

RENEWING THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT: A REAL LIFE STORY OF RURAL CHANGE

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This is a real life story of rural change. It is about how Robert Owen and Values Based Accelerated Learning turned upside down the thoughts of small rural community and three generations of women about how people learn. He introduced us into an exciting new world of possibilities, how every child could thrive on education if material was delivered in the child's preferred learning style. So many things fell into place. We felt that we could go forward into a brave, new, happier world of education.

SONG 'NIGHTMARE EDUCATION'

I will speak first about my background and why I had Merri-May and how her education did not go according to plan, my traditional plan that is. Then what happened when Values Based Accelerated Learning came into our lives and changed our way of thinking. Then Merri-May might like to comment on how she felt about it all.

For the first half of my life I was a Novocastrian, not a religion, just that I was born and bred in the fair city of Newcastle just north of Sydney on the coast of NSW. I used to tell my children that I was a war baby and how the city was shelled until one asked, "Which war, Mum, the Anglo-Boer War?"

I think I was born into a lucky generation, benefiting from the good economic times after the war, living in a pleasant suburb and being able to walk to school without too much worry about traffic or strangers or drugs. My father worked at the BHP and my mother looked after her family which included her father, who lived with us and various elderly relatives who lived nearby in the country. It was a parochial and simple childhood but a happy enough one.

I fitted into the school system and the teachers usually wrote nice comments on my reports. Books, taking notes and learning things were a pleasure. Spelling was never a problem.

Perhaps I did read too many Norah of Billabong books about the romance of the outback. In 1966, I married a pair of riding boots and went to live in a sheep growing area 'back of Bourke' on a property called "Weilmoringle". Half way across the NSW Queensland border. (map). This sheep property encompasses an Aboriginal settlement, school, store and post office, all within a stone's throw of the homestead. (If you are good at throwing and can find one. Newcomers are always betting that they cannot throw a stone across the Darling. They always lose this bet as on the black soil plains it is virtually impossible to find a stone).

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The same black soil plains turn to a quagmire in wet weather, adding to the isolation. There are no all weather roads out of Weilmoringle so it is always difficult to make plans. Arrangements are always made, "weather permitting".

It was rather a cultural shock for me at first with no electricity, a fuel stove, mail only twice a week if it was not wet, everyone knowing our business and so on. I soon learnt that if I wanted anything done I had to do it myself and became reasonably handy with hammer and nails, mowing the lawn, shooting snakes in the house etc. but I never learnt to cut up wood, kill a sheep or milk cows on the advice of my mother-in-law.

We had two boys who went to the local school and later on to boarding school. They seemed to like reading and learning and did well and their Mummy was proud of them.

However in 1975 I decided to do something for International Women's' Year, so I had a dear little baby girl we called Merri-May. She was such a joy but always very active. She liked to be outside, doing something, like riding a motor bike or swimming in the river. She was never one to sit still and look at pictures or read. I found her activity a bit physically tiring at times but put it down to being an older mother. I was heading towards forty when I had Merri-May. I had to participate in so many of her games, she had to help with so many of my jobs. I thought that it was probably a case of atavism, a reversion to an ancestral type, but we did not have to go back many generations, my daughter was so like her grandmother.

Life pottered along smoothly enough until Merri-May went to school. The local school had a majority of Aboriginal children and at times she was the only European child there. She spent a lot of time playing in the bush with her Aboriginal friend Pattie. They gathered wild food and fished and made up stories. This suited Merri-May down to the ground. However as time went by it became more and more obvious that Merri-May was having trouble with her school work. She could not spell and did not like reading. We tried extra homework so I could help at home but that was a disaster as I would end up shrieking, "but can't you see how to spell that!"

The extra school work only fine tuned her great ability to create diversions. I spoke to the teacher about this and he said that one day he had found himself and the whole class outside watching the swallows migrate before they had finished their lessons. The children had a knack of taking the teacher's mind off school work.

We tried lots of other strategies to no avail. We had eye tests. The Doctor said Merri-May had wonderful long vision and would make a good pirate as she could spot ships on the horizon before anyone else, that appealed to her no end. (Apparently many Australians have this wonderful long vision which make them such good bushmen, they could spot the stock at great distances).

I thought of taking Merri-May out of school and teaching her myself but she assured me we were not compatible and of course she was right. At least she had company her own age at school and one frets about lack of social contact in the bush.

The only day Merri-May really like at school was National Aborigines Day when all the Aboriginal children had a holiday. That day she came top in everything, even spelling!

I began to feel I had failed as a Mother, it was an appalling thought as I used to be such a perfectionist. I fretted and fumed at my poor daughter, quite the wrong thing to do. The child did not seem unintelligent but what sort of a future would she had in this modern world without a proper education and not being able to spell. Bad spelling is so frowned upon. My husband suffered for much of his life from petro-chemical poisoning so I felt I could not worry him too much about my problems and Merri-Mays.

The rural scene was falling apart and she could not rely on us to support her and we made the hard decision to send her away to boarding school for her final primary year. It was like putting her into prison. She endured it stoically as many country children do, but she had to repeat the year. This made her older than the other girls of her next year and she lost the first set of friends she had made at boarding school. Thanks to a patient and understanding teacher she did leave primary school being able to write a simple sentence. The spelling was still woeful!

Merri-May proceeded into the competitive, academic atmosphere of secondary school. Probably the sport and drama the school offered pulled her through a few years there but she was not very happy. I felt helpless and useless. I did not even had to read her reports as I knew what they would say about the spelling.

One day when she was sixteen she rang up and told me to sit down as she had something to tell me. She had checked out the hockey teams from other visiting boarding schools and had chosen a school she thought would suit her better. It did not have a speech day. The girls were caring and sharing and were given scope to develop their own talents in their own way and regarded in their own areas of expertise.

One goes along with a sixteen year old. We reckoned that it would be her decision and she would have to live with the consequences and we had not found a happy education for her so far. So we went to an interview at the new school. They were short of beds but Merri-May said that did not matter she would bring a sway and camp on the lawn. They fitted her in.

While not neglecting the academic side of things, this school did tend to foster talents of a non academic kind and only wrote kind comments on her reports. However there was a lot of images of herself that Merri-May had to undo. Her self-esteem was very low and she was convinced that she was stupid. No matter that she could play the guitar and compose a musical for her drama group. At least she decided to stay at school until final year but she did not expect to get through her HSC.

Then one day I had a phone call from Merri-May's grandmother. In the evening my ninety year old Mum ensconces herself in her four poster ancestral bed and listens to the wireless. She had just heard Caroline Jone's programme. " A Search for Meaning " with Robert Owen and others. She was very excited and said that this sounded like something which would help Merri-May.

My Mother confessed that she had been literally tortured as a child at a small rural school pre World War One. She could not spell and was often forced to stand in the corner with the number of her spelling mistakes printed on her forehead, usually about 12, while the rest of the class laughed and called her a convict. She went away to boarding school but found it very trying. She seemed incapable of learning, her parents took her out of school at an early age and she worked at home and mustered cattle with her father and looked after an ailing mother until she died. A late marriage produced a move to the city and my sister and myself.

No wonder my mother was so sympathetic about Merri-May's problems. All the horrible memories of her own education had revived in her concern for her grand daughter. It seemed that the system still had not changed enough to cater for all children and their learning needs even eighty years after my Mother's experiences.

I wrote to the ABC for the Caroline Jones tape that my Mother had heard. It was a revelation. Different children had different learning preferences. So many things fell into place. Of course Merri-May couldn't see what I could, she might hear and learn, or learn by doing something but her preference was not visual and showing her words was really not a great deal of help to her.

How could I bring these new ideas to Merri-May and our little rural community? They sounded too good to keep to oneself and I knew other mothers had problems with some of their children on distance education. We needed Robert Owen.

I rang up Robert and, probably cried, and told him all about Merri-May and our problems and how many mother's in our area had trouble teaching their own children if they were not into books and reading. He very kindly offered to come to Weilmoringle and run a two day workshop for the ICPA. A miracle.

The ICPA as you probably know is the Isolated Children's Parents Association. We have always supported the organisation and the local members rallied around and raised Robert's fare and it was arranged for him to stay with us. He very generously did not charge for his time. The teacher at the Weilmoringle School opened the school and the school facilities for us to use. It was a wonderful weekend. Fifty people turned up to attend something on education that Merri Gill was raving about!

There were mothers and daughters and some sons and brothers.

The whole atmosphere was so happy. I can still see some of the messages Robert put up on the walls. "Every child is a genius seeking to be discovered". "There is no failure only feedback". "People are not their behaviour".

"Every child is a genius seeking to be discovered". That simple statement leaped up on the wall and implanted itself in my brain for ever. It was the most positive, comforting thought I had ever heard. All children are gifted in their own way and can achieve in their own way. My daughter was not stupid nor were other children who found the school system a trial. Why had I gone along with the idea that she was stupid because she could not spell? Even poor sheep thrived on good feed. By saying some children were clever because they could spell and, by inference, that the others were stupid was a great put down to the non-speller.

One of the first things Robert did at the workshop was to give us a simple questionnaire which explored one set of differences on how people preferred to take in information. The preferences we were exploring were visual, audio and kinesthetic.

Everyone in the group had a different profile. Some preferred information they could see, some hearing and others preferred being involved and doing things. Some people tended to use one way almost exclusively, others used two ways or all three. I, of course had the classic visual preference, beloved of the system. I could sit quietly for hours reading, looking at the blackboard and now I knew why the school system was no hassle for me.

Merri-May threw up a profile which showed she liked to listen to her lessons and do things to learn, like climbing up the wall. If the teacher wasn't doing that already.

What a revelation! Somehow everything was falling into place. I really understood my daughter's problems for the first time. I had always loved her but why had I ever been so presumptuous to think that my values on what constituted the correct method of education were correct for everyone?

I will always prefer to see things to know them. I laugh when I write down telephone messages now, as I translate them into my favourite way of doing things. Of course I know now why I prefer to write letters and not telephone people and why I speak quickly in a rather high pitched voice, a characteristic often found in people who prefer visual learning.

The whole workshop was so exciting. A new way of thinking. I had been so bound up in what I considered the right way to learn that I had not allowed for differences and how in effect the

school system favours some children. I was like a train on a narrow gauge line steaming away forever. How appallingly narrow minded I had been.

Then the guilt set in. What had I been doing to my poor child? How had she put up with me? (She may tell you). I must change, I was changing.

Merri-May had a lot of rethinking to do herself, she was not stupid. She was a "genius seeking to be discovered".

We had both changed our attitudes and needed to redefine our roles. I think we became friends out of it all, not just a fussing mother and a nagged daughter. We both grew up and appreciated each other in a new light. We could joke now about how we preferred to learn things, about how I had to write down telephone messages and write long letters rather than telling people things. Why Merri-May could make a cake while I was still reading the recipe.

All this was of great delight to my mother. She wanted to know all about it as it was her doing that brought Values Based Accelerated Learning to us. As we talked she went back into that frightening classroom of childhood and relived the hurtful memories. Somehow the journey back in time, armed with a new understanding that she was also "a genius seeking to be discovered", helped heal the wounds. Her mother had been a reader and went to bed with diabetes when my mother was fifteen. She nursed her for years and had to harness the sulky and drive twenty miles every week to change her mother's library books. She was a reader and no doubt unconsciously pitied her daughter's lack of prowess with spelling. It seemed the bad spelling appeared every second generation in our family and what a lot of intergenerational misunderstanding it had all caused.

No doubt when Merri-May marries late in life and has her little daughter, the dear little soul will sit around the house quietly reading but Merri-May will not say to her, "what a waste of time that is, go and do something". She will pat her daughter on the head and say, "I understand how you prefer to learn, you are like my mother".

Understanding was one thing, putting it into practice is another. We had to work out strategies to use our new found knowledge. There was only a year until the final exams and so many books to be read. We started those holidays. I opened "Tess of the D'Aubervilles" and started to read aloud. I tried to go slowly and not rattle on in a high pitched voice, characteristic of my visual learning preference. My dear little readjusted daughter/friend listened and did the ironing. We were both happy in our own favoured learning modes, weren't we darling? We ploughed on through Mark Twain, Arthur Miller and many more. The clothes were never so well ironed and we did the final exams and we got through.

At school, Merri-May read things onto a tape if she particularly wanted to remember them and walked around if she felt like it while she went through homework.

As for the dreaded spelling, we bought a small computer spell check and stopped worrying about it.

Accelerated learning is more than visual, audio and kinesthetic learning set of preferences of course. There are 15 to 20 other sets according to Robert Owen and we only covered a few at our workshop. I came to see that the child's learning preference can be catered for by the appropriate teaching style. This was easier in a Distance Education situation where a Mother could cater for one child's style but my admiration for a teacher who could cater for a whole class by frequently changing styles grew tremendously.

Overall Values Based Accelerated Learning is "a craft that maps the radical integration of motivation, preferences and values". So motivation and values play a big part. Robert discussed

these aspects and again set us thinking especially about our values. Values are so much part of us that we rarely query them or why we think the way we do on a certain subject. He went on to say that values are so entrenched, that they can only be changed through an emotional experience. No wonder my values on traditional education had been altered! I assure you that the whole episode had been very emotional. I came to see that the child's learning preference can be catered for by the appropriate teaching style.

There is much more to Values Based Accelerated Learning. We touched on such things as how the left and right parts of the brain function. How exercises and Baroque music can accelerate learning. How to make mind maps. How people have other approaches to learning such as reflected in the questions "Why or Why not?", "What", "How", "What if?". (This could be expanded). We had lots of coloured pencils and lots of fun. I only touch on some of the exciting aspects of Accelerated Learning. I have much more to learn myself.

That whole weekend workshop certainly renewed the rural environment at Weilmoringle as far as education was concerned. One teacher who attended said that although she knew a lot about what Robert had said, it did put it all into place for her and she was delighted. Some things she had done almost instinctively as a good teacher had been put into perspective.

The mothers with children on Distance Education said how much it helped them understand their children and they were much more tolerant of wriggling and fidgeting if that was how a child preferred to learn. In fact, many of these ideas are being used in distance education, especially at Charleville in Queensland.

One mother from over the border in Queensland was very cross that she had missed the workshop as she had heard so much positive feedback. Robert Owen agreed to go to Cunnamulla nearer her home to do another weekend for the CPA in the cooler weather. Several other Queensland branches have been lucky enough to have Robert. The Queenslanders know when they are onto a good thing!

Good things just keep rolling on from our wonderful workshop at Weilmoringle. I was allowed a little time off from shovelling feed for starving sheep in the middle of the drought last year and attended an Values Based Accelerated Learning Conference in Cessnock in the Hunter Valley in NSW. What an incredible school. A positive atmosphere pervaded the whole school and it is so popular that they have students waiting for the gates to open in the morning.

A delightful woman from Western Australia was demonstrating her Accelerated Learning course in Japanese. I passed on a copy to my son. He is married to a teacher who uses Values Based Accelerated Learning techniques. They are both enjoying the Japanese course and now he is off to Japan to sell them sugar.

Finally, without my interest in Accelerated Learning, I would not be here at Ballarat enjoying myself with such an enthusiastic group of people.

This paper was presented at the 1995 SPERA Conference.