

Leadership Begins at Home

by Nanda Currant

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I HAVE BEEN THINKING QUITE A BIT ABOUT LEADERSHIP. We have lived by a model of hierarchy for a long time. We have assumed that our schools, communities and nation must be run the way we think a dog pack runs, that there must be an Alfa and Omega, a dominant figure on top, leading the way.

But this may be a faulty way of thinking about leadership, and not only for society, but even for dogs. Recently I read *Your Dog is Your Mirror* by Kevin Behan. Ostensibly about dog training, the book presents a new way of thinking about “packs,” and about learning. Behan speaks about energy and how it moves in a pack, and how the heart of the animal has more to do with the hunt than does the hierarchy or supposed Alpha leaders.

This new way of thinking about leadership echoes something I observed while in 15 years working with homeschoolers, and more recently, in producing a movie about their experiences. Homeschoolers, I believe, inhabit a new shape, a new way of learning and relating to each other.

What struck me in my work as a “teacher” with homeschoolers (kind of a funny contradiction, to “teach” homeschoolers, but it worked as a creative relationship) was how the homeschooled students and their families moved through life in more energetic, and less hierarchical, ways, just as Behan describes a dog pack moving without a clear established leader.

Indeed, many homeschooled students seemed to hold another way of inhabiting the world, and I hope another way of running it in the future. Through homeschooling, teachers and educators leave aside what we rely on as fact or subjects or a particular way education must be delivered. This departure from the way things are always done suddenly yields another kind of human being. It is more of an “emptying out” than a “filling up” learning process. It is more spacious and at the

same time energetic, and certainly it comes more from passion than lessons.

I worked with students who homeschooled in two districts in California, and the curriculum was based on the needs of the students enrolled in the program. As time went on the district began to shape the program so it began to look more traditional, more like what it was trying to leave behind. But the teachers, who had that primal image of education at its root, a kind of no-schooling all about learning, continued to run the experiment and acted as a bridge with the district and families to explore and re-invent learning.

Last year, I filmed some of their stories, in hopes of identifying some qualities and values transmitted through homeschooling. I really did not know how these kids had turned out, as it had been many years since I’d worked with them. When I began filming them, I held my breath.

Here’s what I identified: People who were homeschooled thought outside the box. They did not feel competition worked as much as mutual support; they operated on acceptance (of each other and teachers) rather than alienation and cliques; they could talk a mean streak (I think this is because homeschoolers don’t have to raise their hand and wait to be called on). I found they were self-starters and did not need to wait to be assigned something and then be moved to the next step (they moved themselves). They felt the community around them was theirs to enter into on equal terms. They were unique and authentic, and had the type of characters where they seemed to care about more than just themselves, or what they could buy or have. They seemed to find vocations that were more about changing the existing problems, forming their own programs and business ethics, rather than just working for the system as a cog in a machine. They were very good at learning on their own. And the list can go on.

More than once as I filmed, I cried because I felt so honored to know them, and so relieved that they exist as the beings they seem to be, standing for the brand of humanity that I hunger for, that I hope to see flourish. I sleep better knowing that they will be okay, no matter what; they will be okay even if life presents hard choices and situations. Those young men and women know how to land on their feet.

I believe they represent another kind of leadership, and their notion of pack and tribe is very different than the hierarchical notion our culture offers them. They are like the pack Kevin Behan refers to, a group of beings moving with their hearts as the power behind the hunt, drawing on energy they have generated out of

their own lives, out of their acceptance of who they are, rather than how well they have adapted to the system. I believe these homeschooled people will push us to change our culture and environment in responsive and important ways.

For too long, our understanding of what it means to be alive has been buried under antiquated theories of learning and education. I am grateful that these young people are retrieving a truer notion of life, and making it resonate throughout our society.