

UNSCHOOLING AND HOW I BECAME LIBERATED: THE TEENAGE LIBERATION HANDBOOK, QUITTING SCHOOL AND GETTING A REAL LIFE AND EDUCATION

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Abstract

Twenty-five years ago, Grace Llewellyn, a school teacher from Colorado, published *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get A Real Life and Education*. As a teenager struggling with many issues, including bullying, social isolation and poverty, I concluded that school was largely contributing to my misery — thanks to this book, I finally had the clarity and courage to leave school. This is a retrospective and narrative inquiry on my experiences growing up and the book that has helped transform my life and the lives of other unschoolers.

Keywords: Unschooling, Homeschooling, The Teenage Liberation Handbook

Great books often have provocative or intriguing titles. When I first began my journey to unschooling as an unhappy middle schooler, I came across Grace Llewellyn's *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How To Quit School and Get A Real Life and Education* during a search of the Toronto Public Library catalogue. The book ended up changing my life. On the 25th anniversary of its publishing, I look back at how a former middle school English teacher came to write one of the most influential books on unschooling and how her book helped to transform my life for the better.

I grew up as a child of mixed ethnicity in Toronto, Canada. My Indo-Guyanese mother immigrated to Canada in 1973, working as a general office assistant. She eventually met my father, a working-class Irish-Quebecker working in Toronto. They got married in the nineteen-eighties and I came along soon after. As a toddler, my mother had considered homeschooling, corresponding with Canadian homeschooling advocate Wendy Priesnitz, but decided against it because she worked part-time. It wasn't until I was older that I would find this out and discover the idea of unschooling.

My childhood had some happy moments, but far more sad ones. At home, my father was abusive towards my mother and me. My earliest memory of my father is of him shoving green peas down my throat because I refused to eat them due to their atrocious taste. The abuse made the decision easy for my mother, when my maternal grandmother passed away, to take me to Guyana so she could help care for my aunt who had bi-polar disorder and my aunt's child. Living in Guyana allowed me to experience a level of freedom and connection that cannot be easily experienced by a Western urban raised child. Time goes by at a different pace, people aren't as rushed or beholden to a schedule. This allowed my mother and others to spend more time with me. The setting gave me more freedom to explore and interact with other children in the neighbourhood. I spent my first year in school in Guyana. My clearest memories of Guyana involve exploration, both on my own and with my mother, and interactions with animals and interesting people. Returning to Canada was a culture shock. Living in the inner-suburbs of Toronto, there weren't as many children around in the local park, playground or the grassy area outside my apartment building. I went from daily socialization in Guyana with many people and other kids, to an apartment that felt cold and isolating — with my only regular source of socialization coming from school. My parents were constantly fighting at home. Adding to the turmoil was the adoption of my cousin from my mom's sister, and my mother, out of loneliness, joining her sister in becoming a member of the Jehovah's Witness, a Christian doomsday sect. This turmoil continued until my parents finally separated, eventually divorcing and forcing me to endure a five-year bitter custody dispute between them.

The custody dispute, which lasted for five years, left both of my parents broke financially and their souls broken. To make the situation worse, we were at the height of the recession. Both my parents lost their jobs and were unemployed or in precarious employment for years afterwards. In school, I was a rambunctious child, full of energy and curiosity. I was constantly getting in trouble with my teachers — it was suggested multiple times by teachers and school officials that I should get tested for Attention Deficit Disorder. Unfortunately, testing was expensive and more than either of my parents could afford. In grade three, at the age of nine, I was diagnosed as being a gifted student and switched schools to attend the gifted program, however at the new school, which was in an affluent neighbourhood, I was increasingly bullied and socially isolated. During lunchtime, I would often be hunted down and chased by bullies. I would run and hide far from the school returning late often. On one occasion the bullies managed to gather a mob of over 100 students to hunt me down to beat me up — other than a few isolated scuffles, I managed to escape the mob that day. I stood out as a target for numerous reasons: because I could not afford new clothes, for being a Jehovah's Witness who would refuse to participate in singing the anthem or holiday activities, and having a Caribbean accent. The final straw for me came when a group of bullies attempted to lift me up and throw me over an indoor bridge in the school. I became unable to learn in school because I was constantly terrified of being bullied. Increasingly my education would occur at home, through books and documentaries on television. I grew to resent formal schooling for its failure to provide me an education in a manner suited to my temperament, learning style and needs.

If things couldn't get worse, someone close to me began sexually abusing me. My personal struggles were becoming too much for my young soul to bear. At twelve, I was avoiding attending school until I was admitted to the hospital and diagnosed with childhood clinical depression. Soon after, my mother and I were almost left homeless when a newly elected Conservative government in the Province of Ontario slashed welfare rates. I felt that the system had failed me on so many levels — the scapegoating politics employed by Conservatives that targeted welfare recipients, an education system ill-equipped to protect students from bullying or deal with emotional trauma, a legal system that allows for the escalation and prolongment of custody disputes to the detriment of the child involved. I felt hopeless and trapped by my situation.

At my lowest, I knew deep down that something had to change. I had always known about homeschooling and I became increasingly attached to the idea. I pictured the character Lisa Simpson from *The Simpsons* as the ideal persona for a homeschooler, going on her own to the library, museum, park or protest, making friends on her own with adults, and starting her own pet projects. This was the life I desired. I started seeking out information on homeschooling. It was then I found *The Teenage Liberation Handbook* during a search of the catalogue at the public library.

Grace Llewellyn was similarly frustrated with her experiences in the education system, albeit from the teacher perspective witnessing the hardships and struggles of her students, which ultimately led to her leaving school teaching altogether. Grace Llewellyn's own experiences as a teacher, in inner city Oakland, California and suburban Boise, Idaho, gave her contrasting experiences that demonstrated to her the failures of the mandatory education system. She began contemplating starting her own independent school, imagining a group of students who go on field-trips, work on collective art projects and engage in similar activities. Llewellyn, spurred on by her dissatisfaction with the education system, came across John Holt's work on homeschooling. She first attempted to teach at a small private school instead of starting her own independent school, but found the same problems of surveillance and control of students manifested themselves in private schools as well. Echoing similar observations of educational critics who came before her, such as John Holt (1974) and Ivan Illich (1971), she talks about her experiences, observations and thoughts regarding the idea of school as a tool for controlling people.

The Teenage Liberation Handbook is divided into four parts: why to consider leaving school, how to prepare to leave, what to do educationally once you've left school, and finding or creating good work. Llewellyn (1997) states, "This book is built on the belief that life is wonderful and schools are stifling" (p. 16). Llewellyn uses the power of stories and personal narratives, both as a student and an educator, to illustrate the ills of schooling and issuing a call for freedom. One by one, Llewellyn goes through the compelling reasons why to leave schooling. She explains why school is authoritarian and controlling in nature, ultimately turning us into complacent and passive citizens. She uses clear and understandable language that is accessible to teenagers. She compares the freedom of students to previous struggles, urging the reader to break free of their bonds. Schools tell us what to do with our time, control what we can wear and when we can

speak, eat, and even use the washroom; Llewellyn (1997) goes on, “You are told what to do, think and say for six hours each day” (p. 34). While reading the book, and reflecting on my own experiences, I came to conclude that the controlling nature of schooling kills the joy of learning for most students, preventing us from learning what we want and finding our true passions and talents.

As a current student of education, what is of particular interest to me is the difficult situation that teachers are put in within the education system. Teachers, who mostly are well-intentioned and eager to teach successfully, are limited in what they can do because of school administrators, education policies and wider societal issues, like poverty or abuse at home, that play out in school (Llewellyn, 1997). Llewellyn dedicates an entire chapter to the bind that teachers face given the condition of compulsory schooling.

Addressing the transition from formal schooling to unschooling, Llewellyn (1997) encourages students to take a break, stating: “Before you can start your new way of life, you have to let the old one go” (p. 131). She comforts us that it is ok if we binge watch television after first leaving school. She reassures us that one can have a social life outside of school and that we can find meaning and pleasurable ways of making a living. Llewellyn (1997) talks about the “zillions of alternatives” for how we can live our lives and make a living, guiding us through the different options, including attending college, apprenticeships, and starting a business (p. 14).

I read her book in tandem with Robert Kiyosaki’s first book, *If You Want To Be Rich and Happy, Don’t Go To School?* Kiyosaki makes similar arguments to Llewellyn, though using humour and examples of successful businesspersons. In the book, Kiyosaki tells a story at the beginning of his book that particularly influenced me. The story is about an encounter with a high school classmate named Glen, who was struggling financially, and his family. Glen was puzzled by Kiyosaki’s success, stating, “I don’t understand. In high school, you were the class clown and your grades weren’t so great, as I remember” (Kiyosaki, 1993, p. 30). Kiyosaki (1993) later replies, “The main reason I’m very happy with my life, and don’t ever worry about money is that I have learned how to fail. That’s the reason I have been able to make progress in my life” (p. 31). Schooling, by taking away the opportunity for students to learn from their mistakes, takes away the excitement of learning; instead, school creates an atmosphere of fear and boredom by focusing on grades and the memorization of knowledge (Kiyosaki, 1993). Kiyosaki (1993) states, “Education leaves out the crucial process of questioning what you don’t know... learning is simply a process of making mistakes, finding out what you don’t know and correcting... when schools teach the belief that mistakes are wrong, we end up robbing students of the skills they need to gain more knowledge” (p. 33). Kiyosaki’s book focuses on changing the way we think, aiming for us to unlearn the dangerous ideas, attitudes and emotions that we learned in formal schooling — all with the aim of improving our happiness and wealth. Kiyosaki would later go on to become globally famous for his Rich Dad, Poor Dad book series.

Together, these books gave me the courage to finally leave school. Initially, school officials told me homeschooling would not be a possible option for me, as my mother was a single parent and did not have a university degree. Not willing to take no for an answer, at the age of 14, I hired a lawyer through a legal-aid clinic called Justice for Children and Youth and negotiated with the local school board to leave school. After years of struggling with bullying, social isolation and boredom in school, I was finally free.

Llewellyn (1997) warns of the judgment of parents or others in the wider community when you leave school. She has a chapter in the book that provides advice on how to broach the topic with parents. I was fortunate to have a mom familiar with homeschooling. However, there was still hesitation on her part, being a single mother struggling to pay the bills and the worry she had that I would become further socially isolated. She reluctantly agreed as she knew my heart was set on the idea.

Llewellyn's book introduced me to ideas that are dangerous, in that they are liberating and challenge many of the dominant narratives in education. Dissatisfied with my own education, I had the feeling throughout my school years that something was fundamentally wrong with the education system. Llewellyn (1997) gave voice to the dissatisfaction that myself and many others have with schooling — she states that: “I wrote it for teenagers because they are the experts on their own lives” (p. 11). Increasingly, more people are choosing homeschooling. While experts have always disagreed on the official number of homeschoolers in Canada and the United States, one study says that the number of registered homeschoolers increased 29% between 2007 and 2012 in Canada (Van Pelt, 2015). Homeschooling is also increasingly in the public eye, as many celebrities are choosing it as an option for their children. Willow Smith, daughter of actors Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith and a well-known pop singer, recently gave an interview to the New York Times where she said: “I went to school for one year. It was the best experience but the worst experience. The best experience because I was, like, ‘Oh, now I know why kids are so depressed.’ But it was the worst experience because I was depressed” (Wu, 2014).

When I finally left school for good to start my unschooling journey, it was not perfect, as Llewellyn warns in her book. I remained somewhat socially isolated, but at least it was on my own terms — a Walden-esque sojourn allowing me to heal and find myself. While I was provided a tutor by the school board for math and English, most of my learning occurred informally. I would spend my time going to libraries, local museums and galleries, attending free workshops and courses, volunteering and exploring my city — all things Llewellyn mentions in the book. There are so many opportunities for learning within our own communities if we only slowed down and stopped to look. I was fortunate that the Toronto Public Library is one of the largest library systems in the world. I would borrow over a hundred items each week — books, DVDs, CDs. I learned what I wanted — education, business, philosophy, politics, spirituality, health, cooking, relationships, psychology, poetry, self-improvement, geography, and history. I would experiment in the kitchen, following recipes in the cookbooks I borrowed to try different cuisines from around the world. Thanks to the large selection of music available at the

library, I developed eclectic taste in music. I even started writing a book reviewing the new age and world music CDs I had borrowed. I learned about how to start and operate a business and a non-profit organization. Eventually I would end up founding two non-profit organizations.

I still endured the after effects of my experiences for years to come, including battling social anxiety and depression. Eventually though, for the first time in a long time, I found happiness as I came to peace with my past and where I was currently in my life. In my early twenties, I enrolled in university — something I previously swore that I would never do because of my experiences with formalized schooling — after being pressured by my best friend who had recently enrolled herself. Not having had anyone in my family previously attend university, I held an image of the institution as rigid and snobby — where students would fall asleep of exhaustion while studying at the library. I was surprised by the greater freedom afforded to students in post-secondary education when compared to primary or secondary school. The program I selected, Environmental Studies at York University, allowed me the freedom to chart the course of my education thanks to its founding philosophy of interdisciplinarity and self-directed learning (Leduc and Morley, 2015; Carrothers, Kline & Livingston, 1988). I quickly learned how to navigate the post-secondary environment, which allowed me to take advantage of various student services, such as student advising and scholarships. I succeeded beyond my expectations and went on to graduate Summa Cum Laude from the program, before continuing to graduate school.

There is magic to Llewellyn's book, as she presupposes and answers every question or doubt you may have about leaving school. You don't have to be 'gifted', you won't end up working a dead-end job, and you can have a life after schooling. As Llewellyn (1997) states in the beginning of her book, "This book is a wild card, a shot in the dark, a hopeful prayer" (p. 16). Indeed, her book was my shot in the dark, my hopeful prayer. Her book changed my life and led me down whimsical and satisfying paths in life for which I will be eternally grateful.

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