



Volume II, No 9

The Wonders of the Mind

THE OBSERVANT EYE

With excitement in his eyes, Pieter van Dorp opened the drawer containing his most delicate treasures. Bird wings, sharks' teeth, and butterflies attracted immediate attention. Further perusal revealed a sea horse, a wasp's nest, chickory and fleabane, a robin's egg, shells, and a beetle. Mixed among this were yogurt lids, katydid pods, acorns, and a geode. Anyone sharing in the disclosure of these special treasures would feel honored. This was a collection discovered by the observant eye of a loving, little boy.

Pieter's parents, Margery and John, have built upon Pieter's interest in nature to develop his sensitivity and powers of observation. Margery and John especially value kindness and want Pieter to develop respect and love for all life forms. Sometimes the opportunities to foster this attitude appear unexpectedly. For example, once an unusually bold bird built its nest against the van Dorps' kitchen window. A quiet peek through the glass revealed tufted, fledgling heads peeping for the choicest worms a mother could offer. Necks stretched nearly two inches long as each baby bird cried, "Me first!" If watching that doesn't inspire an awe for life, what would?

THE UNIVERSE WITHIN

More fascinating than even the finest wonders of nature, is the marvel of the human mind, with its incredible capacity to learn. The use of the mind is such a routine part of our daily existence, that we rarely stop to think about how awe inspiring that integral part of us is. We may be overwhelmed by the amount of data a computer can regurgitate, and forget that even the most sophisticated computers lack the ability to discriminate certain points that would be obvious to a child. The mind surpasses technological limits.

"Cognitive Science," a new hybrid of half a dozen fields of study, explores the wonders of the human mind. *In The Universe Within*, Morton Hunt, shares the discoveries made by cognitive scientists about how human beings think and learn. He also shares some information of the average human being's capacity to learn. Did you know, for example, that the average person can accumulate 500 times as much information as is contained in the Encyclopedia Britannica, or 500,000 times as much, if redundancies are counted? That, unlike any animal, the human infant's brain triples in size during its first year? That one mathematician calculates that the average human memory has the capacity to process up to one hundred

trillion bits of information in the life of the individual? If that's average, what is the capacity of a child who has had a wealth of enriching experiences since birth? What are some of the things parents are doing to enrich this marvelous power of the mind?

LEARNING BY DOING

Pieter's education started in the home, but certainly hasn't been limited to the confines of a house. He learned about measurement by measuring and charting the growth of the corn in a nearby field. The van Dorps created a chart by drawing a tall cornstalk on a sheet of paper. This was taped to the wall in Pieter's room. Each week, after measuring the corn, the family would mark the day's date and the height of the corn on the chart. That was the kind of math class Pieter delighted in telling his friends about!

A cecropia cocoon found on a Russian olive tree became a guest in Pieter's terrarium. The larva emerged with bright green coloring and characteristic nobs. Had Pieter kept it to maturity, it would have developed into a not-so-welcome house guest: a fuzzy, brown moth.

Pieter learned about plant cells by taking apart cattails. Margery found that the cattail is especially good for the study of cells, because the cells are visible without a microscope. They are more square than human cells and provide a good lead into discussion of other kinds of cells.

The stagnant water at a nearby pond prompted further research. Margery gained access to a microscope, and she and Pieter discovered a world beyond what's normally visible. Mosquito larva may not be the most charming discovery to an adult who knows the irritation of a mosquito bite, but to a growing child this is excitement!

A FRESH CONTEXT FOR EXPERIENCES

Travel is very important to the van Dorps, and they use it to increase educational opportunities for Pieter. It's a time for Pieter to assimilate more information about his world, giving him a fresh context for his experiences. Frequently the unplanned things turn out to be what Pieter remembers best. A trip to his grandparents may be highlighted by the joy of being

sprayed with a water hose—a trip to a metro area could be most remembered for the moments when Pieter chased the pigeons—each of these being experiences in which Pieter discovers more about the world around him. Typical of most youthful travelers, Pieter usually proclaims that the ride always seems like it takes “300 hours!”

When the family went to a tulip festival in Holland, Michigan, they found a wealth of cultural experiences—especially for a boy named van Dorp. There was a Dutch village, a wooden shoe factory, [Clompen dancers, tulips, and a parade. When they grew tired of the crowds, they sat by a pond and Pieter found new vitality in discovering dried up cocoons. No matter where they go, Pieter always discovers one of nature's wonders.

The van Dorps also like to “travel while in the comfort of their home.” John's slides of his trip to India provide a good vehicle for showing Pieter other kinds of life and culture. They also show Pieter other kinds of vehicles — like the elephant that John rode on a short trek through one part of India.

A ROOM OF HIS OWN

Pieter's room is another point of family focus. It has an interesting combination of items ranging from a miniature dinosaur skeleton to a construction hard-hat. The name “Pieter” is brightly emblazoned in blue, wood letters on a plaque with a photo of young Pieter. There is no doubt that this is Pieter's room.

There's a ladder so Pieter can climb into his brass bed without assistance, a feather pillow which he helped to make, and a child-sized chair. A map of the world on the wall has strings, leading from the places that Pieter is studying, to pictures depicting life there. There's a foam mat for bunking overnight guests, and sometimes Pieter and his friends put up a small tent in his room and take journeys to secret places.

SECRET JOURNEYS

The frontier which the mind passes through as we grow from infancy to adulthood is one of limitless opportunity, and the more real-life information we process, the more “linkages” we create in the brain
(continued on page 4)

Basic

Principles

THE RELATION BETWEEN *ACTION* AND DEVELOPMENT

“Every time you act, you add strength to the motivating idea behind what you’ve done.”

Dr. George Weinberg
Self Creation

The Principle

One summer a college student earned money by going from house to house in the country selling encyclopedias. His sales trainer had advised, “When you go into a house, tell the lady of the house that you’re thirsty, and ask if she would please get you a glass of water. If she does, you’ve improved your chances of selling her the books.”

Even though he chose to use it in a manipulative and self-serving way, the sales trainer had learned an important principle of human development. That principle can be better applied to the personal growth of ourselves and our children. Psychologist George Weinberg calls it the self-creation principle:

Each time we act, we reinforce the motivation behind this action.

If the college student’s request for a drink of water aroused any kindly feelings in the housewife, she probably got him the water out of a desire to be helpful. In that case, getting the water strengthened somewhat her desire to help—and so increased the probability of a sale.

The principle works both ways, though. If the housewife got the salesman some water with feelings of resentment, thinking him presumptuous to ask and wishing him gone, then getting the water for him only increased those resentful feelings—and definitely reduced his chances for a sale.

As in the Get-Back-on-the-Horse-Again Response

The same principle works for children, and parents often act on the principle intuitively.

When two-year-old Todd was playing in the front yard, a large neighborhood dog bounded by him barking loudly and knocked him down. Todd cried; his mother, Fran, comforted him; and then she helped him decide how to react to this experience. She suggested that they go look for the rambunctious dog and tell him not to knock Todd down anymore. Todd was definitely reluctant to go but, sure of his mother’s support, went with her. When they found the dog, Todd wanted to run away, but Fran stood calmly still, and Todd felt safer staying close to her. She began talking to the dog in friendly tones, letting him sniff her, finally petting him— modeling behavior that Todd soon imitated. After they got back to their own front yard, Fran began pattering around outside, within hearing distance but apparently oblivious of Todd, giving him the message that it was fine to go on playing in the front yard as before; there was no need to avoid the situation; if the dog ran through the yard again, Todd could handle it.

Fran was using the old, “If-you-fall-off-the-horse,-get-right-back-on-again” strategy; and it worked. But why does it work?

Falling off a horse, or being knocked down by a dog, may trigger a feeling of fear in anyone. Whether that fear is a one-time response to a single incident, or a pattern of fear about the possibility of any similar occurrence, depends on what the person does about that initial feeling of fear. As Weinberg puts it in his book *Self Creation*, “Any acts of avoidance based on fear will entrench the fear.” If Todd had run away

from the dog and avoided playing in the front yard alone, he could have created a good phobia for himself. And, Weinberg's important insight is precisely this: it's not being knocked down that could have created a phobia; it's what Todd does in response to the incident that determines whether fear dies or grows.

Approaching the dog and continuing play in the front yard as usual were actions that expressed, "I can handle a bump by a dog; there's nothing to fear here." His mother guided his actions so that they led him to a healthy attitude.

ACTIONS AS INVESTMENTS

Taking any kind of action is an investment of oneself; to invest in something is to add to it, to buy a piece of it, to help it grow stronger. If we buy some stock in the ABC Company, we've strengthened the financial position of that company. If we feel a special surge of friendliness and invite an acquaintance to dinner, we've strengthened our own friendliness. (But if we think an acquaintance is superior to us and want to curry her favor, inviting her to dinner strengthens, not our friendliness, but our sense of inferiority and our need for others' approval!)

Wise investors know exactly what they're investing in—financially or personally. Since our acts invest us in the motives underlying those acts, we have to know why we're acting to know what part of ourselves we're strengthening—and why our children do something in order to know what part of themselves they are developing. Weinberg, again, explains, "Motivations for an act always contain two elements: a goal, and a belief that this act will help achieve that goal." So to know, for example, why Julie brags to peers about how many toys she has, (a.) we have to understand that she's acting this way because she thinks it will achieve some goal she wants, and (b.) we have to learn what that goal is.

We might discern that Julie wants the children to like her but is convinced that no one will really like her for herself, only for the fun they can have with her toys. If we're right, we know that her behavior is logical, if self-defeating. We also have a means of helping her. Every time she brags, she's reinforcing within her own mind the conviction that she can't be liked for herself. Just getting her to stop bragging will help. "If you don't act on a motivating feeling, it wanes and dies." If we don't invest in a stock, it has no power to help or harm us financially; it is irrelevant to us. The same thing is true when we don't invest in an emotion; it has no power over us.

AND SPEAKING OF POWER...

It's a powerful tool for parenting. Knowing that in acting children are building their attitudes, we have two advantages: we can discover their current attitudes by carefully observing their actions; and we can affect the development of their attitudes by guiding their actions. "The basic strategy of self creation is to sort through the continuous heterogeneous stream of thoughts, feelings, impulses, inclinations, and fish from that stream only those you want strengthened—and act on them." If we fish for our children at first, then include them in the sport as they grow, they'll eventually learn to fish for themselves—to consciously direct their own growth by wisely commanding their own actions. We will have given them real power over their own lives.

J.C.

To Mother — or Father — is to Teach

by Joanna Carnahan

THIS IS A ... POINT TO THE ... WHAT IS THIS?

Do you know about Montessori's "Three-period Lesson?" It's one of those concepts that's so utterly simple you think it's only common sense. And it is, of course, once we understand and use it. Not using it, though, is the norm, and is one of the reasons that centuries of adults haven't seen how brilliant babies are, or how easily all children can be taught to succeed.

THE FIRST PERIOD

The first step is just giving information. A friend of mine named Peggy used it playfully with her five-month-old daughter. When Pamela was in her high chair and feeling content, Peggy held up a spoon and happily announced, "This is a spoon!" Next she held up an orange and in the same way said, "This is an orange!" She repeated the two presentations rapidly and enthusiastically a few more times during the day; and that was the first period, the time for simply presenting: "This is a _____; this is a _____"

For an infant, start by presenting easily distinguishable objects, a few at a time, quickly. Repeat the presentation several times throughout the day until you feel your child recognizes the objects and is familiar with their names. (If babies look away or don't seem interested in your repetitions, it's almost always because they learned the objects in the first presentation or two and are ready for something new now. Keep the new coming!) Of course holding, smelling, tasting, and banging objects are all part of the learning too.

THE SECOND PERIOD

When she felt Pamela was familiar with the words, Peggy would repeat, "This is a spoon; this is an orange," and immediately add, "Can you point to the orange?" or, "Where is the orange?" as she held both objects within Pamela's reach. Pamela, of course, would point to, or touch, or grab the orange. Then Peggy might add, "Where is the spoon?"

The point here is that you're not yet asking the child (even a verbal child) to name the objects learned. Naming involves a fairly complicated mental process that takes

input and changes it into output. Pointing involves the less complex process of simply recognizing—remembering that this word is the one that came into your brain associated with this object

A fine point—to insure success—is to ask for recognition of the last-named object. "This is a pastry blender; this is a small strainer. Where is the small strainer?" Pointing to the strainer just named is an easy success for your baby — and success reinforces remembrance.

Another friend was positive that by the age of one her daughter knew the name and location of every piece of equipment in the family's well-stocked kitchen. Practically since birth, Dawn had been securely propped in an infant seat on the kitchen counter eyes following her mother's every move, ears absorbing all the information her mother shared. "Now I need the pastry blender here in the second drawer. 'See the pastry blender? I'm using it to blend the butter and cornmeal ... Now they're well-blended, so I'll wipe off the pastry blender and let you hold it.'" Predictably, by the time she could walk and pull open a drawer, Dawn could go get for her mother any utensil in the kitchen—a delayed but impressive demonstration of that second period. Letting children—including infants—demonstrate their knowledge is an easy success step most of us need to use more frequently.

THE THIRD PERIOD

The next step, for verbal children, is to ask for the name. If you've been teaching tree leaves and Brad has correctly pointed to maple and elm and oak leaves, you just hold up the oak leaf and ask, "What's this?" Ask only when your child can easily point to or bring you the object; ask only when you're confident of success.

Or, avoid any sort of testing context by setting up situations that more naturally elicit your child's use of the names you've been teaching: "Oh, I dropped the sack and the leaves fell out; will you help me pick them up? Here's the elm leaf; which one did you find?"—or any of those dozens of other games you're so good at inventing on the spur of the teaching moment! □

(continued from page 2)

which aid us in understanding more. As we observe, we question, and from that questioning comes the organization of thinking which we call intelligence.

This can easily be seen in children when looking at what they consider humorous. When children giggle at the phrase “the cow jumped over the moon” and say, “that’s silly!,” it can be interred that they have already processed enough information about cows and the moon to know that this just isn’t possible. They

may not be able to articulate how they have concluded that was silly, but the mind it not limited by our ability to explain it, and children needn’t be limited by our disbelief of how much human beings are capable of learning.

If we give our children the enriching experiences which are their birthright, they will amaze us with their secret journeys to worlds beyond our imagination. That’s something that really can inspire an awe for life for and the wonders of the mind! □

- 4 -

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