

PREFACE

Introducing Natural Learning

When I was thirty years old, as I held my infant daughter in my arms and looked into her eyes, I sensed a deep engagement within the core of my being. In this act, I discovered the source of many years of yearning. I had found my home after three decades out in the world. In that first year, without uttering a word, my daughter communicated to me the meaning of life. I felt the bond of unconditional love.

My daughter, Ilana, became my inspiration. Where Jean Piaget, the world's foremost child psychologist, had primarily studied the mental development of children, I found myself studying my daughter by intuitively connecting with her as a whole child. In our conversations and laughter, my individuality dissolved into the quality of shared experience. I rediscovered myself within the context of family. Observing my partner's mothering love, I felt encouraged to explore the nurturing domains of my own being. My daughter's joyful and enthusiastic experience of the world was the guiding principle of my newly discovered life's purpose. I was learning how to father, and I was fathering my own mentor.

Ilana's mother, Maureen, and I acknowledged our daughter as a whole human being and encouraged her to act as the author of her own life. Our willingness to consider our daughter as a legitimate representative of herself, regardless of her age, challenged the beliefs of friends and family. However, Ilana's ongoing and consistent demonstration of integrity and clarity became our guiding principle. Over the years, the results of our commitment to this principle quieted even the most vocal critics.

Wondertree, our educational adventure, began because my partner and I listened to our daughter. We recognized her natural ability to make appropriate decisions about her life each and every day. From the day she was born we honored her as a competent and whole being. She clearly let us know what she wanted, and we clearly let her know what we wanted. We respected her and her needs, and she in turn learned to respect us and our needs. She modeled our style of listening and considering as we created an atmosphere of guidance and positive cooperation. Ilana demonstrated her amazing capability as a human being, as a natural learner, and as a SelfDesigner, in

SelfDesign

the way that she learned to speak. According to psychologists, learning to talk is the most difficult neurological task we do in our lifetime. It is much harder than acquiring the skills to read or to do calculus or even to fly a plane. Yet Ilana, in the first years of her life, joyfully learned to communicate sophisticated ideas and concepts to us, as do virtually all children.



Out of the connection between Ilana and her mother, I witnessed the emerging of a human being.

Ilana's comprehension of language and the world emerged naturally from her playful explorations. Because of my background as an educator, I assumed that I would be teaching my daughter about language, and yet she learned most of her words through modeling. From time to time she would ask a name for something, though even this process she directed. When she learned the name for something it was because it had some relevance to her at that moment. If a word had relevance to me and I attempted to teach it to her, she was often busy learning words that were more important to her in her world. I was so amazed at her natural way of gaining knowledge that I began to rethink everything I knew about learning. To her, learning was play. To me, her learning process became the seed for a new understanding, which some twenty years later I came to call SelfDesign.

We lived in the country for the first five years of Ilana's life. When her best friend went to kindergarten, Ilana decided to join her. During those first two weeks, however, I noticed that it was harder and harder for her to get out of bed in the morning. I sensed a growing reluctance about something, although Ilana had no words for it yet.

One evening when I was tucking her into bed, she began describing her day. She told me that she was sitting on a swing in the school playground and it was a beautiful, sunny morning. When the bell rang she realized that she did not really want to go inside. As she was swinging, she remembered her daycare, where she could sit in the sandbox and practice whistling all day long if she wanted. She remembered that having choices was really important to her, and she thought about how entering her new school made her feel as though she was giving up control of her life. "Dad," she said, "do I *have* to go to school?" I replied that she *could* go if she wanted to but that the most important thing was to listen to her heart and to do what was important to

her. For the rest of that year she stayed at home with us, occasionally going to daycare when she chose.

Instead of Schooling, Wondertree

In January 1983 we moved to Vancouver, and Ilana said she would be interested in going to a new daycare one day a week. We accompanied her to more than ten daycare centers before she met people who echoed her criteria of openness, choice, and trust.

In September, when I suggested to her that other children her age were going to school, she asked me, “Dad, is first grade a lot like kindergarten?” When I replied in the affirmative, she looked at me and said, “I think I already know who I would like as a teacher. Could you be my teacher? Can we keep on doing what we have been doing since I was little? Could we start a school here in our house? I will share all my toys.”



Ilana and Jonathan, the second Wondertree learner, sharing their love for music. Twenty years later, she is still writing and singing her own songs.

It took my partner and me a couple of weeks to realize that we could and should support our daughter in her ongoing learning adventure. I made up posters and Ilana and I went hand in hand to many businesses throughout the city to advertise our new school. When I phoned the local newspaper to ask them to do a story on our new program, the reporter was interested. He asked many questions and was finally convinced that this would make an exciting news story. Then he asked me how many students I had for this new school. When I told him, “One, my daughter,” there was silence followed by a click as he hung up on me. Nobody came to the first meeting I called, and I stood in an empty meeting hall. Two weeks later at the second meeting I advertised, one man showed up, and after a lengthy conversation he agreed to bring his son to my house the next day. And so it began, a very humble start for Wondertree.

In my wildest dreams I could not have imagined what would happen in the growth of this program over the next two decades. From the foundation of the Wondertree Learning Center we developed Virtual High, a corresponding program for high school-

SelfDesign

ers. Throughout the years both programs have been open-ended, emerging from the curiosity and collective efforts of all involved in the learning community, and we have explored areas far beyond the usual educational realms. Our learners have traveled the world and accomplished some incredible things, both as individuals and in groups.

As a modest example of the notice we have received throughout the years, four of our youth went to Findhorn, Scotland, to attend the global eco-village network conference in 1995. (The work of our eco-village group is included later in the book.) There they met two writers, a husband-and-wife team, who were researching ecological and innovative projects around the world for an upcoming book. About a year later these two researchers visited the Virtual High program and chose it as the focus of their chapter on education because they felt it was the most important learning initiative in education anywhere.

Besides recognition by visitors from around the world, we have won numerous local, national, and international awards for our leading-edge projects. Over the years hundreds of people have come to visit our programs, and we have inspired many to start their own as educators or parents. In the meantime, Wondertree has kept its focus on natural learning and on enfranchising all its learners to design their own curricula from their enthusiasm to understand the world around them.

What you have in this book is the tip of the iceberg of the work, but hopefully a visible and comprehensible tip that will entice you to dive deep into the depth of the work of SelfDesign as it emerges from our websites and workshops.

As a comprehensive generalist I wanted to put everything in this book. After all, it is my life's work. For the past fourteen years, I have presented a ten-day summer intensive each year. I tried to fit all of the new paradigm ideas, methodologies, and new learning technologies into the course. Although the participants were thrilled and transformed, they were exhausted. I also noticed that it took the graduates of the intensive who came to work in the Wondertree program at least another two years to integrate and really begin to understand the nature of the SelfDesign work. This book is our first attempt to simplify the ideas and spread the information out over a larger time frame.

I have learned to appreciate that it is a very difficult task to change the fundamental assumptions and beliefs upon which our lives are built. As Douglas Harding so aptly states, unless we have accurate answers to the most fundamental questions about who we are, then we can, and definitely will, get into trouble. This work has evolved through our attempts to develop and discover more accurate assumptions about who we are and how we work. While we certainly do not have all the answers, we have some good insights and maps that allow us to look deeply into the issues. Understanding that we come from a loving and open space is fundamental to this work. From this seed we grow as fulfilled human beings, with enthusiasm to engage in the world. The children have shown me this so clearly, so often. Let us come together to listen to and respect the children and to work together to model our own discoveries through living in harmony and respect. Thank you my mentors and friends.

—Brent Cameron