

# A Natural Way of Learning

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We seem to have lost track of the voyage of learning that takes place in all of us. I am referring to the magical, mysterious trip that takes place in the miles we travel between concrete and abstract learning.

Concrete learning holds a lot of "poetry of innocence" because it is intensely beautiful and has emotional power. It most resembles the wide-eyed, lively and curious attitude of a child when she meets the subject or object of her learning. The foot settles first on the ground of concrete learning as we embark on our learning voyage and that moment is magically symbolic. An example of this takes place in the wonderful film *In America*. An Irish girl who is perhaps eight years old tries to explain her Halloween costume to her father. She is dressed like "autumn", which is the Irish word used for this season but she goes on to explain that in America they call it fall because that is when the leaves fall. Nobody told her this, she was able to learn by making sense of the word fall and the way they use it in America. This process of deciphering in my opinion is brilliant and it is one that we all have had within us since most of us learned to speak. In learning to speak we were able to decipher and make sense of words that represented something that was based in the very real world we live in. When we are struggling to learn something new we all start from that place of the symbolic concrete. Some of us are more consciously aware of that initial learning process within us when we are struggling with an abstract thought or concept and for others it still takes place, it just happens so quickly they are not aware of it. I am proposing that in order for us to get back to the newness and excitement of triumph in learning, we have to slow down. We need to take the time to decipher the possible symbolic concrete poetry that was the seed of the abstract concept we are struggling to learn. For example, you may have learned in your geography class the abstract concept of wind: a large body of air in rapid natural motion, its speed often expressed in terms of the force it exerts on an obstacle and its direction is that from which it comes, etc. But when Jean Piaget, a Swiss child psychologist asked four year olds, who are still in concrete thinking at that age, what they thought the wind was they would often reply with such ideas as: "It is God breathing on me". It is that search backward into time to our childlike response to the discovery of our original concrete thoughts that will enable us to experience the excitement of struggling through the process of understanding abstraction. Best of all, it is those original symbolic, poetic concrete thoughts that will help us to make sense of and retain an abstract theory we are struggling with. Just think of all the learning that took place in school that you do not remember. We all could probably write a set of encyclopedia of the learning we have forgotten. But if you were to examine the concepts that you did retain I bet you that you could remember why. Two different things probably happened:

you felt the triumph of success when you deciphered new concepts by connecting them to something concrete in your life and/or you felt a kind of love-respect with the person teaching you.

I have shared in my writings before that I could not read properly by the age of thirteen. My parents sent me to an academy after school so I could learn to read and it was far away from home. My mother would drive me but she was very distracted at the time and I could hear in her sighs that this was not her idea of a good time. I never said anything to my tutor but he must have picked up on my mothers' feelings. So at first he told my mother very kindly that she could go back home and he would drive me back since it was on his way. We never spoke too much in the car that I can remember, and eventually he would pick me up to bring me to the academy and drive me home. Within a very short time I stayed up all night reading an entire Daphne du Maurier novel and I never looked back. In my case it was not the reading method that did the trick it was the respect that he had for my learning process. He quietly believed that I could do it and did what he had to do, which was to take care of me before and after my tutorial.

I also feel we live in a society where the concept of time and productivity is always moving at a racing pace. This unfortunately has travelled through our educational ideals where the concept of an embodied learning is forgotten. It takes a long time for learning to pierce through the misty veils of fog into our body and soul which is the sacred place where knowledge can be held, sculpted and molded to be ready for grafting on the next learning experience, and so on. The length of time and the rhythm this process takes is organic, just as the four seasons slide into one another each bringing their own piece to the whole of the year.

It has become very important for me to link the processes which take place within the root system of concrete symbolic thinking with its sap travelling upwards through to the branches that touch the abstract sky, along with the concept of love and respect. That is what I personally bring to my own tree of knowledge. I recognize that as a teacher/learner at Espritedu Training of Psychotherapists, I am always growing and changing and I always bring these key concepts along with me because those are the ones that I myself have embodied along the way. And what I always try to bring to as a teacher and psychotherapist, is myself.