

# I. Orientation

## 1. The Remembered Moment

There was once a young boy who was curious and bright; he had his own way of thinking about things and his own pace for caring about them. School didn't hold much relevance for him because he had other plans, and he was always busy learning. For instance, he collected medallions from every place he visited. Each day, he wore a different one to school around his neck.

One day his teacher said, "Matthew, tomorrow we are going to conduct a science experiment with metals. I bet we could learn something interesting about one of your necklaces." He could hardly wait to tell his parents, and much of the evening was spent discussing which medallion to take to school the next day. Finally he picked one laced with silver, from a trip he had taken with his grandfather. In the morning he was in a hurry to get to school. Returning home that evening, he shared his new scientific knowledge with his parents: metals all transmit electricity differently, and the silver in his medallion made it highly conductive.

The boy is much older now, but he still remembers that day, and he remembers what he learned about electricity. He also remembers the feelings he had—of his personal passions being genuinely interesting to others, of helping others learn, of being seen. The teacher may not remember that particular lesson, but she remembers other times when she made a special connection—sometimes with a student, other times with a mentor, a parent, another educator, or someone else—and came away changed.

Everyone reading this book, no doubt, has had similar experiences—when someone fired your imagination with new knowledge or touched a deep chord in you that opened doorways you didn't know existed. Why do

The Drive to Learn: An Interview  
with Edward T. Hall, "Santa Fe  
Lifestyle, (Spring 1988), pp. 12–14.

experiences like these hold so much power? Perhaps it's because they are part of our most common birthright as human beings: our entry into life as eager and natural learners. "The drive to learn is as strong as the sexual drive," writes anthropologist Edward T. Hall. "It begins earlier and lasts longer."

Learning is at once deeply personal and inherently social; it connects us not just to knowledge in the abstract, but to each other. Why else would it matter so much when a teacher notices something special about a student? Throughout our lives, as we move from setting to setting, we encounter novelty and new challenges, small and large. If we are ready for them, living and learning become inseparable.

What if all communities were dedicated, first and foremost, to fostering this connection between living and learning? Such a world might feel very different from our own. There would be no boundaries between "school" and "work" and "life." Skillful people, from groundskeepers to accountants to scientists to artisans, would have a steady stream of apprentices, both children and adults. People of every age would continually embark on new endeavors and enterprises, taking failure in stride, readily seeking one another's help. Teenagers would spend most of their learning time outside school walls (as Hall puts it, "with all that energy, they shouldn't be in school"), working on projects with real meaning for them. And children would be everywhere, in civic meetings and business conferences, just as they are present in significant meetings among many indigenous peoples. An innate communitywide culture of learning would lead to fewer quick fixes that seem to work at first but then backfire. The children, the culture, and all everyday practices would continually remind people of the real purpose of our endeavors: to look out for the long term.

Arguably, with the pace of social, economic, and technological change continuing to accelerate, we are already moving into such a world, whether we are ready for it or not. Some critics say that this will make schools irrelevant. We feel exactly the opposite is true. No matter how technologically advanced our world becomes—no matter how many tablet computers they own or how many functions their smartphones perform—children will always need safe places for learning. They will always need launching pads from which to follow their curiosity into the larger world. And they will always need places to make the transition from their childhood homes to the larger society of peers and adults.

That is why a culture dedicated to learning would devote its resources to those institutions that most shape our development as learners. They might or might not resemble the schools we have today. But they would be places where everyone, young and old, would continuously develop and grow in each other's company; they would be incubation

sites for continuous change and growth. If we want the world to improve, in other words, then we need schools that learn.