

## WALKABOUT



Searching for the Right Passage from Childhood and School By Maurice Gibbons

***This article about the challenge approach to self-directed learning was first published in the "Phi Delta Kappan" in May, 1974. It became the most requested reprint in the history of the "Kappan", won an excellence award from "Education Digest", and was reprinted in over a dozen books. For several years the "Kappan" produced a Walkabout Newsletter and Walkabout school programs appeared. Several of these are still active after nearly thirty years. In May, 1984, the "Kappan" published "Walkabout Ten Years Later" and reports from several active programs. The main features of Walkabout, in adapted form, now appear in a wide array of educational approaches. The version that follows is edited to about two thirds of the original article's length.***

A year ago I saw an Australian film called Walkabout which was so provocative -- and evocative -- I am still rerunning scenes from it in my mind. In the movie, two children escape into the desert-like wilderness of the outback when their father, driven mad by failure in business, attempts to kill them. Within hours they are exhausted, lost, and helpless. Inappropriately dressed in private school uniforms, unable to find food or protection from the blazing heat, and with no hope of finding their way back, they seem certain to die. At the last moment they are found and cared for by a young aborigine, a native Australian boy on his walkabout, a six-months-long endurance test during which he must survive alone in the wilderness and return to his tribe an adult, or die in the attempt. In contrast to the city children, he moves through the forbidding wilderness as if it were part of his village. He survives not only with skill but with grace and pride as well, whether stalking kangaroo in a beautiful but deadly ballet, seeking out the subtle signs of direction, or merely standing watch. He not only endures, he merges with the land, and he enjoys. When they arrive at the edge of civilization, the aborigine offers -- in as ritual dance -- to share his life with the white girl and boy he has befriended, but they finally leave him and the outback to return home. The closing scenes show them immersed again in the conventions of suburban life, but dreaming of their adventure, their fragment of a walkabout.

The movie is a haunting work of art. It is also haunting comment on education. What I find most provocative is the stark contrast between the aborigine's walkabout experience and the test of adolescent's readiness for adulthood in our own society. The young native faces a severe but extremely appropriate trial, one in which he must demonstrate the knowledge and skills necessary to make him a contributor to the tribe rather than a drain on its meager resources. By contrast, the young North American is faced with written examinations that test skills very far removed from the actual experience he will have in real life. He writes; he does not act. He solves familiar theoretical problems; he does not apply what he knows in strange but real situations. He is under direction in a protected environment to the end; he does not go out into the world to demonstrate that he is prepared to survive in, and contribute to, our society. His preparation is primarily for the mastery of content and skills in the disciplines and has little to do with reaching maturity, achieving adulthood, or developing fully as a person.

The isolation involved in the walkabout is also in sharp contrast to experience in our school system. In an extended period of solitude at a crucial stage of his development, the aborigine is confronted with a challenge not only to his competence, but also to his inner or spiritual resources. For his Western counterpart, however, school is always a crowd experience. Seldom separated from his class, friends or family, he has little opportunity to confront his anxieties, explore his inner resources, and come to terms with the world and his future in it. Certainly, he receives little or no training in how to deal with such issues. There are other contrasts, too, at least between the Australian boy and the urban children in the movie: his heightened sensory perception, instinct, and intuition, senses which seem numbed in them; his genuine, open, and empathic response toward them in saving their lives, and their inability to finally overcome their suspicious and defensive self-interest to save his. And above all there is his love and respect for the land even as he takes from it what he needs; and the willful destruction of animals and landscape which he observes in disbelief during his brushes with civilization.

Imagine for a moment two children, a young native looking ahead to his walkabout and a young North American looking ahead to grade 12 as the culminating experiences of all their basic preparation for adult life. The young native can clearly see that his life will depend on the skills he is learning and that after the walkabout his survival and his place in the community will depend upon them, too. What meaning and relevance such a goal must give to learning! What a contrast if he were preparing to write a test on survival techniques in the outback or the history of aboriginal weaponry. The native's Western counterpart looks forward to such abstractions as subjects and tests sucked dry of the richness of experience, in the end having little to do directly with anything critical or even significant that he anticipates being involved in as an adult -- except the pursuit of more formal education. And yet, is it not clear that what will matter to him and to his community -- is not his test-writing ability or even what he knows about, but what he feels, what he stands for, what he can do and will do, and what he is becoming as a person? And if the clear performative goal of the walkabout makes learning more significant, think of the effect it must have on the attitude and performance of the young person's parents and instructors, knowing that their skill and devotion will also be put to the ultimate test when the boy goes out on his own. What an effect such accountability could have on our concept of schooling and on parents' involvement in it!

For another moment, imagine these same two children reaching the ceremonies which culminate their basic preparation and celebrate their successful passage from childhood to adulthood, from school student to work and responsible community membership. When the aborigine returns, his readiness and worth have been clearly demonstrated to hand to his tribe. They need him. He is their hope for the future. It is a moment worth celebrating. What, I wonder, would an alien humanoid conclude about adulthood in our society if he had to make -- his deductions from a graduation ceremony announcing students' maturity: speeches, a parade of candidates -- with readings from their yearbook descriptions -- a formal dinner, expensive clothes and cars, graduates over here, adults over there, all-night parties, occasional drunkenness and sexual experience or flirtation with it, and spray painting "Grad '74". on a bridge or building. For many it is a memorable occasion -- a pageant for parents, a good time for the students. But what is the message in this celebration at this most important moment of school life and in this most important shared community experience? What values does it promote? What is it saying about 12 years of school experience? The achievement of what goals is being celebrated? What is it teaching about adulthood? How is it contributing to a sense of community? What pleasures and sources of challenge and fulfillment does it encourage the young to pursue? And if our alien humanoid could look into the students' deepest thoughts, what would he conclude about their sense of readiness to live full and independent lives, to direct their own growth, to contribute to society, and to deal with the issues that confront us as a world -- perhaps a universe -citizenry? I think his unprejudiced conclusions would horrify us.

In my opinion, the walkabout could be a very useful model to guide us in redesigning our own rites of passage. It provides a powerful focus during riteing, a challenging demonstration of necessary competence, a profound maturing experience, and an enrichment of community life. By comparison, preparation and trial in our society are incomplete, abstract, and impersonal; and graduation is little more than a party celebrating the end of school. I am not concluding that our students should be sent into the desert, the wilderness, or the Arctic for six months -- even though military service, Outward Bound, and such organizations as the Boy Scouts do feature wilderness living and survival training. What is

appropriate for a primitive subsistence society is not likely appropriate for one as complex and technically sophisticated as ours. But the walkabout is a useful analogy, a way of making the familiar strange so we can examine our practices with fresh eyes. And it raises the question I find fascinating: **What would an appropriate and challenging walk-about for students in our society be like?** Let me restate the problem more specifically. What sensibilities, knowledge, attitudes, and competencies are necessary for a full and productive adult life? What kinds of experience will have the power to focus our children's energy on achieving these goals? And what kind of performance will demonstrate to the student, the school, and the community that the goals have been achieved?

The walkabout model suggests that our solution to this problem must measure up to a number of criteria. First of all, it should be experiential and the experience should be real rather than simulated; not knowledge about aerodynamics and aircraft, not passing the link-trainer test, but the experience of solo flight in which the mastery of relevant abstract knowledge and skills is manifest in the performance. Second, it should be a challenge which extends the capacities of the student as fully as possible, urging him to consider every limitation he perceives in himself as a barrier to be broken through; not a goal which is easily accessible, such as playing an instrument he already plays competently, but a risky goal which calls for a major extension of his talent, such as earning a chair in the junior symphony or a gig at a reputable discotheque. Third, it should be a challenge the student chooses for himself. As Margaret Mead has often pointed out in "Growing Up in Samoa", for instance the major challenge for young people in our society is making decisions. In primitive societies there are few choices; in technological societies like ours there is a bewildering array of alternatives in life-style, work, politics, possessions, recreation, dress, relationships, environment, and so on. Success in our lives depends on the ability to make appropriate choices. Yet, in most schools, students make few decisions of any importance and receive no training in decision making or in the implementation and reassessment cycle which constitutes the basic growth pattern. Too often, graduation cuts them loose to muddle through for themselves. In this walkabout model, teachers and parents may help, but in the Rogerian style -- by facilitating the student's decision making, not by making the decisions for him. The test of the walkabout, and of life, is not what he can do under a teacher's direction, but what the teacher has enabled him to decide and to do on his own.

In addition, the trial should be an important learning experience in itself. It should involve not only the demonstration of the student's knowledge, skill, and achievement, but also a significant confrontation with himself: his awareness, his adaptability to situations, his competence, and his nature as a person. Finally, the trial and ceremony should be appropriate, appropriate not as a test schooling which has gone before, but as a transition from school learning to the life which will follow afterwards. And the completion of the walkabout should bring together parents, teachers, friends, others to share the moment with him, to confirm his achievement, and to consolidate the spirit community in which he is a member. Keeping these features of the walkabout analogy in mind, let now ask the question, What might a graduation ceremony in this mode be like in a North American high school?

The time is September. The place, a classroom somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. Margaret, a student who has just finished grade 12 is making a multimedia presentation to a number of relatives, over 20 of her classmates, several friends from other schools, some teachers, the mayor, and two reporters she worked with during the year. Watching intently are a number of younger students already thinking about their own walkabouts. Margaret has been thinking about this moment since grade 8 and working on her activities seriously since the night the principal met with all the grade 10 students and their parents to outline and discuss the challenges. Afterwards she and her mother sat up talking about her plans until early morning. She is beginning with the first category, Adventure, which involves a challenge to her daring and endurance. The film and slides Margaret is showing trace her trip through the Rockies following the path of Lewis and Clark in their exploration of the Northwest. Her own journal and maps are on display along with a number of objects -- arrowheads and the like -- which she found enroute. The names of her five companions -- she is required to cooperate with a team in at least one, but no more than two of the five categories -- are on display. In one corner of the room she has arranged a set of bedroom furniture -- a loft-desk-library module, a rocking chair, and a coffee-table treasure-chest -- designed, built, and decorated as her work in the Creative Aesthetic field. On the walls are photographs and charts showing pollution rates of local industries which she recorded during the summer and used in

a report to the Community Council. The three newspaper articles about the resulting campaign against pollution-law violators, and her part in it, are also displayed to give proof that she has completed the third category, Community Service.

Margaret, like many of the other engaged in a Logical Inquiry which related closely to her practical work. Her question was, What structural design and composition has the best ratios of strength, ease of construction, and economy of materials? Using charts of the various designs and ratios, she describes her research and the simple experiment she developed to test her findings, and she demonstrates the effectiveness of the preferred design by performing pressure tests on several models built from the same material. After answering a few questions from a builder in the crowd, she shows how the problem grew out of her studies in architecture for the Practical Vocational category. Passing her sketch books around and several summer-cabin designs she drew up, she goes on to describe her visits to a number of architects for assistance, then unveils a model of the summer camp she designed for her family and helped them build on their Pacific Coast property. Slides of the cabin under construction complete her presentation. A teacher asks why she is not performing any of the skill's she developed, as the challenge requires, and she answers that her committee waived that requirement because the activities she chose all occurred in the field.

As Margaret's friends and relatives gather around to congratulate her, down the hall Ken is beginning his presentation with a report on his two-month Adventure alone in a remote village in France where he took a laboring job and lived with a French family in which no one spoke English. The idea arose during a discussion of his proposal to travel when the teacher on his committee asked him to think of a more daring challenge than sight-seeing in a foreign country. A professor in modern languages has been invited by the school to attend the presentations, converse with him in French, and comment on his mastery. Later, with his own guitar accompaniment, Ken will sing a medley of three folk songs which he has composed himself. Then, to meet the requirements of the Community Service category, he plans to report on the summer-care program which he initiated and ran, without pay, for preschool children in the community. The director of the local Child Health and Welfare Service will comment upon the program. Finally, Ken will turn to the car engine which stands, partially disassembled, on a bench at the back of the room. His Logical Inquiry into the problem, "What ways can the power output of an engine be most economically increased?" is summarized in a brief paper to be handed out and illustrated with modifications he has made on the display engine with the help of a local mechanic and a shop teacher. He will conclude his presentation by reassembling the engine as quickly as he can.

If we entered any room anywhere in the school, similar presentations would be under way; students displaying all kinds of alternatives they selected to meet the five basic challenges:

**Adventure:** a challenge to the student's daring, endurance, and skill in an unfamiliar environment.

**Creativity:** a challenge to explore, cultivate, and express his own imagination in some aesthetically pleasing form.

**Service:** a challenge to identify a human need for assistance and provide it; to express caring without expectation of reward.

**Practical Skill:** a challenge to explore a utilitarian activity, to learn the knowledge and skills necessary to work in that field, and to produce something of use.

**Logical Inquiry:** a challenge to explore one's curiosity, to formulate a question or problem of personal importance, and to pursue an answer or solution systematically and, wherever appropriate, by investigation.

We would learn about such **Adventures** as a two-week solo on the high river living off the land,

parachute drops, rock climbing expeditions, mapping underground eaves, an exchange with a Russian student, kayaking a grade three river to the ocean, scuba-diving exploits, sailing ventures, solo airplane and glider flights, ski-touring across glaciers, a month-long expedition on the Pacific Crest trail, and some forms of self-exploratory, meditative, or spiritual adventures. We would see such Aesthetic works as fashion shows of the students' own creations, sculpture and painting, jewelry, tooled leather purses, anthologies of poetry, a humor magazine, plays written and directed by the author, a one-man mime show, political cartoons, a Japanese garden featuring a number of home-cultivated bonsai trees, rugs made of home-dyed fibers, illuminated manuscripts, gourmet foods, computer art, a rock-group and a string quartet, a car-body design and paint job, original films, a stand-up comic's art, tapes of natural-sound music, and a display of blown glass creatures. In the Service category students would be reporting on volunteer work with the old, ill, infirm, and retarded; a series of closed-circuit television hookups enabling children immobilized in the hospital to communicate with each other, a sports program for the handicapped, a Young Brother program for the retarded, local Nader's Raiders kinds of studies and reports, construction of playgrounds, hiking trails and landscaped parks, cleanups of eyesore lots, surveys of community needs and opinions, collecting abandoned cars to sell as scrap in order to support deprived families abroad, shopping and other trips for shut-ins, and a hot-meals-on-wheels program for pensioners.

In the **Practical** realm we might see demonstrations of finely honed secretarial skills, ocean-floor plant studies, inventions and new designs of many kinds, the products of new small businesses, a conservation program to save a locally endangered species, stock market trend analyses and estimates, boats designed and built for sale, a course taught by computer assisted instruction, small farms or sections of farms developed and managed, a travel guidebook for high school students, a six-inch telescope with hand ground lenses and a display of photographs taken through it, a repair service for gas furnaces and other home appliances, and a collection of movie reviews written for the local suburban newspaper.

And we would hear about **Logical Inquiries** into such questions as, How does a starfish bring about the regeneration of a lost arm? What does one experience when meditating that he doesn't experience just sitting with his eyes closed? What is the most effective technique in teaching a dog obedience? How do you navigate in space? Does faith-healing work, and if so, how? How many anomalies, such as the ancient Babylonian battery, are there in our history and how can they be explained? What folk and native arts and crafts have developed in this area? What are the 10 most important questions man asks but can't answer? What is insanity -- where is the line that separates it from sanity? and, What natural means can I use to protect my crops most effectively from disease and insects? All day long such presentations occur throughout the school, each student with his own place and time, each demonstrating his unique accomplishment, each with an opportunity to be successful in his own way.

At the end of the day the families, their children, and their friends meet to celebrate this moment. The celebration takes a variety of forms: picnics, dinner at a restaurant, meals at home -- some cooked by the graduating students -- and buffets which all guests help to provide. In some instances two or three families join together. The ceremonies are equally varied, according to taste and imagination; some are religious, some raucous, some quite quietly together. In each the student is the center of the occasion. Parents and guests respond to the graduate's presentation. Teachers drop by to add their comments. And the student talks about his plans for the future. Some may find ways to announce the young person's entry into a new stage of independence and responsibility, helping him to clarify and pursue his next life goal. To conclude, there may be a school or community celebration to which all are invited for music, singing, and dancing. The only formal event would be a presentation of bound volumes of the student's reports on their accomplishments to the principal and mayor for the school and the community libraries. My own preference would be to include, also, some ritual experience of the family being together at the moment of its coming apart, or some shared experience of life's mystery; perhaps a midnight walk or coming together to watch the dawn -- the world beginning again, beginning still.

Preparation for the walkabout challenge can be provided in various degrees of intensity, depending upon how committed the school staff is to creating a curriculum which focuses upon personal development:

- » It can be an extracurricular activity in which all planning and work is done during out-of-school time.
- » It can be one element of the curriculum which is included in the schedule like a course, giving students time for planning, consultation, and training.
- » It can be the core of the grade 12 program, one in which all teaching and activity is devoted to preparing for trial.
- » It can be the goal around which a whole new curriculum is designed for the school, or for a school-within-the-school staffed by interested teachers for interested students.

If the school is junior secondary -- this concept can readily be adapted to elementary schooling, too -- students and parents should be notified of the graduation trial upon entry in grade 8, perhaps by a single announcement with an accompanying descriptive brochure. Trial committees -- including the student, the parents, and a teacher -- should be organized for meetings, likely as early as grade 9, to guide the student's explorations of possible challenges, so that serious planning and the preparation of formal proposals can begin in grade 10. To make the nature of the walkabout vivid, the committee should involve students in a series of "Experience Weeks" during which they would be out of school pursuing activities, first of the school's design and later of their own design, as trial runs. During these early years the student could also benefit from association with "big brothers" in the school, older students in more advanced stages of preparation who can help their younger colleagues, with considerable benefits for themselves as well. The committee would also be responsible for helping the student make his own choices and find the resources and training necessary to accomplish them; and by their interest, they would also help the student to develop confidence in his decisions and commitment to his own goals. A survey of student plans during any of the senior years would give the staff the information necessary to plan the most useful possible training, which could be offered in mini courses -- one day each week, for instance -- or in a semester or a year long curriculum devoted to preparation for trial. If students were required to write a two-page report on each challenge, a collection of these reports could provide an accumulating resource for younger candidates as well as a permanent "hall of accomplishment" for graduates. In such ways the walkabout challenge could also become a real focus for training in such basic skills as speaking, writing, and use of the media. These are only a few of the ways this proposal can be implemented and integrated with other aspects of school life.

I am interested in the Walkabout challenge because it promises what I most want for my own children. No one can give life meaning for them, but there are a number of ways we can help them to give life meaning for themselves. Central to that meaning is their sense of who they are in the scheme of things and their confidence that, no matter what the future holds, they can decide and act, that they can develop skills to be justifiably proud of, that they can cross the most barren outback with, a certain grace and find even in simple moments a profound joy. I hope that by exploring what they can do and feel they will come to know themselves better, and with that knowledge that they will move through today with contentment and will look forward to tomorrow with anticipation. I think a challenging walkabout designed for our time and place can contribute to that kind of growth.