

Leaving the John Muir Trail: Authentic Leadership in Education
Stuart Grauer, August 2009

Cathedral Peak is a crown jewel for Yosemite climbers, and its ascent is a coveted achievement. Inclining steeper and steeper on the ascent, it is finally reached by scaling nearly straight up a granite spire, then rolling up and over onto a flat top of no more than 5 feet by 8 feet, a tiny table perched at well over 10,000 feet in the air. According to climbers who have made this ascent--not me--it can be scary up there, especially when it's windy, but the scarier part is that once there, you have to get down (without falling off the edge of civilization). For many, parenting and schooling evoke similar fears.

Though the John Muir Trail passes right by it, Cathedral is far off the trail map. Me, my nieces Sarah and Emily, and my daughter Audrey are camped beneath this peak in Tuolumne Meadows, gazing up to the north, ready to set out in the opposite direction.

I am the uncle and parent out here, though I know my school principal self could get drawn in at any time. We head southward along the Tuolumne River, padding on the soft forest floor. As the trail switchbacks, the path turns to igneous stone crunching under our feet. My niece Sarah observes: "Look at the two colors of rock up there," pointing to a gorgeous rock dome from which a giant slab had sheared off. She has an eye for color, I think. I ask: "Have you been doing much art?" and she replies, "We only needed one arts elective so I took music." I didn't know we were talking about high school--I thought I was asking about life.

No surprise. For young people, learning and even art can seem reduced to mandates supplied by colleges and departments of education rather than processes for the discovery of self, service, and potentials. Likewise, science is standardized—large class size means labs with predetermined outcomes. On a

good day, that could mean discussing the daily, worldwide disappearance of dozens of species of life, or dissecting a worm.

Here in California, state exams and the standards they test for are trumping learning and authentic experience. Despite an unbelievably gifted talent pool of teachers, schools keep getting larger—school systems are engineered to bear their own weight rather than in accordance with some larger purpose and vision. With no hint of irony, two thousand students in a gated compound is described as “the real world.” This “comprehensive school” story is being documented by educational experts and universities nationwide; some of these outside experts are wondering what has happened to things like arts education, devalued because they do not lend themselves to quantitative measurement. These comprehensive schools aspire to a non-existent spirituality, as school boards and teachers seem terrified to acknowledge that students might be developing such a thing on their watch. “God forbid” someone mentions the “R” word—squabbling over the nuances of man’s supremacy in the cosmos is just as rampant now as it was at Galileo’s trial before the Inquisition.

Meanwhile, nationwide, even the notable College Board (owner of the heavily marketed “AP” label) is lobbying for AP engineering exams, as interest groups try to nudge education towards vocational training. Turning robust, liberal arts learning into narrow, commercial training is not only bad for education, it’s also bad for the economy: The earnings of people in the top quintile of abstract thinking skills is almost \$50,000 higher a year than those of the bottom quintile. What great news that, in Washington State, the teacher of the year this year is a music teacher!...

Rounding a bend ascending a thick pine forest, we encounter a small group of day hikers and Sarah asks the inevitable question: "Are we almost there?" When the hikers tell us, "I'm sorry to say, no," I want to interject: "Yes, you are 'there,' now. We spent months anticipating being here now. It seems like few

wise men in all of history, east or west, have failed to point out that our lives are enriched along the trail, that happiness is not your end but your journey. I say nothing, but I believe we will get to that later in the week. For now, Sarah needs security, and she needs me to prove to her that we are a fixed point on a line on our hiking map. Compared to the wilderness, school's captivity is comforting. Out here, the air is thin, she is anxious, and chaos theory won't do. Like typical kids nowadays, she has been taught that education and life occur in predictable, controlled ways—what's more, many students have the sense that they are entitled to this predictability, life owes it to them.

I don't blame them: it must be discouraging to think you will be judged by your results rather than by who you are or who you are becoming.

Something we must treasure about being young is the opportunity to try out things we might fail at, and to still have plenty of time to find our true calling--to develop our core. This is a part of childhood now being "left behind." Sarah and Emily are products of a fine east-coast prep school, and of our prevalent objectives in education these days: the information download, your GPA, your class rank, and all the strategies students use to replace real, messy experience with a "college resume." They learn to avoid risks, take classes to please others rather than to honor their curiosity, and to write formulaic, three-paragraph essays that all follow the same format, nation-wide: the same ones admissions officers and SAT readers are trained to recognize as acceptable. In learning all of this, there is a cost: diminishment of right-brain values like respect for nature, oral traditions, and spiritual education. What's left is a narrow trail for an imagination to stay on. Straying is defined as a mistake.

We reach a wide stream, it must be the Lyell Fork, and we realize: crisis! We are two miles off the trail. After an hour and a half of hiking, we're barely closer to the top than when we started. And it's my fault: My leadership is such that people have followed blind. I should have warned them that they'd need their

own minds and maps. Now I am imagining a school where the final exam for graduating high school seniors would be the Milgram test.

For most of my career as a teacher I tried carefully to carry students along with me like a comedian working an audience, and to eliminate risk like most teachers and parents do. Here at the Lyell Fork, I realize that no matter how far we carry our students, when we put them down again they are not a step farther along than when we first picked them up. Our world is becoming more complex, and it won't work to provide a fixed roadmap or an education for conditions as they are today: things keep changing.

“You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself.” Galileo mentioned that, 400 years ago.

Creating leaders means students, parents, and teachers all must stay continually responsive to new and ongoing challenges. It means approaching life so that a roadmap never replaces intuition. It means enabling students in identifying the skills that will endure, meta-values that remain true in changing conditions. What are those values? What is ending up in the spiritual backpack of our kids? How does it get there?

Emily's ticked. “When you come to a fork in the road, take it,” I suggest. Not funny. Staying on the trail was supposed to be a given, and Emily was expecting to be led. I was the guru! Now, doubling back, taking stock in our slow progress, I watch her go through stages, from ignoring the reality of our helplessness, to frustration and blame at being lost—anger at having wasted time and energy—Why should she have to do this extra hiking! She is not accustomed to problems that aren't assigned, problems with no teachers. But she sucks it up.

And later, hours later, at last, we can see Emily's newfound resolution and strength. Any sign of her earlier high altitude symptoms are long gone. Emily

looks focused now, more fully aware, broader shouldered, and it's obvious that her 25 pound pack is nothing as she takes the lead bounding up to the higher ground. By mile 11 she's practically running up the trail, leading the way. I start shooting photos to cover for the fact that I am falling behind: after all, I'm their leader.

I received a letter recently from a high school alumna of mine on the occasion of her graduation from college after 10 long years. She told me this story:

I've always wanted to work in the veterinary field and was always told I couldn't. Why? Because math was too difficult and I had trouble focusing and learning. For many of my college professors, if you couldn't keep up, give up. If it seemed impossible it must be.

Life in academics is still difficult and will always be more of a struggle for me than for other people. That's fine. ***I will not be defined by those things that come easily to me.*** My strengths come from struggle and hardship. I am not an A student, but I have the qualities that come only from fighting in the face of failure. I will stand where A students fail.

Isak Dinesen (***Out of Africa***) is quoted as saying, "To be a person is to have a story to tell." School heads like me worry for students and parents who feel they must not experience struggle or failure, people who think false summits and changing circumstances are "unfair" and that school ought to be a standard thing. Dealing with complexity, such as our country will be seeing a lot more of, will require a way of leading that keeps us continually responsive to rising challenges and falling control over situations.

My buddy Dave, a cop (retired), was once sued for failing to stop a man from jumping off the Coronado Bridge. Like The Catcher in The Rye, the idea is that we are bound to catch children before they fall: something we all want to do, but we know all along that it makes no sense. Kids have to fall, and the world is filled

with bridges and cliffs. And they must get lost. But many families feel they cannot afford to risks allowing real life experiences. They have to build that college resume. And many feel that their children do not ever deserve to fail, or fear that they can't handle it. Could it be that Dave did not have the fearfulness required a policeman?

On average, successful people have had many more failures than unsuccessful people. These failures form the well that makes victory taste so sweet. Natural talent is a wonderful gift, but determination, will power, and desire far transcend this in the making of a successful path through life, or the catching of a brook trout at Vogelsang Lake--something I have failed to do. Success is also when you take the wrong fork in the road and remain open to that experience, and consider it to be a bonus discovery. America!

Climbing higher, we observe a large, dead lodgepole pine. Rather than growing straight up, the grain of this tree spirals around and around all the way to the top, to give it strength. Ahead, a gigantic half dome is reflected perfectly in a high mountain lake, so you can hardly tell which is real. A field of purple fire grass runs in lanes that curve and criss-cross in hypnotic patterns beyond what could be random. These are the patterns in nature, the basis of all human arts, and they spiral into human interactions that have fascinated people forever. We seek out such patterns because we can rest our minds on serendipity: things collaborating beyond reason or human intervention. Peace is a natural state. Beauty is "the smile of God" (Muir). In nature, young people get lost in patterns of laughter and group formation—they may find the selves that lie beyond any structure or rules, the selves that connect to something larger.

Our successes come when we are able to create coherent connections among diverse life events—our lives add up and make sense across all disciplines, across groups. "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." I wish I said that, but John Muir did. Making this

shift--from results, to process has been the advice of many leaders. And still, we can go further, beyond process, beyond the journey, to the source of our lives, a core, something beyond all the learnings and rules, something essential—this is the work of artists, the work of transformation. Can we teach students to make and to trust these connections, to draw from this source? Down the trail or off the map, things could get rough; students might need a core like this.

As an emotion, fear can only occur if accompanied by a larger sense of isolation. Our educational goals these days stress hanging on to a national supremacy, while events like war and the depletion of our national treasury have introduced fear and isolation into the spirit of many families trying to stay ahead and provide opportunity for their children. Fear has become an unspoken shadow in my community as in our nation; isolation leads us to narrow our vision and to tighten our grip on things we feel we can bank on: class rankings, prestige “name” colleges, efforts to control life, and outcomes that look good on paper. Well meaning students are pressured to tailor their passions in accordance with what clubs and services will look good on applications. Lives become resumes.

We hike to a path around a lake to a series of two waterfalls where Sarah and Emily rest. Audrey and I scramble up some boulders to some brush. We sense an animal track. Bushwhacking through the brush, off the trail map, we cross a shallow stream, then begin following a curved path at the foot of a rock cliff. Following the bend, an astonishing, hidden, three-waterfall canyon is before us, completely off the map.

Looking up above these falls, we know that yet another mountain lake lies above them, and we smile: we have left the John Muir Trail again, this time on purpose.

Leaving the trail means courage and faith (the opposite of fear and isolation), even though we know that off-trail is where the discoveries lie. Fearlessness in educational programming is no trivial matter in our nation today. In Latin, heart

and courage are the same. Going forward, fearlessness will mean parents encouraging their students to choose their courses from the heart, not their preconceptions, and not out of their concept of the fastest, safest way to get their schooling over with--fearlessness to the student will mean acceptance that authentic education has no prescribed path, and that it doesn't even have any end. It's a future we have to discover or invent. Even if you do reach the top of the mountain, you can't stay there, and why would you want to?

Fearless college preparation is more like a cross-country trip than the 50-yard dash students often assume it to be. A teacher used to be a person who had time to engage and understand the minds of his students—let's insist on creating conditions where this is possible again. Teachers and administrators must be willing to make enough room for curiosity and openness to discovery in the course of a year, to quit the great textbook race. The great homework race every night is squeezing out time to explore and to relate to one another, and we can reclaim this time, too. Educational fears come when we feel attached to what used to be, and we can let go of these attachments ...without falling off the edge of civilization. Openness to deep dialog, to the formation of authentic relationships between teachers and students, has been the way of all great teachers before us, the teachers who have modeled courage and patience. We can call it the John Muir path of education.

We are at last in our van, traveling down the mountain, losing elevation fast, heading home nearly speechless as we watch the magnificence of the week slip away like a dream. The girls plug in a DVD--it's a movie about a family crossing the western US in a van. Emily muses, "Isn't this ironic, I'm leaving for NYU in three weeks, and now I've fallen in love with the mountains." Sarah and Audrey are lost in a video of people clowning it up on a road trip and I'm looking down the road at eight hours of driving.

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