ponder that life without school is not only desirable, but possible. It is desirable because a schooled society is one that doesn't let its citizens trust themselves to make the right educational choices, one that wants uniformity and conformity. A deschooled society implies that individuals have the opportunity to choose and direct their own learning and are consequently responsible for their decisions and actions. The existence of the Purple Thistle Centre proves that this model is possible at a small scale. Time will tell if this community centre model can spread or can only exist as an exception. ☕

If you are interested in deschooling your life and you live near Saskatoon, SK, join us at the:

III CELEBRATION OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Saturday September 30th, 2006

Keynote speaker: Matt Hern "Possibility in the face of probability"

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