



**THINGS
WE
SHOULD
NEVER
SAY TO
KIDS**

JIM HANCOCK

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Thing Five

“I’m Proud of You”

I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised...

I wrote a book called *Raising Adults*, the premise of which is, we’re raising too many children. We’re producing too many people who feel unprepared for life in the world as we know it. And if we keep raising children our trailer homes will eventually be overrun with boomeranging offspring come back so we can finish the job. This is, by my estimate, a less-than-positive outcome for both the boomerangs and the boomers who flung them unprepared into the world. Therefore, the argument goes; instead of raising children let’s concentrate on raising *adults*.

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This is an admittedly obvious play on words. So obvious a lot of people seemed to miss it altogether. But it’s no joke, if only because it calls into question

what, exactly, it is we think we're up to. If, for example, we wanted to end up with *adults* at the end of 18 years or so (don't laugh; 18 used to be the benchmark for adulthood in this culture and a lot of families measured up pretty well), then what would we teach people while they were young to assure that outcome? That's what *Raising Adults* is about and you can read it for yourself (www.westofthe101.com). I bring it up here only because I was and am surprised by what turned out to be a prickly idea in *Raising Adults*. It has to do with the words, "I'm proud of you." Here's part of what I wrote:

If you want to raise someone who is a human *being* and not a human *doing*, separate what she does from who she is. Feel free to disagree with me here, but I've chosen not to use the words, "I'm proud of you." I tell my daughter how impressed I am. I tell her how much I admire her. I don't say I'm proud of her. Here's why.

I'm afraid if I tell my daughter I'm proud of her it will sound like I had some-thing to do with her success. I didn't. She waded out of a decent gene pool. She grew up in a home with people who love her and who nurtured her

as well as we were able given a long history of craziness. She went to school in relatively affluent school districts. Beyond that context, Kate's achievement is all her own. She's blessed with a good brain operating system, which she learned to use effectively. She doesn't accept easy answers and she's not an intellectual snob. She learned to articulate her thoughts directly and generously. She learned to listen well and distinguish between important information and factoids without needing to ask, "Will this be on the test?" She built a strong work ethic and a whatever-it-takes attitude. She also learned how to have fun. She knows how to listen to her friends and figure out which are *fuelers* and which are *drainers*. In the process she learned to be *fueler* and how to *get* fuel when she's drained. Her skill as an actor is equal parts genius and hard work. The genius, for which she takes no credit, is an unusual ability to memorize dialogue quickly. But it's hard work that turns those words into characters who are real to an audience.

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I'm impressed out of my mind by all that. I'm so fortunate to know her. I admire her work and her character. But I wouldn't say I'm proud of her because those achievements are hers and hers alone.⁸

Perhaps my mistake was saying, "Feel free to disagree with me here..." because people of all ages certainly do.

"What's wrong with saying, 'I'm proud of you?'" they want to know.

"Well," I say, "I'll tell you—" but they interrupt.

"My parents said that to me all the time," they declare.

"Simmer down," I say, "The trouble is—" but I seldom get to finish my thought.

"Why do you hate America?" they scream. "In America, we are proud of our children. What is your problem!"

Just this. I don't think we should ever give children the impression that making us proud is the point of their lives. Forget for the moment the argument about taking credit where no credit is due. Just consider this: If we let our children think that pleasing us—making us proud

⁸ (*Raising Adults*, thetinycompanycalledme.com 207, page 209.)

—should be their primary concern, we divert them from the more significant work of growing deep and wide in the world and living lives that conform not so much to our image as to the image of their creator. *That's True North*: To move toward the place where they are fully and deeply themselves, as each was created to be. An adult waving a magnet nearby threatens a child's sense of direction. When the needle is drawn away from True North, she's being misled.

e.e. cummings said:

To be nobody-but-yourself --- in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else --- means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.⁹

To think of a child's own parents conspiring with the world to make her anyone *but* herself...it just seems wrong.

Let's see if we can set this in concrete. When a man impresses on his son that he's proud of him for making good grades (and when that boy believes making the old man proud is a good thing), the youngster is likely to set about trying to please his dad by presenting a record

⁹ A poet's advice to students. In: cummings ee A miscellany revised. New York: October House; 1965. p 335.

of good grades. This is a common transaction between generations: trading *achievement* for *approval*. The simplicity of the exchange is exemplary—as long as the younger person makes the grade, father and son each knows where he stands. It's a bit like quarterly earnings in the stock exchange. The analyst predicts; the company delivers, the shareholder lets his investment ride.

Maybe you see where this is going. If the currency between man and boy is *grades*—as distinct from, say, *gaining knowledge* or, dare we hope, *wisdom*—the boy may be tempted to cheat in order to get what he wants; just as his father might be tempted to overstate earnings to deliver a positive quarter (or the appearance of a positive quarter) where that is the unit of measure.

Did I say *overstate earnings*? That can't be right. What I probably meant was more along the lines of *extrapolating a positive trend*, or *projecting revenues in anticipation of an upswing*...something in that vein. That can't be all bad, can it?

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Right here is where the trouble lies: with faulty measurements. Part of the trouble in financial markets is that the unit of measure—quarterly earnings—may in themselves say as little about sustainable profits as grades in themselves say about learning. This is a problem.

A century ago the nonprofit General Education Board promised: “We will organize children and teach them in a perfect way the things their fathers and mothers are doing in an imperfect way.

“In our dreams,” the Board wrote, “people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hands.”¹⁰ Our molding hands...

OK, can I just say, YIKES!

Am I the only one who thinks *docility* is not an asset in learning?

Half a century ago, the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives¹¹, edited by Benjamin Bloom and a host of others, was devised as "a tool to classify the ways individuals are to act, think, or feel as the result of some unit of instruction."

¹⁰ General Education Board Occasional Letter Number One, quoted in John Taylor Gatto, *Underground History of American Education*, chapter two, *An Angry Look at Modern Schooling*, page 8, <http://www.johntaylorgatto.com/chapters/2i.htm>

¹¹ Bloom Benjamin S. and David R. Krathwohl. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*, by a committee of college and university examiners. *Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*. New York, Longmans, Green, 1956.

Again: YIKES! I'm not saying teachers shouldn't engage students purposefully, I'm just saying I'm not sure I trust teachers who believe they know how students are to act, think, or feel as the result of a unit of instruction. In fact, I'm pretty sure I don't.

You probably know about taxonomy but just in case you forgot it's a classification of things (doesn't matter what) into some sort of order. The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives outlines six categories of learning, beginning with simple knowledge and peaking with complex evaluation.

- 1. Knowledge (e.g. remembering lists, definitions, facts and directions)**
- 2. Comprehension (e.g. interpreting what a list, fact or direction means)**
- 3. Application (e.g. using a list or fact to solve a problem)**
- 4. Analysis (e.g. finding patterns between lists, definitions or directions)**
- 5. Synthesis (e.g. making a list of lists, translating a definition in different words)**
- 6. Evaluation (e.g. judging whether a list was worth remembering in the first place).**

Honestly, when it comes to conveying "a tool to classify the ways individuals are to act, think, or feel as the result of some unit of instruction," I'm not convinced Bloom's Taxonomy

delivers, except maybe on the bottom end. If all that's required is reporting back to the teacher what she said about who, what, when, where and why then, as long as the lesson was clear and correct, there's not much range in the appropriate "ways individuals are to act, think or feel." At that level of learning a thing is what it is and isn't what it isn't and that's that.

But farther along in Bloom's Taxonomy lots of factors come into play that make predicting such outcomes difficult and in some matters impossible.

For example, I have a friend whose responsibilities once included training members of a religious organization in how talk about their faith. For two decades he labored under the assumption that everyone who trusts God does so for one reason (which, oddly enough, happened to be the reason he put his faith in God). He taught hundreds of religious workers how to talk about their faith—though it was difficult to measure how well they executed what he taught them. Then, in what I thought was a grand display of an

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old dog learning a new trick, my friend conducted an anecdotal study of reasons for belief—by which I mean he asked believers all over the globe what it was that convinced them. After just a few weeks he'd categorized nine different reasons for believing. I suppose it goes without saying but I'm being paid by the word so, what the heck: Finding eight more reasons to believe caused my friend's mission to absolutely blow up! For my white readers, *blowing up* is a good thing. It means my friend was able to help people learn to talk compellingly about *their* faith instead of *his*.

Isn't this the point? That learning is more important than teaching? That embracing the lesson is more important than yielding to the power of the instructor?

If you're a person of faith who's read with alarm the reports of college-bound kids forgetting to pack their beliefs as they head off to school, my friend's lesson may be important to you. If a child doesn't embrace the reasons his parents give for believing, then of course he'll forget to pack the family religion when he moves out. I mean if he doesn't expect to use it, it's excess baggage. Besides which, it's not his. This is the same reason he doesn't pack the refrigerator. If, on the other hand, he believes for reasons that are persuasive to him, he won't carry the faith as baggage, he'll be wearing it.

All the expressions of pride from parents and other authorities are at best a waste of time because they are entirely beside the point. And the worst case is very bad indeed. The worst case is a power play in which the young are expected to comply with the wishes of the old in order to gain acceptance. This never ends well.

The worst case is very bad indeed.

Here's why I think all this matters. In 2004, my publisher got an angry letter from someone at a group called Focus on the Family on the subject of *Good Sex*, a learning design I created with my friend, Kara Powell (that's Dr. Powell to you). The letter promised to publish a review of *Good Sex* that in my estimation included unfounded accusations, innuendoes, near-truths, half-truths and untruths along with a handful of substantive disagreements—chief among which was that our learning design was *non-directive*. "I am offended for Christian families and youth who will be exposed to this non-directive and, I believe, non-Christian curriculum," the manager of Focus on the Family's Abstinence Department wrote in the letter.

The concluding section of the review was titled *Lack of True Teaching*.

...Directive teaching clearly states facts; it differentiates between right and wrong. Although directive lessons include thought-provoking questions and encourage teachers and students to reflect on issues, they are merely tools used to complement all of the other program components.

Nondirective teaching is based on individual autonomy: "Let's discuss the issue so that you can decide what's right for you." Good Sex is nondirective teaching.

Young students need facts about sexual issues. They need to know that the Bible is very clear on most human sexuality issues. They need to see examples demonstrating the benefits of obeying God in our sexual behavior, Good Sex fails to fulfill those needs. Authors Jim Hancock and Kara Powell should have spent less time watching MTV reruns and studying Hugh Hefner and given more time and energy to researching the issues they included in their curriculum. Reading Good Sex will leave youth leaders and students confused and frustrated. Focus on the Family cannot recommend the Good

Sex curriculum to churches, parents, or youth groups. This is not a recommended Christian sexuality curriculum.

For the record, *Good Sex* is in fact non-directive, but not the way they characterized it.

It's not "Let's discuss the issue so that you can decide what's right for you" which is just silly. *Good Sex* is a learner-centered—rather than teacher-centered—design.

Do the reviewers really mean to say the only acceptable way to teach kids about sexual choices is directive instruction at the lowest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy—1. Knowledge (e.g. remembering lists, definitions, facts and directions) and 2. Comprehension (e.g. interpreting what a list, fact or direction means)?

Because I don't think so. I think the elementary levels of learning are insufficient for teaching adolescents about sex. For children, sure—children are not yet equipped to make complex judgments—but sexually maturing adolescents require a more thorough engagement of mind and heart than simply taking our word for it. Since *Good Sex* is a biblically informed

curriculum, that means asking students to address the biblical text directly rather than on the basis of hearsay. Somehow I don't think, *Because my teacher said it's in the Bible* is a very resilient argument should an adolescent ever encounter a serious challenge to his beliefs about sexuality. Not that that would ever happen...but it could.

You may not be familiar with Focus on the Family but I think they believe you are because I think they believe everyone knows who they are and cares what they think. And they apparently expect authors and publishers to agree with them or risk public censure. I suppose this is the organizational equivalent of hearing a parent say, "I'm disappointed in you" instead of "I'm proud of you." It's a power play that only works if the parent is always right and the child remains forever young (and I don't mean in that sweet Bob Dylan lullaby sort of way).

E.B. White is supposed to have said, "Who we think our audience is, is how we write." I have the distinct impression that a lot—maybe most—adults think kids are not merely young

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but probably a bit dumb. This is why they talk and write down to them, why they pander and then preach instead of inviting youngsters to stretch and

If kids don't get respect from the ones who teach them, they will turn to — and learn from — those who give them respect.

grow. I'm here to tell you, Here's how I think it nets out, whether it's church-based sex education or school-based world history: If, instead of asking kids to puzzle out solutions from the source material, we give them the answers and then say we're proud of them for remembering what we said—I think we get at least two things wrong.

1. We put our youngsters on intellectual welfare when we could be putting them to work.
2. We increase the temptation to cheat and lie.

Modern learners perform more like court reporters than farmers, writers, miners, inventors, filmmakers, explorers or detectives. Farmers plant and cultivate and harvest; court

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reporters write down what people say. Writers observe and reflect and

interpret and organize and communicate; court reporters read back what they wrote down. Miners dig for precious substances that have never been brought to light; court reporters regurgitate predigested words. Inventors come up with new-to-the-world ideas and processes and products; court reporters make records. Filmmakers tell stories; court reporters keep track of details. Explorers go where others do not go to witness what others do not see; court reporters wait for someone to say something. Detectives don't stop until they find the truth; court reporters don't stop until around five o'clock.

There's nothing wrong with court reporting. It's valuable, honorable work and I make light of it only to make a point. Because, actually, some of my best friends are court reporters. OK, that's a lie; I don't know any court reporters. Someday soon I won't be alone in this because nobody will know any court reporters, because their jobs are going to go away; outsourced to computer chips arrayed in microphones and video cameras, captured direct to hard drives, fully searchable by time-code and sound recognition software. It won't happen while I'm writing this book but by the time you read it, the job, *Court Reporter*, could be gone. So you're not doing your child any favors if you make a habit of saying you're proud of

her for learning more like a court reporter than a farmer, writer, miner, inventor, filmmaker, explorer or detective.

The problem is, school is currently structured to teach the wrong things for where we are inevitably headed as a culture. Students don't learn about the creative energy and satisfaction of *working*; they learn about the grudging rewards of *jobs*. Our message is embedded in our method. It's not, *Hooray! Look what you've learned!* It's *Hooray! Look at the grade you earned!* —A near-perfect metaphor for the subsistence jobs they'll get if they learn the wrong lessons; jobs where the rewards are not for creating value but for doing what they're told.

These days, the principal output of conventional education is the sort of compliant child who's well-schooled in keeping his head down, blending in, keeping his most thoughtful questions and opinions to himself and, most of all, doing what he's told (as far as you know).

This student is distinguished from his parents mainly by choices that simply don't matter much; things likely to produce mild regret (tattoos, piercings, ridiculous fashions about as

likely to evoke a blush response in 20 years as the ridiculous fashions his parents favored in their youth). None of these things is liable to generate significant change in the world as we know it, even if the image of Grandma Heather's great nieces gathered round to study her tats at the family reunion does promise a certain entertainment value: "*What was that, Grandma —before your skin got all saggy, I mean?*" Beyond that, and despite the remarkable changes swirling around the planet, there's not much reason to expect today's North American high school graduate will be any different than yesterday's model.

The thoughtful observer might say we like it that way.

Look, I know you don't control what happens at school and probably not what happens at church. The ground you control is the place where you talk with you own child about life, the universe and everything.

So, what if you made those conversations learner-centered instead of teacher-centered? What if you practiced the art of engaging your children in the task of learning for themselves?

What if you affirmed your kids for what they discover and how they learn to apply that knowledge with wisdom and skill to solve problems for themselves and their world instead of flattering them for earning good grades?

What if you stopped saying “I’m proud of you” and learned to say, “I’m impressed by your insight, your ingenuity, your perseverance, your progress?”

What if we all, in the hours we have with our children, taught them to learn, not just pass tests?

I think they and we would be better off. I think among other things they would learn, in the most positive and holy sense, to be proud of themselves.

At the risk of oversimplifying maybe it all starts with going out to your parking space and scraping off that *Proud Parent of a Jefferson Elementary Achiever* sticker. Just a

Good Sex: The Rest of the Story...

The same week our publisher got the angry letter about *Good Sex* there was a very different assessment by Tim Stafford in *Christianity Today*. (June 2004, Vol. 48, No. 6, Page 36):

Hancock and Powell's *Good Sex* aims to bring the church into this struggle. It offers a packet of materials for youth groups—a leader's guide, a student journal, and a video of discussion starters. The material would enable a novice volunteer to lead a meeting, but *Good Sex* really aims at veteran youth leaders who want to cobble together their own approach from a variety of resources.

Hancock and Powell explain that they aim for a process, not a confrontation. In seven lessons they cover a lot of biblical ground. The Bible studies are bracketed by open-ended discussion, in which kids think for themselves and speak freely. The intent is to create a church context in which sexuality gets explored thoughtfully and biblically, and kids reach their own conclusions.