



## Education

# Schools lack the sense of adventure that kids need

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One drizzly day a year ago June, I was trying to escape from a 10-person family vacation. My generous mother wanted to be with all her kids and her grandkids at one time, and teamed up with my generous sister who had always wanted to see Alaska. So we all ended up on a 50-foot boat, small for a skeletal crew and all our big personalities. Among us were five adolescents who screamed OH MY GOD at just about anything, all day.

From my vacation perspective, I mull over my work life. I fuss about educational bureaucracies that can lose sensitivity to the actual kids, as they live and feel. Too often the “education industry” tries to fix schools as if they were mis-engineered machines with bad parts. But their fixes tend to expect the kids, bursting with creative energy, to be passive. Do this assignment. Don’t talk unless called on. This will be on the test, so learn it. Maybe insisting on compliance used to work, but modern kids rebel.

My vacation book was the funny, if airheaded, “Eat, Pray, Love” by Elizabeth Gilbert. Hollywood just released a chick-flick version, with sumptuous scenery, but I doubt it would give me the peculiarly inspiring sense of empowerment the book did.

The privileged Gilbert paints herself as a world-class neurotic. How could I not envy the enormous book advance that paid her cash money to travel, invite her soul, and record her efforts to find herself with fun writing and colorful stories? Still, I give her a lot of credit for constantly wrestling with her demons. She complains, God knows, but she doesn’t leave it at that. She goes out and tries something.

Adopting Gilbert’s active approach, I escaped the kids by suiting up in raingear and retreating to the top deck. The scenery was majestic. Waterfalls everywhere. My irritability eased. Finally peaceful, I returned to the cabin where I had fun shrieking whenever the kids did, which they didn’t appreciate. Then I finished the book.

At the top of her story, Gilbert is an undeniable mess. Trapped in a marriage she hates, she’s got to get out, but no idea what she wants out of life. She knows only that she abhors what she feels to be the universal and tedious expectation that she raise a bunch of kids in a house with neighbors and carpools. I did not find this attitude

endearing. Please don't have kids if you don't want them. But don't you dare dismiss the work of supporting healthy kids as if it were a dull cliché.

But then she began to win me over, with her appetite for food and the Italian language, then later with her struggles to be a good girl within the disciplines of an ashram in India. The third part in Bali was annoying, largely because her idea of love set my teeth on edge. But hey, it was her idea, and she found a relationship for herself.

At the end of her yearlong journey she concludes, "what keeps me from dissolving right now into a complete fairy-tale shimmer is this solid truth ... I was not rescued by a prince; I was the administrator of my own rescue."

I love that. It's active. If only we could help the kids have this kind of confidence, make them feel they are learning how to act on their own behalf. Help them believe that this toolbox of skills and information they're getting from school really will come in handy when they try to quintuple a recipe, get the smell out of a local pond, repair a relationship, or advocate for affordable housing. Schools are always making up dummy problems for kids. How about structuring effective learning experiences out of what the kids really need and want to work on?

That would be a solid reason to go to school, for that legion of kids who see little point in it. No one ever seems to give modern kids a compelling reason to get an education, especially not the poor, distressed or "bad" kids that I mostly deal with.

Kids will tell you they know they should get a good education so they can get a good job and buy the stuff they want. Oh, please. Wake me when it's over. How about harnessing the bursting-with-creativity part?

Life is always going to be a series of troubles, and the quality of your life is only as good as your response to those troubles. Just as Gilbert did, let's call trouble "adventure," and start working on clever, colorful solutions. There. That's an idea a kid could love.

If a guy runs you down on a bicycle, and breaks your leg, you have every right to complain and blame, even sue. But at the end of the day, you've got to get your own sorry butt off that dirty sidewalk and get on with your life. No matter what your burden or complaint. Everyone has one. So acknowledge this fact to the kids, and help them live with it. They'll rise to that labor. If cuckoo Gilbert can do it, so can they.

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