

## A Creative Outcome

On the back page of the Sunday Review section of the New York Times on a while back, there was an intriguing article, entitled [“How to Raise a Creative Child.”](#) At first I worried because the author, Adam Grant, was identified as a professor from the Wharton School, the famous business school of the University of Pennsylvania. But, then, of course, I realized, that businesses, especially those in the ever-growing information technology sector, are clamoring for creative thinkers. We who are involved in Waldorf schools, particularly those with high schools, have heard this call for creativity, for outside the box thinkers, rather than the “excellent sheep” that William Deresiewicz has recently written about. And the Waldorf schools have a solid response.

First, let me point out a few of the more notable ideas in the article. Mr. Grant writes that child prodigies usually don’t become adult geniuses, and one of the main reasons this is so is that they don’t learn to be original. They practice their one specialty and often that becomes perfect, or close to it. But, they don’t have the opportunity to make what they have practiced into something new. Researchers like Ellen Winner, whom he quotes, support this: “Only a fraction of gifted children eventually become revolutionary adult creators,” she writes. They shine in their jobs, but do not generally “make waves” as Mr. Grant puts it.

What is it that tamps down creativity in our children, even the most gifted? Part of the problem might be too many rules, or at least so many that the children feel stifled. I remember being very careful in composing the first student handbooks for the San Francisco Waldorf High School. We were clear that there were few rules in the book precisely because we were asking the students to take responsibility, to begin to develop their own code of behavior, based on the moral values we knew their earlier schooling and, more importantly, their families were inculcating within them. If you can create a code of ethics for yourself, you are well on the way to a creative future.

But, there is more. We wanted to let the students know how important it is to make mistakes, and how mistakes need not define them or limit them. In fact,

they could grow from mistakes. For example, when we study *Parzival* in the eleventh grade, the students are relieved to see the hero make mistakes—big, life-changing mistakes, while blundering blindly toward he knows not what—and learning from those mistakes! Parzival sets things right in the end, pulling himself, with a little gentle guidance, through a dark night of the soul, wherein all had seemed hopeless toward the shining goal of the Grail. He made more than “One Wrong Move,” as veteran English teacher Peter Greene, put it in describing a syndrome that robs today’s children of their agency in much the same way as Parzival seemed to be. Any mistake, any failure, Mr. Greene has pointed out, could be the One Wrong Move that sets you on a downward spiral forever. Children are taught, not always overtly, that they can’t let that happen.

The freedom to fail is too often overshadowed by the fear of failure. *The Gift of Failure*, a recent book by teacher/author Jessica Lahey makes a strong argument for the need for failure as a part of growth, and she means failure that children are not necessarily saved from by the intervention of well-meaning parents or teachers. She reminds us that too much of our society, including the general attitude towards education, is reflective of this notion that our children must be saved from failing in any way. There is a critical message here that our children absorb: they must be imminent failures if so much attention is paid to making sure they don’t make the One Wrong Move. Hard to be creative within such an attitudinal framework!

The educational researcher Kirsten Olson set out to write about the joys of people’s school days, but, when she interviewed her subjects, the stories she heard were more about pain, disappointment, and what she called “wounds.” The resultant book, *Wounded by School: Recapturing the Joy in Learning and Standing Up to Old School Culture*, categorizes seven types of wounds, caused by restrictive rules, curricula, methodologies, and by sorting and labeling of children. The wound most relevant to encouraging creativity is the first one she cites: “Wounds of Creativity.”

Dr. Olson says straight out what Mr. Grant emphasized in his Times piece: school stifles creativity. It does so by encouraging the fear of failure, by expecting compliance, by ignoring the students' own interests, by teaching only to the students' heads, and forgetting the vital importance of their hearts and hands. It shouldn't be so that adults live creative lives *despite* their schooling, rather than *because of* it.

"Evidence shows that creative contributions depend on the breadth not just depth of our knowledge and experience," writes Mr. Grant. Creativity is not fed by a narrow curriculum, then, but rather by one responsive to the developing child's changing consciousness, and moves rhythmically between intellectual, practical, and artistic undertakings. Wide interest rather than strict specialization seems to mark our most honored scientists, for instance. Mr. Grant notes "Nobel Prize winners are 22 times more likely to perform as actors, dancers or magicians; 12 times more likely to write poetry, plays or novels; seven times more likely to dabble in arts and crafts; and twice as likely to play an instrument or compose music."

Wouldn't it make sense, even if our only goal in nurturing creativity were to produce Nobel laureates, to widen the scope of what we expose our children to in school? To give them an opportunity to experience as many possible avenues of creation as possible? To help them, thereby, to find what they love to do? "The theory of relativity," Grant quotes Einstein as saying, "occurred to me by intuition, and music is the driving force behind this intuition." Albert Einstein kindled a love for music as a teenager, after hearing Mozart sonatas, and with his passion for it arising within his soul, he concluded that "Love is a better teacher than a sense of duty."

The Waldorf schools have "recaptured the joy in learning," to borrow from Dr. Olson's subtitle, by guiding students on a path of discovering their own creativity. The path is made of all kinds of artistic and practical pursuits, alongside varied academic studies. Sometimes a student might fail at one or another, or at least make mistakes, and it's all right because there are successes,

too, and the failures and the successes work with each other to nourish the growing children. They discover what they love, and through that they begin to access the kind of intuition Einstein referred to. With every piece of work, the children create something meaningful—beautiful or true. And through what they create for themselves, not just for their teachers, finally, they become confident that they are capable of undertaking whatever they set out to do and need not fear the inevitable mistakes. They practice to perfect the things they feel drawn to. They learn through love, the greatest teacher. And the outcome is creativity.

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