

Let's Get Excited About Learning Again



Send him mail.



"Insight for the Young and Unrestrained" is an original weekly column appearing every Thursday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Gregory V. Diehl. Gregory is a writer, musician, educator, and coach for young people at EnabledYouth.com. Archived columns can be found here. IYU-only RSS feed available here.

Do you remember when the prospect of trying something new was exciting? There was a time when you didn't care about your inability to do it well right away or how foolish you might look when you fail the first dozen times. I remember. And I'm reminded of this daily because I am fortunate enough to get to work with children who haven't yet lost their curiosity about the unknown and their eagerness to learn. It keeps me young. In my experience, kids will try anything new with little reservation if I can make it exciting enough for them.

As adults, our intellectual abilities should be incomparably superior to how they were in our respective childhoods. We are also physically bigger, stronger, and in better control of our bodies than we were in our early years. We should, by most rational accounts, be able to take in new data, learn new terms, build new logical structures, and manipulate our digits and appendages in ways we could never have attempted as children and adolescents.

Through the amazing nature of human development, kids will always have something we've come to lack. The passion, curiosity, and enthusiasm of a child exploring his environment surpass those of nearly any adult. This is what makes them so magical and precious to us and how they seem to learn so quickly. They haven't yet adopted the fear and discomfort which comes with pushing personal boundaries. If you could create a creature with the enthusiasm of a child and the physical and intellectual abilities of an adult, you'd have an unstoppable learning machine.

When I talk to my peers, and most especially my elders, they overwhelmingly seem to prematurely accept where their limitations of learning lie without ever really pushing them. As children they might have had endless ideas about what they were going to do with their lives and all the things they were going to try, but by age 25 they've resigned themselves to a life of steadily improving repetition of the same old routine. It grows easier and easier with each passing day to only continue to do what we already know, and even keep our

tastes ever more narrowly contained in only specific applications of human creativity.

Don't misunderstand me here. There is nothing wrong with specialization and preference in life. The dividing of our knowledge and labor into increasingly particular skill sets and actions is what has allowed the most efficient free market in history to form and create the modern world around us. But there is great danger in a narrow mind which prematurely closes itself to new growth and experience.

We often seem to define ourselves by our specializations. Our natural abilities and practiced skills become our jobs, hobbies, and how we describe who we are to the world. We get so used to labeling ourselves by a certain set of terms that we become closed off to any other things we could have been and skills we could have learned. Culture certainly doesn't help. We are told that if we haven't started to develop certain skills by the end of teenagehood that we will never be able to learn them. The world seems dedicated to convincing us that who we are when we finish college is who we are destined to be for the remainder of our days. The standard American schooling process does an exceptional job of instilling these limiting beliefs into us all from our earliest memories.

If we don't get excited about learning, we risk closing ourselves off further and further each passing year to new ideas and activities. Children can get away with performing poorly at anything because no one expects someone with such little life experience to necessarily be good at whatever they attempt. As adults, we don't always get that luxury. We've learned to be ashamed when we hit a wrong note on the piano or make an inaccurate remark on an esoteric subject. There's far less forgiveness for the grown man or woman who should supposedly know better than to attempt something he wouldn't most certainly succeed at.

With the endless ocean of knowledge available at our fingertips, how much of what we watch, read, write, listen to, talk about, and get paid to do are things already inside our zones of familiarity? I make an effort to spend at least a few of the 24 hours in each passing day trying something new or intellectually engaging myself in unusual ways. It has been one of the hardest things to overcome from the damage done to my psyche by the public school system where I was forced to "learn" by external demand and routine. I've had to focus on reawakening the spirit of enthusiasm for new ideas within myself before it became completely snuffed out.

Now it's become habit for me upon confronting a new challenge, or any demand I lack the knowledge to fill, to first attempt to learn it myself before employing someone else to perform it for me. It's only daunting if I look at the gap between points A and Z without making the effort to figure out B, C, D, E, etc. as I come to them along the way. When my car won't start in the morning, I could just resign myself immediately and accept that I don't know anything about cars, so I'll have to call or hire someone who does. We all do this on most subjects.

But when I'm feeling especially ambitious, or when money's tight, I'll spend an hour on Google and Wikipedia, tinker a little with the tools I have and the few parts of the engine I actually understand, and to my utter surprise I've actually been able to get myself out of several major mechanical issues with the knowledge I've picked up as the situation called for it. By no means do I consider myself a mechanic, but it goes to demonstrate that even something I have had absolutely zero training in can be learned with relative ease when the need is present and I am willing. It's worth a couple hours of my time to save hundreds of dollars in service charges and gain a greater practical understanding which will continue to serve me throughout my life.

What about other restricted fields of knowledge like biology, health, and medicine? Obviously doctors go through such intensive training for a reason to obtain their credentials, and the more specialized the application the more learning will be required. But that doesn't mean the common person cannot engage in a little of their own research and personal experimentation to learn how their body works and how to maintain it. The same applies to the most seemingly convoluted elements of physics, economics, and psychology. The only thing holding most people back from a working understanding of many of these fields is simply the limiting belief that they can only be learned to a useful degree through years of university study. It is, rather unfortunately, necessary for the maintenance of our socialistic education and political systems that this illusion be perpetuated.

The arts are no different. As a self-taught violinist, I am often initially confused when people make common cliché statements like *"Oh, I wish I had learned to play music when I was a kid. Now I'll never learn."* It's odd to me because I know how simple and intuitive learning music can be, even with a notoriously finicky instrument like the violin. But then I remember that cultural dogma maintains that these esoteric skills are impossible to learn without years of professional training from early childhood onward. Their culture and their schooling indoctrinated them with the erroneous belief that learning only happens in younger years. Ironically, overcoming the belief that learning something is difficult is often the most difficult part of learning it.

If you want to be the most successful possible version of yourself, you've got to get excited about learning again. You've got to remember that childlike wonder and innocence you had before everyone started projecting upon you their own inability to act. You've also got to forget this image you carry around of what you are good at and where your limitations lie. Surely, we all do have natural talent pools for certain types of activities and not others, but the difference between talent and skill is that skill is developed through practice and study. If you only look at the goal and ignore all the necessary steps between where you are now and where you would like to be, any worthwhile task will seem impossible.

I may not be a natural artist, or salesman, or actor, or writer, or whatever else I might have

an interest in becoming, but I don't for one second doubt my ability to learn these things in time through constant unabashed error-correction and eagerness to improve. It's actually the main reason I even write this column every week: it's a chance to challenge myself to push my writing to the next level and get a coherent series of thoughts articulated weekly with increasing efficiency. Every week, more words come out in less time, and (I hope) the quality of context steadily improves. It's my training for the writer I hope to become in time.

I look back on how much I've changed in the last five years or so. I think of how much I've learned and grown, and wonder if I possibly could have predicted back then that this is where I would be right now. I wonder what I'll know and the kinds of things I'll be doing another five years from now. But if I give up on learning new things now, I'll only become more and more restricted in my hobbies, professions, and abilities as I get older and the natural path of human development slows me down. My greatest strength is my openness and dedication to overcoming obstacles. My greatest weakness may very well be the very sense of identity I've come to value and rigidify my personality into.

So let's forget arbitrary normality. "Normal" changes with each passing generation. When people stop learning, they work only to preserve the way they were once trained to do things and see the world. Read new books. Watch a documentary on something totally outside your awareness. Explore different tastes in media. Listen to a unique podcast. Play a video game. Listen to a new piece or new style of music. Travel! Associate with interesting strangers. Start using your body and moving in different ways. The body has to be taught through repetition and motion, and it has been amply shown that brain health is directly linked to precision use of the hands and overall bodily exertion.

The outlets for information are endless. Even as I work, I will often have something intellectually or emotionally stimulating on in the background of my focus which does wonders to keep my interests varied and my creative juices flowing (YouTube & Netflix have become tremendously valuable to me). I get bored very easily now, and I see that as a good thing. My standards of mental engagement elevate higher all the time. While it is a fine virtue to be content with one's present circumstances and level of knowledge, without the eventual drive to improve upon all things in life we will be overtaken by the degrading forces of time and face death of the human spirit long before the death of the body. Make your stand now before decay gets the best of you and your mind goes.