

Wednesday September 11, 2013

Adult learning differs from children's

By Jim Taylor

Probably less than one per cent of infants are incapable of learning. In North America, only five per cent of children don't go to school. But once those children become adults and leave school, around 50 per cent never take any further education. And of those who do, over 80 per cent take only job-related courses; barely 20 per cent choose further education for personal improvement.

The decline of interest in education is staggering, but perhaps understandable.

Adults take risks when they enter any educational program. They have to expose themselves to situations where others know more than they do. No one likes to appear ignorant.

Adults also find that many educational programs place them into a style of learning they gladly gave up long ago.

Different strokes for different folks

Children, young people, and adults learn in different ways. That should be obvious, but apparently isn't.

For small children, everything is new. They don't have enough life experience yet to pick and choose what they should learn, so they absorb everything. No one actually teaches infants how to crawl, how to walk, how to speak. They observe; they copy; they do it.

And at that age, everything they absorb has immediate application in their lives.

Then they go to school. The school system assumes that students need to store information for future use. Like calculus and chemistry -- valuable in later life. But teens don't need calculus to wash dishes, or chemistry to flip burgers.

The school classroom and the university lecture are both systems for presenting and storing information that may be useful later.

Then those students graduate, and go out into the world. And start a whole new approach to learning.

Choosing to learn

Adult learners have two characteristics.

First, they are increasingly selective. They study and learn only what they want to learn. They have little desire, anymore, to store information that might never be useful to them.

Second, they learn by associating new information with what they already know. A new idea will stick only if it can be hooked up, in some way, with their existing experiences or understandings.

Adults find learning easiest when a new idea confirms what they already know and believe. It's like finding a missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle that drops perfectly into place.

It's much harder when a new idea forces them to re-arrange puzzle pieces that they had already put together.

And the hardest thing, for any age, is to un-learn something they had previously taken as unchallenged truth. For example, people who grew up thinking that Jesus walked on water have to un-learn that conviction before they can deal with that story as symbolic narrative. Ditto for parents who grew up believing that children benefit from boot-camp discipline.

Small children throw tantrums when a pattern of behavior no longer works the way it used to. A closed mind is the adult equivalent of a child's tantrum.

Unfortunately, too many adult education programs try to put learners back into school classrooms or university lectures. It doesn't work, and adults don't like it, because that's not how they learn anymore.

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column, recommending an awareness that this moment's experience may be the last time we will experience it, prompted a number of you to share your own experiences.

For example, George Brigham wrote, "At 73 I can relate to your words. They were made more poignant an email in which I learned of the sudden death of an old friend yesterday.

"Our last cat died about 6 weeks ago. With cats living around 15 years, we think he will have been our last. We're coming to Canada and New England again in a couple of weeks on vacation - in part to visit friends and relatives - and wonder will it be our last trans-Atlantic trip.

"It's sunny and in the low twenties here in the north of England today. Will it be the last, at least for this year? The poignant pleasures of Autumn!"

And this from Judy Westerhoff: "I too am working through a last time after my 15 year old lab mix died. For the last year I had to carry her up and down stairs to let her outside.

"My age is catching up with me. I knew I could no longer have a big dog. Senior housing in this area is very short on places that allow dogs. I thought long and hard about adopting a new dog. My rescue dog is a godsend. She is small enough for me to pick up easily but big enough to take me on long walks. I know she is probably my last canine companion. I enjoy her freely given love and company. It reminds me of God's freely given love that never ends."

Mary Margaret Boone shifted the focus to what she called her "never again" times: When I left my home town and headed to university, I said I would never go back except for visits to a dwindling number of family members. Then a local historic church where I settled burned down and I realized how we take images and buildings and scenes from our past for granted as though they would always exist for our benefit. And so I dragged my young children off to the home of my childhood for them to see and experience what shaped me growing up.

"But I still shunned the city of my birth as a place of bad memories and not a place I wanted to spend any time.

"Then I was ready to be placed on internship and I gave the committee my wish list, and where did I end up - my home town! They didn't know I was born and raised in this place. Did my wish list come from some weird psychological yearning to experience the familiar? It was a wonderful experience both personally and theologically. I learned to never say never.

"To relate to your story, even if you are not buying tires what stops you from dropping by to say hello? Friends you may never see again because they live half a world away are thanks to modern technology only a text, e-mail, phone call away. Even the finality of death doesn't remove people from our realm nor do our everyday experiences because our lifestyle changes. Our memories hold on to our life experiences. So there really are no last times."

Dale Perkins: "Exactly my own situation, and something I can easily identify as my own reality. I continue to value friend Stephen Faulkner's 'Four Principles of a Wise Person': 1) Show up, 2) Pay attention/listen, 3) Speak one's truth, and 4) Act accordingly while not becoming attached to outcomes. That summarizes my current approach to life. And undergirding it is a total realization that what I'm experiencing may be the last time I experience it/her/him/them. It's precious."

Diane Robinson mused, "None of us knows our expiry date. If we were actually fully and completely mind-full of every hug, every kiss, every coffee date, every sunrise throughout our life's duration (as if each of these may be our last), could we live in that heightened and continuous state of awareness and appreciation? I like to think so, but?"

Marjorie Gibson looked back from a vantage point almost 20 years ahead of mine: "Regarding your excellent essay on buying new tires, I read it with pleasure and understanding. You are launched on a road that I have travelled for a

long time now, and find different from any other segment of my life, and with its own joys. How well I related to the pangs of saying goodbye to old friends, loved activities, and even ingrained beliefs.

“Where am I now in my reactions? Ever changing! Concerning your query about retaining the mental, physical, emotional stamina to continue doing the things which enrich your life now - my answer is, perhaps yes, perhaps no! To my surprise I find that what I lose is often replaced by some special joy from unexpected sources. We humans are all so different, that I am sure there are countless ways to reap what our last years offer.”

Beth Burgess considered herself “lucky in that I started thinking at a fairly young age that every day might be my last. Unfortunately, sometimes I forget, and that's the occasions I might regret something I say or do. If I keep it in mind, my behavior is so much better and what I expect of myself. It doesn't mean I'm hoping each day is my last, just being realistic.”

The column about the woman who wrote an anonymous letter about the autistic boy next door continues to draw some responses.

Pat Brush in Ottawa offered a more sympathetic view than mine: “I was reading the responses to your column about the nasty letter writer and they brought some further thoughts to me. We often hate in others that which we haven't come to terms with in ourselves. It makes me wonder if this woman had a special needs child that was taken away from her by a society making the excuses that she gave in her hateful rant.”

Art Gans also had a comment on last week's letters: “I agree with your newspaper editor that if a person can't sign a letter, she won't print it. Too many places in our world do not follow that rule, in particular Internet sites that encourage anonymity by suggesting pseudonyms. Perhaps the ‘editor’ knows who they are, but the lines of propriety are certainly crossed on the level of language and content.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

My paraphrase of Psalm 14 – originally written about 20 years ago – seems to assume a deity who is separate from ourselves, who sits in judgement of humanity. I don't think I would write it the same way today, but neither am I clear how I would write it differently, so I'm giving you the paraphrase as is.

1 Only fools say, "There is no God."

They delude themselves.

Their actions reveal their foolishness;

whatever they do turns out badly.

2 For there is a God, who knows what they are doing.

God loves those who seek justice, show mercy, and walk humbly with their maker.

3 But those who turn their backs on God will lose their way;

they will stumble in the darkness cast by their own shadows.

4 Can't they see what fools they're making of themselves?

They crunch people's dreams like popcorn;

they grow fat on others' famine.

They deny the reality of a holy presence.

5 When they discover their error, they will subside

into putrid puddles of sweat,

For they have challenged God;

they cannot win.

6 But we who have nothing must rely on God.

7 God, save us from those who prey upon us.

Topple the proud from their pedestals,

and restore us in a universal Jubilee.
Then all your people will be glad.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications,
info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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