

HOME EDUCATION

A response to "Better Than School" One Family's Declaration of Independence by Nancy Wallace (1983, Larson Publications, Inc.)

"Nevertheless I am of the opinion that, if I had insisted on their (the children) being educated somehow at public schools, they would have been deprived of the training that can be had only at the school of experience, or from constant contact with parents. I should never have been free, as I am today, from anxiety on their score, and the artificial education that they could have had in England or South Africa, torn from me, would never have taught them the simplicity and the spirit of service that they show in their lives today, while their artificial ways of living might have been a serious handicap in my public work. Therefore, though I have not been able to give them a literary education either to their or to my satisfaction, I am not quite sure, as I look back on my past years, that I have not done my duty by them to the best of my capacity . . .

*"But the ultimate result of my experiments is in the womb of the future. My object in discussing this subject here is that a student of the history of civilization may have some measure of the difference between disciplined home education and school education, and also the effect produced on children through changes introduced by parents in their lives. The purpose of this chapter is also to show the lengths to which a votary of truth is driven by his experiments with truth, as also to show the votary of liberty how many are the sacrifices demanded by that stern goddess. Had I been without a sense of self-respect and satisfied myself with having for my children the education that other children could not get, I should have deprived them of the object-lesson in liberty and self-respect that I gave them at the cost of the literary training. And where a choice has to be made between liberty and learning, who will not say that the former has to be preferred a thousand times to the latter?" (M.K. Gandhi, **The Story of MY Experiments With Truth**)*

In the Sixties and Seventies renaissance, free schools and home education came into focus as part of the Aquarian ripple. In the Eighties there are now home educators whose pioneering activities and continuing enthusiasm make home educating much less an unknown lonely journey. Supportive networks of home educators like 'Education Otherwise' in Great Britain and 'Growing Without Schooling', the U.S. equivalent inspired and organised by John Holt (author of How

Children Fail) are alive and well and providing advice, resource sharing and human support. I feel myself fortunate to have read "Better Than School" by Nancy Wallace. Another 'real' experience arriving at the right time courtesy of AHP. A true karmic gift.

I am six months into home educating Jeannie and Elizabeth age six, and this in-depth frank sharing of Nancy Wallace's experiences has inspired, strengthened and humbled me. Living, through the book, intimately with Nancy, Bob, and children Ishmael and Vita, feeling the health and balance in relationships, I have gained affirmation in the often tortuous struggles of our whole family to achieve something of the

The book details the ways in which the Wallace family, having developed their places of love and respect for each others' personhood, become increasingly distressed as Ishmael struggles to adapt to his first school. Finding themselves unable to give up their son to a life of state schooling that is extinguishing his joy of learning and causing him increasing disease, they move through an agonising process of personal growth and problem solving to the point of embracing home education.

Gradually Bob and I developed the habit of getting into bed as soon as the kids were asleep (bed was the warmest place in the house) and being miserable together - a sort of nightly sob session where I poured out my heart to Bob and he tried to be as supportive as possible. 'What is wrong with Ishmael?' I used to despair. 'Why can't he be like other children?' Other times it was myself I worried about. 'What's wrong with me, anyway? Why don't other mothers feel the way I do?' How often, at the school, at the library, and even at the grocery store I had searched the faces of other mothers I saw, looking for even a trace of the misery I was feeling over Ishmael's life at school. But everyone seemed so complacent, so accepting of their children's situations. It was lonely for me, and I needed Bob to tell me I was right: Ishmael was shrivelling up before our very eyes".

Nancy shares thoughts, fears and problem solving from many areas of life. I particularly followed the patterns concerning the possible isolation from peers. The threads interwoven here I found a revelation. In the middle life of the book Nancy says: "Although Bob and I talked a lot about this problem of isolation, the one thing we seemed to be clear about was that school was no solution. The very nature of its structure precluded the kind of social interactions we felt the kids needed. (I say 'we felt' because neither Vita nor Ishmael ever openly expressed any feelings of loneliness, and I'm sure that they seldom, if ever, felt either lonely or isolated. After all, their lives

were very full and busy. In any case, how could they have missed what they had never experienced?) It's true that we lived in an impoverished working class community with few, if any, children who could have been considered Ishmael's intellectual peers; but even if the school had been full of them, we knew the formal school environment would not have been good for him. He didn't need to compete against his classmates for grades, and he didn't need the 'stimulation' of assigned projects to work on with other students. Instead, he, and Vita too, needed to make music with other children, to play spontaneously with friends as quick and as adventurous as they were, and to get to know children who cared about books and art the way they did. The artificially controlled environment of a school wouldn't have provided them with those kinds of opportunities. Only the real world could do that. But our problem, and the one we pondered often, was just where in the real world should we look?"

We parents are notoriously defensive, rarely finding with ease those places of admitting our needs to deepen in order to become in reality the parents we envision for our children.

Nancy weaves together the places of the heart and the realities of life in the world. She has in no way lost out - through her acceptance in each 'now' of her clear seeing of her children and her own abilities to meet each challenge honestly. Nancy and Bob and Ishmael and Vita show us the creative strength of a self loving family: I will be learning from the sharing for many nows. I recommend "Better Than School" to persons, parents and other educators who are energised to explore potential realities and to absolutely everyone out there who enjoys learning from children.

Love and peace,

Lorraine Downen

Growing Without Schooling - 729 Boylston St., Boston, MA 02116
USA, Education Otherwise, 25 Commonlane, Hemingford Abbots,
Cambs PE18 9AN
