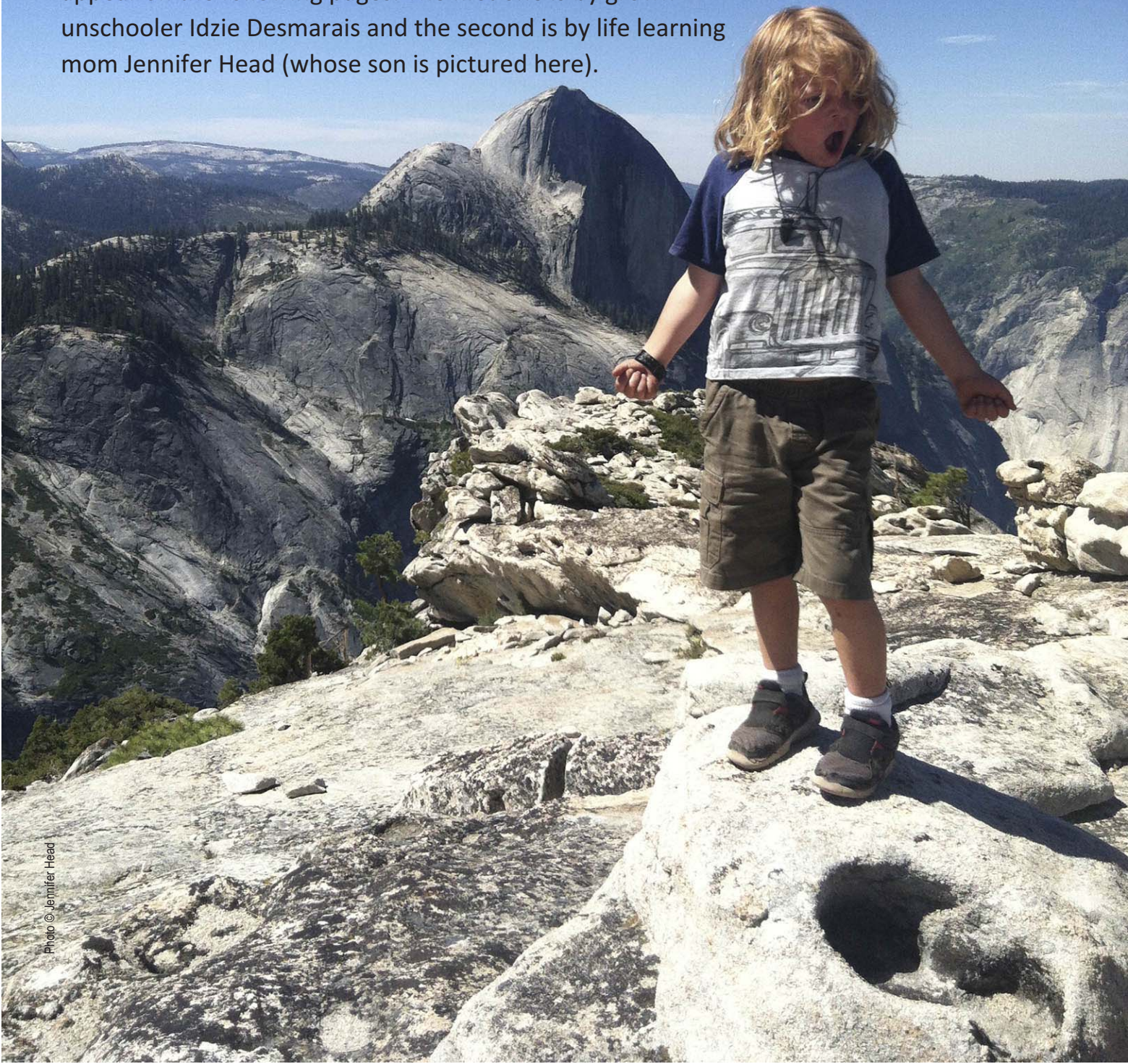


Responding to those who criticize something they know nothing about . . .

We have all experienced those obligatory not-back-to-school articles in the media just before school starts. No matter how good or bad, they are inevitably accompanied online by negative comments from people who know nothing about unschooling, are afraid of change, are unable to have their thinking challenged, or have a vested financial or emotional interest in the educational status quo. One recent article and the accompanying comments elicited some strong responses from life learners. Some of them appeared on the newspaper's website; two of our regular contributors sent us their responses, which appear on the following pages. The first one is by grown unschooler Idzie Desmarais and the second is by life learning mom Jennifer Head (whose son is pictured here).



When You Unschool, You Don't "Unparticipate"

Community Engagement and the Value of Different Ideas

By Idzie Desmarais

One morning not too long ago, I woke up to find an interview request from the *Montreal Gazette* (the largest English language newspaper in Quebec) sitting in my inbox. After spending a short amount of time pondering my response, I ended up talking to the reporter for over half an hour on the phone. It was a good experience. She was respectful in her questions and actually listened to my responses, which is all I hope for when someone says, "Hey, can I interview you?"

A week later, the unschooling story was a front page feature. The main article was...well, not super positive, to say the least, though that's more to do with the attitude of the Quebec Ministry of Education (that unschooling is illegal) and the views of one of the "experts" spoken to (an education professor whose study I wrote a rebuttal to when it was released a few years ago). I was not quoted in it. What I was quoted in was the accompanying sidebar article, which was very positive, and quoted Peter Gray as well.

The reaction, sadly, has largely been to the main article, and has mainly been the usual after a mainstream media piece on unschooling comes out: defensive, shocked, angry.

One such reaction was a letter to the editor published in the *Gazette*, and it was such a perfect example of someone not understanding un-

schooling and how it works, that I wanted to write a response, clearing up a few things.

Will children really gain the exposure they need outside of school?

"The premise of the 'learn what excites you' is one that we all hold in high regard," writes Ms. Sanders, the author of the aforementioned letter. "That being said, we don't know when we are young what we don't know, and education is that door opener."

No, children don't "know what they don't know." But where the mistake is made is the idea that a) schools are the only place to gain exposure to different topics, b) that schools provide exposure to the most important things, or the things every single child should know, and c) that schools do a good job of imparting knowledge on the subjects they do expose students to.

I'd counter that all three of those assumptions are wrong. Inside of schools, only a few subjects are taught. Outside of schools, learners have the whole world to choose from when it comes to their learning. It's also important to note that unschooled children are far from alone in this process. Parents, acting as facilitators, seek to provide exposure to a variety of things, and children find interests – find learning – through friends,



“Because they don’t teach the truth about the world, schools have to rely on beating students over the head with propaganda about democracy. If schools were, in reality, democratic, there would be no need to bombard students with platitudes about democracy. They would simply act and behave democratically, and we know this does not happen. The more there is a need to talk about the ideals of democracy, the less democratic the system usually is.” ~Noam Chomsky

neighbors, family, the Internet, the library, homeschool coops or groups, local classes, museums, travel.... The world is a big place, and it’s full of a whole bunch of options.

And I really don’t think schools are picking the best options. Schools fail children by focusing on academic, intellectual, and abstract topics to the exclusion of almost all else. As William Upsi Wimsatt said:

“[There were] No sex classes. No friendship classes. No classes on how to build an organization, raise money, navigate a bureaucracy, create a database, buy a house, love a child, spot a scam, ask the right questions, talk someone out of suicide, or figure out what’s important. Those are the things that enhance or mess up people’s lives, not whether they know economic theory or can analyze literature.”

Schools also fail children by upholding the tenets of society as it is. Jeffrey Nall had this to say on the matter:

“In addition to a lack of awareness of the social construction of gender, many teachers, idealists, and visionaries aside, are encouraged to embrace the role of dominant culture’s deputy, tasked with fitting children to the world that is rather than promoting critical analysis and re-imagining society. What is important to realize here is that learning, acquiring new understanding, be it reasonable or not, occurs throughout everyday life. Classroom and schoolyard ‘educational’ experiences such as those described above are formative, and warp children’s sense of self-knowledge.”

Noam Chomsky goes further:



“Because they don’t teach the truth about the world, schools have to rely on beating students over the head with propaganda about democracy. If schools were, in reality, democratic, there would be no need to bombard students with platitudes about democracy. They would simply act and behave democratically, and we know this does not happen. The more there is a need to talk about the ideals of democracy, the less democratic the system usually is.”

Vandana Shiva points out the role schooling plays in industrialization:

“I think the way western education has grown over the last few centuries, especially with the rise of industrialization, was basically not to create human beings fully equipped to deal with life and all its problems, independent citizens able to exercise their decisions and live their responsibilities in community, but elements to feed into an industrial production system.”

Schools do not seek to help students question the way things are and build better alternatives, they simply do their best to present the way things are as the only and even best way. Don’t question, just listen. Some teachers do their very best to foster critical thinking and teach students about important things not found in the curriculum, but the system itself is not built to support that.

It also isn’t built to let students think critically about the institution of schooling itself. Ivan Illich once stated that “School prepares people for the alienating institutionalization of life, by teaching the necessity of being taught.” In a similar vein, in an article by Jordan Bates he comments that:

“In the U.S. and other countries, students are never given the tools to scrutinize the educational standards and practices to which they are subjected. It is rarely, if ever, articulated to students that our way of ‘educating’ and assessing is but one imperfect model; or that much of what we ‘know’ consists of our most current theories and



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“Schools do not seek to help students question the way things are and build better alternatives...Some teachers do their very best to foster critical thinking and teach students about important things not found in the curriculum, but the system itself is not built to support that. It also isn’t built to let students think critically about the institution of schooling itself.”

preferred interpretations; or that everything they're being taught is filtered through a cultural lens fraught with biases and agendas; or that in all likelihood what we do know about existence is one water molecule in a sprawling super-ocean of things that we do not know."

We also make a big mistake in thinking that, regardless of cultural context, communities, interests, and needs, every single individual child the world over should be learning the exact same things. Learning should be personalized, informed by, as I said in the article in the *Gazette*, "[the learner's] needs, their families and communities and what they're passionate about. The most amazing thing about unschooling is the incredible array of people and that's what builds healthy communities – not trying to have everyone know the exact same things."

Are schools really the most supportive places for children and teens?

To continue with the letter to the editor that sparked this post:

"Today's educators spend endless hours at workshops and professional development meetings to address this goal. Teachers have participated in learning communities that broaden the dimensions of each of the elementary and high school curricula, allowing for new programs of study and various educational paths that support each student."

Yet despite all this, schools remain stagnant, the content taught often feels irrelevant to students, and nothing major ever changes. There are just tweaks here and there that don't really challenge any of the major problems built into the system (strict hierarchies and separation between teachers and students, lack of free choice and intellectual independence, authoritarian instead of cooperative approaches to problems). I think this just goes to show that teachers don't really have that much impact on the system as a whole. Even

the most progressive and caring of teachers are severely limited in what they can do, and important choices about how schools look and function, as well as what becomes a part of curriculum and what doesn't, are made by bureaucrats and politicians, not teachers. She continued:

"Good schooling is not only centered on the academic piece, but encompasses the social and mental health of each student."

That statement is so inaccurate it's insulting. What about the countless teenagers dealing with depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses



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"What about the kids who are bullied, burned by cigarettes, beaten, and terrorized by classmates, while school administration does little to nothing about it?"

who are receiving no special support in school? What about all the closeted LGBTQIA+ young people who are just desperately trying to make it through high school safely, feeling completely unable to come out because of the culture at their school? What about the kids who are bullied, burned by cigarettes, beaten, and terrorized by classmates, while school administration does little to nothing about it? What about students of a racial or ethnic minority, who don't see themselves

“Is school really the only place you can participate in community?”



and their communities reflected at all in the curriculum, and who may feel greatly discouraged from practicing their own culture by being forced to conform to the dominant (Western, white) culture which is presented as the only or best option in schools?

When all those things are issues of the past, and the majority of students feel supported, both physically and emotionally safe, and like they have an important say in their own education, then you can say that schools support students' mental health. Until then, I don't really think you can.

Is school really the only place you can participate in community?

“Many students develop their love of sports through the various teams at school,” Ms. Sanders continues. “Others learn confidence and success through plays and musical performance. These electives are clearly designed to enrich and encourage further exploration past the high school years.”

I feel like I've responded a thousand times to this type of question. It's like the words start to blur together as I respond: Unschoolers don't just learn alone all the time we do things with other people yes even structured things.

Unschoolers often participate in a whole range of different activities. In my childhood and teen years, I participated in a play, a musical performance, a choir, a marching band, an Ultimate Frisbee team, a bowling team, as well as numerous classes on as wide-ranging topics as swimming, French language, doll making, and history. In school, the types of things the author lists are “electives.” Out of school, they're an integral part of each individual's learning and life, not to mention something that you have more time for, since you're not restricted by spending most of your waking hours in school, traveling to and from school, or doing homework.

“When you unschool, you also unparticipate in an environment that promotes different ideas, listening skills, and recognition that our personal way is not the only right way to navigate ourselves through life.”

I find it frustrating that people sometimes seem to think that adding the “un” prefix to various words is a good way of mocking or discrediting unschooling. It's not. Moving past that, as I discussed earlier in this article, I think schools do a pretty good job of presenting only the dominant ideas on how the world works and should work. I have yet to see any proof that schools promote

different ideas, listening skills, *or* the “recognition that our personal way is not the only right way.” In fact, I feel like I’ve seen quite a bit of the opposite. Upon learning that I didn’t go to school, plenty of kids and previously schooled adults have reacted with scorn, and have responded with comments such as “but you **have** to go to school!” and rude attempts at quizzing. That’s not even mentioning the horrible reactions I’ve gotten from schooled people about other parts of my identity, like that I’m queer, and feminist, and have ideas about environmentalism and politics that not many others share. Where is that knowledge of diverse ideas and respect for differences that schools supposedly instill in students?

Furthermore, and contrary to popular belief, unschoolers don’t all hang out only with people who are exactly like them, and thus learn quite well, while spending time in the real world outside of school, that there are many different ideas out there, and a diverse range of experiences and ways of living. I actually wrote about just this subject recently, saying:

“The world is full of people who aren’t like you. In fact, the world contains a wider diversity of people than can often be found in school, considering that schools are: a) age segregated; b) contain students only from that school’s district, which means that as often as not, the student body will be fairly homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic level, race, and even religion.”

That’s true of where you live, as well, so it might not be different outside of school, besides the age-segregation part, but it certainly won’t be worse. While there might be some negative stereotypes of the extremely conservative far-right Christian school-at-homers who wish to keep their children away from everyone who doesn’t think exactly like them, that’s not the reality for any unschoolers I’ve ever met (when it comes to homeschoolers, sometimes that view is accurate, although more frequently it’s not).

Unschoolers are out in the world doing things and meeting people, which means you’re going to

come across quite a few people who don’t share your beliefs, work ethic, and habits. That’s just a part of living life, and a good part, usually!

In conclusion

Going back to the letter, the author concludes:

“As the school year approaches, watch your child grow and thrive. Encourage them to try the course that is unfamiliar to them. As parents, we want our children to learn to live within our community and world with knowledge of others not like ourselves. It makes them strong at work, within their families and multi-dimensional people.”

I hope all children will thrive wherever they find themselves, but the reality is that many will not thrive in schools. If children are instead wilting in school, withdrawing or lashing out in anger, if they seem anxious and depressed, I hope parents will consider looking into other options. Options, like unschooling, that allow young learners to explore and discover new things, at their own pace and in their own way, and to spend plenty of time in various communities, befriending people from a variety of backgrounds, a whole range of ages, and countless different interests.

That’s what will help children be confident people, comfortable in their own skins, and prepared not just for the world as it is, but equipped with the flexibility and creativity to help create the world that might be.

Idzie Desmarais is an unschooler, cook, writer, and anarcho-feminist. She likes to spend her time making tasty food, reading fantasy novels, blogging about unschooling, and going on road trips with friends. Idzie dreams of someday living in the woods with friends and family, growing tons of tasty food, and writing a book (or two or three). Currently, she lives in Montreal, Quebec with her parents, sister, two cuddly kitties, and a big shaggy dog.

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Natural Learning: Seeing the Forest Despite the Trees

By Jennifer Head

"What does education often do? It makes a straight-cut ditch of a free, meandering brook."
~Henry David Thoreau

A mature forest ecosystem, one that has long since been annihilated by fire or at the hands of humans, is complex and high in biodiversity, each species with its own specific needs, interacting with one another, finding the niche that works for them. Sometimes it's hard to see the forest for the trees, the big picture, the whole nine. I know; I've been there.

At the height (and end) of my academic career, what was originally an immense love of the natural world gave way to an extreme narrowing of my vision, purpose, and passion as I hyper-focused on a few amino acids of one domain of one subunit of one protein in one critter. It's hard to see the entire forest when your eyeballs are smashed up against one tree.

This is the current predicament in which we find ourselves with the standards-based, test-obsessed, public education system. Although homogenization and federalization of education are relatively recent phenomena, corporate educational entities and the educational experts they attract

have made quick work of bulldozing forward into the proverbial forest, over mycelium, past herbaceous ground cover, beside woody shrubs, under the canopy, and up to one singular tree. They have chosen one narrow niche in which all children must now thrive, completely blind to the myriad possible ways to flourish.

One of the rationalizations I often hear cited as just reason to perpetuate the decidedly narrow view of mass education is that educators have spent countless hours in workshops developing ways to make linear, lock-step, standards-based education more interesting. Expecting all children to thrive in an educational system where the desired outcome is homogeneity because so many hours have been invested in developing the plan, is analogous to saying that a given plant should thrive in the wrong habitat because so many hours were invested in digging the hole. The logic is completely flawed and the end does not come close to justifying the means.



This time of year, there is a familiar resurgence of back-to-school mania, and with it, concomitant criticism of alternative learning lifestyles. Normally, they don't get under my skin. Why would they? I love my decisions enough to not need everyone else to love them. However, a letter published very recently in the *Montreal Gazette* struck a chord in the unschooling community. The author, an educational consultant, asserts that young children need educational experts to tell them what to know; that unschooled students don't have access to athletic, musical, or artistic opportunities; that unschoolers only interact with people just like themselves; that unschoolers are ill-equipped to deal with life's challenges as a result of not having attended school; and that they are lacking in experiences that are unfamiliar to them. To be more specific, according to the author, unschooled children "unparticipate." To this I have to say:

If a desired outcome of "good schooling" is truly the social and mental health of each student, education would be interest-driven, schools would resemble villages (i.e., would be more diverse in every way), and students would have much more freedom. For unschoolers, nothing is "designed" for them. The enticing and carefully-scripted enrichment activities of which the author speaks are all still available to unschoolers. Why on Earth wouldn't they be? One doesn't have to sit at a desk all day to be able to take an art class, play an instrument, or participate in sports. Get out of that box!



"One doesn't have to sit at a desk all day to be able to take an art class, play an instrument, or participate in sports. Get out of that box!"

As far as exposure to diverse people and ideas, how does one arrive at the silly notion that unschoolers only hang out with people exactly like themselves? On our travels and during the workshops that we attend, we interact and work with folks from toddlers to octogenarians, with people from all walks of life, with people from every corner of the planet. Still think we're sheltered? My six-year-old has played games unique to the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast, spoken French with a Belgian, had a tickle fight with a Kiwi, cracked codes with a Canadian, made armor out of Doug fir bark with an Israeli, befriended a man from Iran, played with a boy from Slovakia, tasted honey from a Transylvanian. Still think we're sheltered? He has slept outside more than most North Americans would in six lifetimes. He's looked down on Half Dome. He's handed out ice cold drinks to long-distance hikers in the desert. He learned to catch lizards with a noose made of grass. He has explored an ice cave and stood on a mountain made of volcanic glass. He knows how to build a rocket mass heater and a house out of earth. Still think we're sheltered? He plays basketball and soccer with a local school district but has no interest in piano or flute. However, he can play the didgeridoo. Does that count? He doesn't know all of his multiplication tables but he knows the ones that have been relevant to his life thus far. However, he can gather wood sorrel for breakfast and plantain to heal a wound, talk to owls, chop his own wood and start a fire, find Betelgeuse in the

winter sky, and he knows that the song of the Swainson's Thrush in spring signifies the coming of summer. Is any of that on the test? He's also interested in algebra, the lifecycles of stars, chemistry, geology, dinosaurs, and evolution. But none of that will be on the test until high school, if ever. It's amazing where the human mind goes when it's not being led.

As the school year approaches and millions of children around the world will once again sit in a room with dozens of children their own age (and likely social class), while they sit still and hear information over which they have no control, while they choose from a heartbreakingly short list of electives that a select few deem worthy, while their eyes oscillate from clock to window and back, I'll be watching my child grow and thrive while participating in LIFE.

Don't take my word for it, skeptics. Come **participate in reality** with natural learners. Experience the world through the eyes of a free-range child. See the light in their eyes that still burns brightly. Seek out unschooled children and see for yourselves that they are confident, articulate, self-motivated, diverse, rarely bored (if at all), adaptable, self-entertaining, collaborative, well-traveled, and naturally inquisitive about world around them. Most of all, re-

member that life learning is not just for children. If you should ever find your view of the world to be a bit myopic, your views on education too top-down or one-size-fits-all, don't forget to take a few (or many) steps back to the edge of the forest, back to

where you were when you were a bright-eyed child eager to explore the world, so you can once again see the big picture.



"If you should ever find your view of the world to be a bit myopic, your views on education too top-down or one-size-fits-all, don't forget to take a few (or many) steps back to the edge of the forest, back to where you were when you were a bright-eyed child. eager to explore the world."

Jenn Head lives on the beautiful Southern Oregon Coast and is a recovering academic who has since embarked on a magnificent life learning adventure with her seven-year-old son. She loves motherhood, natural building, backpacking, felting, quilting, cooking, reading, gardening, traveling, living off the grid, and so much more. She hopes to inspire and empower families to live more sustainably and simply by requiring less and forming deeper connections with the Earth. She is currently learning to build beautiful and sustainable houses from earth alongside her son

and will soon be further exploring her interests in Permaculture design and practice. This is her second article for Life Learning Magazine. She and her son recently created a website called Yada Yada Yada (www.yadayadalife.wordpress.com) where they plan to share their amazing adventures. - LL -