

Homeschooling for Peace

by Guy Littman

Guy, Kathy, and Chris Littman live in Northern California's wine country. Guy is the Finance Officer of a Quaker sponsored retirement community, where Kathy also works part-time. Guy and Kathy have served in several positions with the HomeSchool Association of California. Chris is studying for his Certificate in Stagecraft at the local community college.

Peace cannot be kept by force. It can be achieved only by understanding.

Albert Einstein

The structure of world peace cannot be the work of one man [sic], or one party, or one nation ... it must be a peace which rests on the cooperative effort of the whole world.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

By the 16th of September, I had to do something. The Towers were down. My cousin was safe, riding the subway on his way to his 96th floor office in one of the Towers when the first plane hit. But lots of people weren't safe. Maybe none of us were. My body was sore from sobbing and fits of terror.

In Meeting for Worship on the 16th, the crowded Redwood Forest Quaker Meeting House was filled to overflowing, not just with people, but with a silence as rich as it was disturbing. Slowly, out of my tormented haze, the mantra came to me: "I am the hijacker. The hijacker is me." This intonation soon took me to a deep place of understanding. Not until I own the deep rage and powerlessness that dwells within me can I understand the horror of what humans can do to their fellow humans.

The pain did not go away. I knew more waste of lives still lay ahead. Revenge would be sought for revenge. The greed for power and our addiction to oil would keep the car-

nage going. But I began to feel united once again with my world and with my body. It was clear now that grace and love are all that keep me from being Abdulaziz Alomari, Nawaf al-Hamzi, or any of the other hijackers. They have names. We are brothers on this fragile earth.

I have been a pacifist and conscientious objector to the military as long as I can remember. I was raised Episcopalian and was active with the Episcopal peace fellowship. I was in the streets against Vietnam in Washington, DC. My wife, Kathy, shares my values and beliefs. She was in the streets of California around the farmworker issues. We now find ourselves in a community of peace seekers, the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. We once again find ourselves in the streets protesting the ongoing carnage of war.

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Kathy and I have one child, our son, Chris. When Chris enrolled in public school, we soon became aware of the problems we were going to have with his education. We were living on one wage, feeling that a second wage was an unfair consumption of the world's resources. Someone else needed that wage more than we. Kathy was, as a result, free to spend time first as a volunteer and teacher's aide in Chris' elementary school. The classes were huge. The kindergartens held 35 or more children, 40 percent of whom were learning to speak English as a second language.

Teachers were only able to have all the supplies and books they needed if they bought them with their own funds. Some classrooms, as a result, had more resources than others. It was the worst of times for public schools in suburban Northern California. Proposition 13 and the subsequent manipulations of state and local funds were pulling our schools into a quagmire of ineffectual education. Chris managed well for the first two years, but by second grade he was unchallenged and bored, headed for trouble we knew not where.

We decided to homeschool. It was the first year of the city school system's homeschool program. The program seemed like an easy transition from schooling, and so we enrolled. Chris stayed with the public school homeschool program through the 8th grade, and for his four years of high school we filed the necessary forms to establish our home as a small private school, as is the custom for many homeschooling families in this state.

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There were many challenges and blessings along the way. Kathy and I were determined to raise a pacifistic son. No guns or war toys in this house! As we soon discovered, though, guns (or the lack of them) became a source of tension and alienation in our home. Even without the peer input of the public school setting, playing with makeshift weapons was part of what our son did. It became clear over time that a ban on guns in the house completely undermined our efforts to teach Chris how persons live together peacefully. There was a drive to play with guns no matter the ban or my feelings. We needed to work out another way. Gradually Kathy and I found ground rules for war toys in the house that made for safe play while also respecting everyone's feelings. I was never easy with what sometimes felt like compromises, but I also realized that something deeper was going on.

I certainly remember playing with guns as a child myself, and yet I cannot remember not being a pacifist. I can remember the release that gunplay provided. I can also remember holding both strong beliefs about pacifism and the firm conviction that each person was valuable, be she friend or foe.

In their book *Natural Learning Rhythms*, Ba and Josette Luvmour describe something they called the Dance. The Dance is, as I understand it, an engagement with one's child that brings one face-to-face with one's own areas of growth and challenge. Dancing with my son meant finishing my own unfinished childhood issues, letting his growth inspire and expand my own growth and learning.

So it was with the Dance of the Guns. I could choose to be repressive and force my values, sometimes in near violent ways, onto my son. Or I could grow, relax, get a grip, and handle my own anger issues. It was the same inner process that I needed in the wake of September 11. Go inside. Face and own the ugly passions that lie within. Release and open to compas-

sion and understanding. I learned to trust the idea that peaceful modeling would be the most authentic path on which Chris and I could journey through life, a lesson learned in the Dance and essential to me now as then.

We found ways to channel the energy of an active young man that were constructive and that built self-esteem. Attracted to Japanese culture, at a homeschool multi-culture day Chris did a presentation on aspects of that culture. Someone told Kathy and Chris about a teacher of Japanese sword martial arts. Chris soon enrolled in Wind Mountain Academy and over the next seven years developed skills in Japanese wooden sword, traditional shaolin kung fu, and fencing. Chris' teacher also introduced him to the Society for Creative Anachronism, and Chris found he enjoyed engaging in role-playing jousts with armor and foam clad swords.

The martial arts evolved into history and political science studies, as well. Chris studied Japanese samurai society, European and American history, as well as the political and strategic aspects of various wars — the inevitable conflicts that arise from greed. What was true for me was true for Chris. The gunplay, the martial arts, the study of war and peace did not lead to a war-loving young man. Chris blossoms as a pacifist in his own right and in his own way. He would probably be a conscientious objector if the draft were to be reinstated. He needed to find his own path, and I needed to get out of the way. I wish I had been more creative about gunplay from the start, and I wish I had been a better model for dealing with anger in an outward, honest way. The way to honor my pacifism was for me to honor each of our interior journeys.

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The Dance took us to the mountains. Chris enrolled in homeschool programs provided by EnCompass (see Directory of Resources for more information) in Nevada City, California. There he was unfolding in ways we would not fully know about for several years. The ropes challenge courses, leadership training, and wilderness adventures lit a spark in him that has not gone out. His gifts for working with people were encouraged and sharpened. Chris then asked Kathy and me to get involved, and so we did. It was tough, it was delicious, and it changed how we are together. I never did get past the top of the ladder on the high ropes challenge courses. But we three began to live our lives more fully together and as individuals. More than anything else we did as a homeschooling family, learning to be truthful with each other and learning to stay connected with each other, brought a boy into manhood with peace in his heart and caring as his way of life.

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Over the eleven years we homeschooled, we evolved into unschoolers. Chris always had a long and intense attention

span. Unschooling gave him the space to follow his interests. He studied oboe, trombone, drums, and guitar. He got involved in children's theater. He and some of his male friends formed a science club that met for years. EnCompass took him to Baja California for intensive language and environmental studies. We worried all along the way. We would have changed some things; we were happy with many of the things we did or did not do.

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I have what I call my favorite troika of utopian novels: Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, Dorothy Bryant's *The Kin of Ata Are Waiting For You*, and Starhawk's *Fifth Sacred Thing*. I like them not only because they share my Northern California roots, but also, and more importantly, because they have stayed with me when I contemplate how I would like to see society take shape over my lifetime. I find it important that Callenbach inserted a ritualized war between groups of men belonging to an otherwise peace-loving, ecologically oriented society. The ritualized war must be played out to achieve true peace.

Our interior work — the work of the spirit in each of us, the recognition of the destructive quality each of us possesses, the compassionate knowing each other as siblings — is the basis for peace and nonviolence in the world. Chris is choosing his own path in the struggle for peace. He may or may not take an activist role. His studies of the root causes of war — the greed for wealth and power — will give him a basis for challenging the systems that make war inevitable. His skills in interior work will keep growing. I don't know if any other educational model would have prepared him so much to do his life work with openness to changing the world.

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Chris is now nearing the completion of his first year of college. The transition from homeschooling to the local community college went well. All through homeschooling we kept before us a strong desire to raise and educate our son to be strongly independent and cooperative, to be the caring, loving person he is, and to be ready to face the unknown decisions of our post September 11th world. Namaste.

A Stirring Call for Educational Freedom

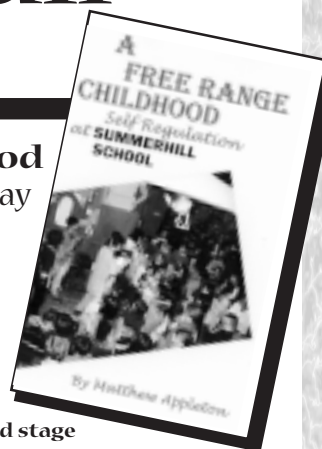
Matthew Appleton's **A Free Range Childhood** provides an updated, insightful account of everyday life at Summerhill School. This is the first major book to appear on the school since A.S. Neill's 1960 bestseller inspired an international movement for alternative education.

"Matthew was a popular member of staff, allowing Summerhill to work its magic on him...This is a candid view of his time with us—it is a very enjoyable read, and it raises some important, if uncomfortable, questions about modern methods of childrearing."

Zoe Readhead, Principal of Summerhill School and daughter of founder A.S. Neill

"The reappearance of Summerhill on the world stage couldn't be more timely. Matthew Appleton is an able guide, thanks to a prose filled with immediacy and passion. Old Neill would be proud."

Chris Mercogliano, Co-director of the Albany Free School, and author of *Making It Up As We Go Along: The Story of the Albany Free School*.



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