

LIVE AND LEARN

By Nate Keenman

Recently, at a year-end picnic for a group of special education classes, we were discussing some of the students. One woman, Elaine, had known many of them during years working as an assistant, and I'd met many of them in different rooms as a substitute teacher. I mentioned a student named Eric, now 18, who has severe cerebral palsy. I told Elaine about taking him to his physical education class and unstrapping one of his arms from his wheelchair so he could participate. After a couple of minutes Eric became agitated, and one of the assistants in that class said, "He wants his arm strapped in again. He doesn't like to have it moving around like that." Elaine said, "Oh, I've known Derrick since he was four, and, being so spastic, he used to love it when I'd hold him and squeeze his arms and legs and body together so he wasn't moving at all. He'd just be so calm and happy!"

The early years of my education were like that: very constricted, but very secure and comforting. Not everyone who grew up in Catholic schools in the 1960's would identify with this feeling, but I suspect many would. There was discipline and an inflexible teaching method. There was great consistency. And there was a very wide scope to that consistency, because the teachers (almost all of them nuns) shared a culture, not only among themselves, but with most of our parents, who'd been educated in a very similar way by very similar nuns. As students, we were being initiated into that culture, equally at home as in school. Parents who sent their children to Catholic schools knew exactly what kind of education their children were getting, and there was seldom any dissonance between what we heard at home and what we heard at school. This was certainly true with regard to my parents. My father had grown up in a solidly middle class family in Pittsburgh, and my mother in a struggling family in Glens Falls, New York, but for all I could tell, they both knew exactly what was going

on every day in my classroom in Syracuse, New York, and in the classrooms of my two brothers and two sisters.

I was a good student, and got very good grades with only moderate effort. Unfortunately, I was also the smallest boy in the class, and I was socially awkward and athletically inept. I was picked on enough to be affected by it for a long time to come. I became inordinately afraid of making a misstep, or trying something that might make me look ridiculous, or attracting any attention to myself, even if it was positive. I had friends, but paid less attention to them than I did to avoiding my tormentors. I think this defensive posture tended to make me tentative and indecisive well into adulthood.

Something else would influence me long after the nuns faded away. In my Catholic education, from kindergarten through tenth grade, there seemed to be a clear answer for absolutely everything, and all the answers were consistent. All I needed to do, I thought, was keep learning more and more answers. But what eventually happened was that in tenth grade, I found that there was an answer missing, so I began to doubt all of the answers. What was missing was the answer to this question: "How is it that a system of beliefs that tells me exactly what to do about "impure thoughts" and can tell me whether or not I'll go to heaven if I'm hit by a bus on the way to confession, can have no clear answer as to whether I should kill people in Vietnam if asked to do so?"

By this time, I was in a rather prestigious Catholic boys' high school, and we often spent our religion classes discussing the war. Halfway through tenth grade, I changed from "hawk" to "dove". There were Catholics on both sides of the issue, but the church as an institution was oddly and (I thought) inexcusably quiet. I was on my own now, as I never had been before. I went to a public school starting with eleventh grade. I was disenchanted with Catholicism, as I said, but I also needed to make a change for social reasons. I needed to be in school with girls to learn to become comfortable with them, and I was bothered by the snobbery and elitism that was common at my first high school.

At the end of high school, I wanted badly to take a year off before starting college. I thought it would help me decide what I wanted to do. Like most young males in 1970, I knew the draft law, and I knew I could take a year off and not be drafted. However, two things conspired to get me into some college--any college-- that year. First, my mother was absolutely convinced that, no matter what the law said, I would be drafted. Secondly, there was a small local scandal going on because a high-ranking male student from the class ahead of mine had ended up not going to college, and he'd written letters to the paper blaming the school guidance counselors for it. Consequently, there were three guidance counselors after me to meet every admissions representative who came to town. I ended up at Hartwick, a small Lutheran liberal arts college that had repackaged itself as a have-a-beer-with-a-professor-and-design-your-own-major kind of place.

It's ironic, I suppose, that I decided to major in the most conventional of fields, economics. Thanks to my Catholic upbringing, I still was attracted to disciplines that seemed to have all the answers. I thoroughly enjoyed most of my college classes. I seldom thought in career terms; I just enjoyed learning. In spite of that, after I got a very high draft number, I took a year off. I worked full-time at McDonald's for most of the time, traveled for about a month, and then went back to Hartwick.

No great revelations came to me during my sabbatical, but when I returned to classes, I enjoyed them more than ever. I still had no idea what I wanted to do, but law school appealed to me because, once again, I thought law might have all the answers. I went to law school at the State University of New York at Buffalo and had the classic first year experience which suited me very well. By the end of the second year, I realized that even if I enjoyed law school, I would not enjoy being a lawyer. I dropped out.

Since my formal education ended, I've continued to learn--through reading and, thanks to jobs that required many hours of driving, from books on tape and

National Public Radio. My greatest life lesson came from meeting and marrying my wife, and from being involved in raising her children and ours. We were married when I was 36, and by that time she had three children: two from a prior marriage, and one she'd adopted. Her adopted child, Carly (whom I've since adopted), weighed one pound, six ounces at birth, and spent the first eleven months of her life in the hospital. When I met Carly, at age one, she had very uncertain prospects, especially as to mental development.

My wife has more insight into the thinking of young children than anyone I've ever known, and she gave Carly a wonderful start. As time went on, though, I became more and more involved in Carly's education. I was less daunted than my wife by the school bureaucracy, less deferential to teachers, and more ready to experiment with different approaches in working with Carly. (Could it be that I didn't see public school teachers and administrators as real authority figures because they weren't nuns?!)

As I mentioned before, my parents came from different backgrounds. Nevertheless, by different routes, they arrived at a world view that did not place a high value on conventional achievement or success. They wanted my siblings and me to be good, to be responsible, to be happy, but not necessarily to come out on top. In my father's case, I think this was because his father had become successful, had been hurt badly by the Depression, and then, when my father was sixteen, had committed suicide. (Other family members disputed that it was suicide, but my father believed it.)

In my mother's case, she'd gone into a tuberculosis sanatorium at fifteen and remained there almost two years. She didn't articulate the effects that time had on her, but throughout a long and busy adult life, she had a serene perspective and an open and tolerant mind. I suspect that spending what are usually the most self-centered years of life bedridden, isolated, and faced with possible death changed her deeply.

My brothers and sisters and I have had different degrees of material success, but that success has been a by-product of the paths we've taken, not the reason for our choices. For years, my wife had been urging me to go back to school and start a new career. It never seemed feasible. Then, in January of this year, my mother died, and my share of her estate was enough to replace my income for a year or two while I went back to school. I quit my job and spent several weeks exploring the possibilities. I considered finishing law school; getting a master's in economics; becoming an actuary; or teaching math, social studies, or special education. I signed up as a substitute teacher for both regular and special ed. classes, so that I could get an idea of whether I was cut out for teaching.

In late March, I was called to substitute in a class for multiple-handicapped high school students. A young assistant met me at the door to the room and said something like, "This is Eric. This is his computer. You ask him questions, and then he answers by turning his head to press this button. We'll be back after we do changes (diaper changes)." It was a real baptism by fire, but by the time I went home, my mind was all but made up. All I had wanted was something that would give me some security for the next fifteen years. I hadn't been expecting to find a career I'd love.

Life had prepared me to love it, though. I'd always loved learning; I'd never been preoccupied with money or status; and having a special needs child had begun to teach me what a complicated thing learning really is. I don't mind working with students who "will never get very far," and I see learning as a good in itself, no matter how slow or limited.