

# **Unschooling and Creativity: Trusting Ourselves to Learn**

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I want to thank the Symposium for Interconnected Arts and Music Performance for inviting me to address the issue of creativity and music from the perspective of learning outside of school. I have worked in the field of alternative education for more than 36 years, specifically with families who help their children learn without attending conventional schooling. My wife and I unschooled our three daughters, who are now ages 31, 29, and 26, and I worked at *Growing Without Schooling* magazine from 1981 until it ceased publication in 2001. I continue to write, speak, and consult with people around the world who want to encourage children's self-directed learning.

From the moment we are born, we are all self-directed learners—all healthy babies learn to walk, talk, and socialize without formal lessons and, if they are allowed to continue to grow and learn in a safe environment with welcoming adults they also learn to read, write, calculate and investigate the world without being taught. It is hard for us to remember that children were part of the fabric of daily life in communities throughout the world from the beginning of humankind. It is only since around 1850, less than 200 years ago, that school became the primary place for children to learn and grow. Today, most people believe that school is a necessity not just for teaching the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also for finding work worth doing and developing one's abilities throughout their entire lives. This formula creates a situation where people are judged by how well they fit into school, rather than fitting the school to the

student. For many students, this means they need to subdue their personal, intrinsic motivations for learning in order to reap the rewards of what school wants them to learn.

My friend and mentor, the late teacher and author John Holt, coined the word *unschooling* to describe how people learn if they don't attend a school or use school methods at home.

A fifth-grade, private school teacher for many years, John Holt's first books urged teachers to give children control over their learning in their classrooms. Over time, John sought other words to describe learning that happens naturally for people all the time, in contrast to learning motivated by school pressure. Homeschooling became the settled term for learning without going to school, but John didn't like it because it implied that you should turn your home into a school and that's where all the learning takes place.

Unschooling is a modern gerund, but the word unschooled is really quite old. The Oxford English Dictionary cites its first use in 1594 and defines it as:

1. Uneducated, untaught. b.) Not educated at school; not made to attend school.
2. Untrained, undisciplined. b.) Not affected or made artificial by education; natural, spontaneous.
3. Not provided with a school.

John Holt wanted to bring out the second, less popular meanings of unschooled: Not educated at school; not made to attend school; not affected or made artificial by education; natural, spontaneous. Over the years, as the public increasingly used the word "homeschooling," Holt moved away from using unschooling in his writing and work and used homeschooling as the more generally understood term for learning without going to school.

Why talk about not going to school in a talk about creativity? Don't you have to learn how to be creative in school? Don't you have to learn all the rules before you can break them? Don't you need a college degree to be creative, find a job, and be a success?

Despite the many products, teachers, and seminars that claim their materials and insights will make you creative there is no evidence that creativity can be taught. An article in *Psychology Today* sums the research up nicely: "Creativity is not simply a set of skills. Creativity is not simply familiarity with a set of behaviors or facility with a set of pre-fab strategies. Creativity is not simply a body of knowledge. Creativity only manifests when a person with the right sets of skills and knowledge invents or finds an appropriate problem that cannot be solved using any existing approach, but which is amenable to solution by that person's unique set of experiences. You never know who is going to hit that jackpot. You only know that some people have embarked on the quest."<sup>1</sup>

More to the point of this symposium, British researchers studied musical creativity and found that musicians may be most creative when not actually playing an instrument. *The Guardian* newspaper reports, "By studying musicians and asking them when inspiration struck them, researchers found that breakthrough moments often happened when players were humming to themselves or tapping out rhythms on the table or imagining dance moves inspired by the music. 'What we are finding is that even fairly mundane activities can feed in to the discovery of new insight, new knowledge and new means of expressing ideas in all sorts of ways,' said John Rink, professor of musical performance studies at Cambridge University. 'The potential is infinite ... Developing a creative voice takes time,' said Rink. 'It takes

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<sup>1</sup> Michele and Robert Root-Bernstein. (2011). "Can Creativity Be Taught?" *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/imagine/201104/can-creativity-be-taught>

experimentation, patience and there may be no predictable course of development that one can expect to follow. You never really know when creative insight will be achieved or how to get it, but prolonged consideration, trial and error, and concentration are all very much part of it ... it is a lifelong journey. It never really ends.”<sup>2</sup>

Given the unpredictable and intensely personal aspects of creativity, is it any wonder that the factory model that schools are based on emphasize standardization and conformity, which are much more easily quantified and measured for grading purposes?

John Holt was, in his own words, a conventional teacher who taught in private schools in Colorado and Boston. But he saw, over time as he taught, that his conventional ways of teaching were not helping children retain meaningful lessons. Based on his experiences John wrote his first book, *How Children Fail*, and it has remained in print since it appeared in 1964. Essentially, John learned that schooling and education are not the same as learning in the flow of life. In fact, since most students forget what they learned after the test is taken and most teachers must keep the class moving forward, John called what goes on in the classroom a charade of learning. John became a bestselling author with that first book, but after working to change schools from within in the sixties and seventies, he decided to support people who wanted to learn outside of school and work with them to create different ways of helping children learn and grow. In 1977, Holt founded *Growing Without Schooling* magazine, and the modern homeschooling movement was now on record. Holt was an avid observer and thoughtful commentator about children and learning, and this passage from an article he wrote in *Growing Without Schooling* sums up his philosophy well: “Babies do not learn in order to please us, but because it’s their instinct and

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, Mark. (2013). “Musicians may be most creative ‘when not actually playing instrument.’” *The Guardian* (1 October).  
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/01/musicians-creative-research-muse>

nature to want to find out about the world. If we praise them for everything they do, after a while they are going to start learning, doing things, just to please us, and the next step is that they are going to become worried about not pleasing us. They're going to become just as afraid of doing the wrong thing as they might have been if they had been faced with the threat of punishment.”<sup>3</sup>

Intellectually this made sense to me as a single man, but it wasn't until my wife and I had our first child, Lauren, that I realized how an intellectual understanding of how things work is totally different from a personal understanding of how the same things work. For instance, when Lauren was nearing two years old her favorite toy was a metal Slinky.

I always liked playing with a Slinky as a child—I was fascinated by how I could push it off the top step of our stairs and it would slink its way down. I also loved the feeling and sound of moving the Slinky from hand to hand, watching it jump in an arc from my right hand to my left. But no matter how often I shared my ways of playing with the Slinky, Lauren seemed unimpressed and preferred her own way: She would take the Slinky from me and put it in her mouth and then toddle around with it dangling in front of her.

My wife and I started to worry: Was Lauren not capable of using a simple toy the way it was intended? Did Lauren have a learning disability—Slinky Deficit Disorder? So one night, while I was cleaning up the kitchen, I found the Slinky on the floor. I thought about Lauren and decided I would put it in my mouth and walk around the kitchen like her—and the Slinky sounded like chimes in my ears!

What I perceived about her behavior was not conforming to what I thought she should be learning and doing with that Slinky, and I kept thinking, as a responsible parent, that I had to

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<sup>3</sup> Holt, John. (1982). *Growing Without Schooling: The Complete Collection*. Medford, MA: HoltGWS.

intervene and make Lauren use the toy the way it is shown in commercials and in their instructions. Fortunately, I was able to put myself in Lauren's baby shoes for a bit and it made me grasp what John Holt was talking about.

Children learn because they want to, not because they want to please us.

I couldn't make Lauren use the Slinky the way I thought it should be used, but fortunately I didn't step over the boundary and MAKE her use it the way I wanted her to. I didn't yell, or sulk, or make remarks that indicated I was disappointed that she couldn't play with the Slinky like every other child I knew. I offered her another way, she said no, and since she was in no serious danger with her activity, I let her indulge in walking with a Slinky clenched in her teeth. Her Slinky project only lasted a couple of weeks, by the way. But it made an impression on me, and I've learned to be much more careful about judgments I make about why people act as they do based on just my own knowledge and a few observations.

Yet, adults do this all the time. We see a five-year-old throw a ball well and we think they should be an athlete; we see a 10-year-old finish reading a long novel and we think they are smart: We project upon children a lot of what we hope and desire for them, and this can warp our relationships about what children truly want to do and learn.

We need to be in less of a rush to get children launched into adulthood and instead enjoy and appreciate their childhood while they are in it. That's a big reason homeschooling has grown over the years—school now takes a much larger amount of time and effort from families and children than it did twenty years ago. The school day has gotten longer and added more instruction while cutting recess, art, music, sports, theater, and other subjects that are not viewed as being important by educators, and we keep extending the number of years children must attend school, with some proposals for schooling to start at two years old and extending

attendance until one is 18. There are even proposals for mandatory continuing education for adults—womb-to-tomb compulsory schooling.

Meanwhile, more than two million children in the United States are currently being taught at home and in their local communities and the number keeps growing. Many who choose to homeschool begin by duplicating school in their homes, and while this works for some families, most families who homeschool eventually loosen their devotion to the school curriculum and start using their children's interests and questions to explore the world—they become unschoolers.

High achievement in school doesn't mean you are more creative or even generally smarter than those with less school achievements—it can also mean you're just good at the game of school. We've conflated school degrees with creativity and intelligence, and this creates a sense of worthlessness for those who are not good at the school game. John Holt and other education reformers have noted how schooling actually constrains learning for many students. This summary of a longitudinal study of creativity, puts that comment in perspective:

“In 1968, George Land conducted a research study to test the creativity of 1,600 children ranging in ages from three-to-five years old who were enrolled in a Head Start program. This was the same creativity test he devised for NASA to help select innovative engineers and scientists. The assessment worked so well he decided to try it on children. He re-tested the same children at 10 years of age, and again at 15 years of age. The results were astounding.

Test results amongst 5 year olds: 98%

Test results amongst 10 year olds: 30%

Test results amongst 15 year olds: 12%

Same test given to 280,000 adults: 2%

“What we have concluded,” wrote Land, “is that non-creative behavior is learned.”<sup>4</sup>

Years earlier than Land, based on his experiences as a teacher and observer of children, John Holt noted in his book *How Children Fail*, “School is the place where children learn to be stupid.”<sup>5</sup>

More recently, in her book *Wounded by School*, Kirsten Olson wanted to know how high-achieving adults were positively influenced by their school experiences. What Olson learned is that these adults were successful in spite of their schooling! In her forward to the book, educator Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot writes: “In her first foray into the field—in-depth interviews with an award-winning architect, a distinguished professor, a gifted writer, a marketing executive—Olson expected to hear stories of joyful and productive learning ... Instead, she discovered the shadows of pain, disappointment, even cynicism in their vivid recollections of schooling. Instead of the light she expected, she found darkness. And their stories did not merely refer to old wounds now healed; they recalled deeply embedded wounds that still bruised and ached, wounds that still compromised and distorted their sense of themselves as persons and professionals.”<sup>6</sup>

School makes us focus on discrete disciplines on a fixed schedule: an hour of math, an hour of science, and so on. This works for professional, scientific management purposes, but for learning it is often deadly. An hour of math may not be enough for students who are into the

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<sup>4</sup> Naiman, Linda. (2014). “Can Creativity be Taught? Here’s What the Research Says.” *Creativity at Work*. <https://www.creativityatwork.com/2012/03/23/can-creativity-be-taught/>

<sup>5</sup> Holt, John. (1964, 1983). *How Children Fail*. New York: Da Capo Press. The full quote is: “To a very great degree, school is a place where children learn to be stupid. A dismal thought, but hard to escape. Infants are not stupid. Children of one, two, or even three throw the whole of themselves into everything they do. They embrace life and devour it; it is why they learn so fast and are such good company. Listlessness, boredom, apathy – these all come later. Children come to school *curious*; within a few years most of that curiosity is dead, or at least silent.”

<sup>6</sup> Olson, Kirsten. (2009). *Wounded By School: Recapturing the Joy in Learning and Standing Up to the Old School Culture*. New York: Teachers College Press, page xii.



topic, and an hour is way too much for students who are not into it. But it doesn't matter to school officials: everyone must get an hour of math.

John Taylor Gatto, another schoolteacher and author who became an unschooling advocate, wrote that this displacement of intrinsic learning is not a bug in the system but a feature based on the industrial-production model schools use: "Educated people, or people with principles, represent rogue elements in a scheme of scientific management; the former are suspect because they have been trained to argue effectively and to think for themselves, the latter too inflexible in any area touching their morality to remain reliably dependent. At any moment they may announce, "This is wrong. I won't do it." Overly creative people have similar deficiencies from a systems point of view.

"Scientific management is always on guard against people who don't fit securely into boxes, whether because of too much competency, too much creativity, too much popularity, or what have you. Although often hired, it is with the understanding they must be kept on a short leash and regarded warily. The ideal hireling is reflexively obedient, cheerfully enthusiastic about following orders, ever eager to please. Training begins in the first grade with the word 'don't.'"<sup>7</sup>

Another way our intrinsic motivations to learn and experiment get warped or destroyed by school is when the teacher–student relationship gets unbalanced. Ivan Illich, the author of *Deschooling Society* and other important books about modern culture, wrote, "The teacher–student relationship is a special one and should not occupy more than a small part of life."<sup>8</sup> But

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<sup>7</sup> Gatto, John T. (2009). *Weapons of Mass Instruction: A Schoolteacher's Journey Through the Dark World of Compulsory Schooling*. Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Press, pages 126–127.

<sup>8</sup> Illich, Ivan. (1971). *Deschooling Society*. New York: Harper & Row.

for some students, at all levels of education, their need to please the teacher, and the teacher's encouragement of that need, can cause the relationship to become toxic, even abusive. The movie *Whiplash* is an example of how the need to please a popular music teacher can displace and ruin real learning and personal growth for a student.

John Holt wrote a book, titled *Never Too Late*, about his experiences as an adult learning to play the cello. In a section called "Learning without Lessons," Holt writes: "The trouble with most teachers of music or anything else, is that they have in the back of their minds an idea more or less like this: 'Learning is and can only be the result of teaching. Anything important my students learn, they learn because I teach it to them.' Teachers make this belief clear by the way they teach, or talk about their teaching, or react—usually with anger—to the suggestion that their students might find out for themselves, and be better for finding out, much of what they are being taught. It is not enough for them to be helpful and useful to their students; they need to feel that their students could not get along without them.

"All my own work as teacher and learner has led me to believe quite the opposite, that teaching is a very strong medicine, which like all strong medicines can quickly and easily turn into a poison. At the right time (that is, when the student has asked for it) and in very small doses, it can indeed help learning. But at the wrong time, or in too large doses, it will shut down learning or prevent it altogether. The right kind of teacher can be a great help to a learner, particularly of music. The wrong kind can be worse than none."<sup>9</sup>

What Holt and similar educators emphasize is the value of relationships and feelings as we live and learn, not the value of certificates and trophies. How we feel about something is

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<sup>9</sup> Holt, John. (1991). *Never Too Late: My Musical Autobiography*. New York: Da Capo Press, pages 209–210.

deeply important to our motivation to learn about it, but in school we are supposed to put aside our feelings about people and things and just focus on getting through the day's curriculum. Illich ruefully noted how schools prepare children to be part of an impersonal workforce by making them alienated to their work in school.

The manmade, global competition to have the most educated nation, meaning the population that possesses the most college degrees, is currently being won by China, but the Chinese have a creativity problem: Their graduates are great at following their team leader's instructions, but not so good at coming up with new solutions to problems. In an article, "How China Kills Creativity", Jiang Xueqin writes, "But ultimately, the most harmful thing that a Chinese school does, from a creativity perspective, is the way in which it separates emotion from memory by making learning an unemotional experience. ... Whatever individual emotions Chinese students try to bring into the classroom, they are quickly stamped out. As I have previously written, from the first day of school, students who ask questions are silenced and those who try to exert any individuality are punished. What they learn is irrelevant and de-personalized, abstract and distant, further removing emotion from learning. If any emotion is involved, it's pain. But the pain is so constant and monotonous (scolding teachers, demanding parents, mindless memorization, long hours of sitting in a cramped classroom) that it eventually ceases to be an emotion."<sup>10</sup>

For more examples of how schools kill creativity, I urge you to watch Sir Ken Robinson's TED talk on YouTube: *Do Schools Kill Creativity?*

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<sup>10</sup> Xueqin, Jiang. (2011). "How China Kills Creativity." *The Diplomat*.  
<https://thediplomat.com/2011/07/how-china-kills-creativity/>

So, if creativity is unpredictable, can't be taught and diminishes in school, what can we do to become creative musicians and people?

It turns out, I learned the answer from my daughter Lauren and her Slinky, only I didn't recognize it until many years later: the way we nurture creativity is to play. Lauren discovered a creative way to play with a Slinky that I never thought of, but instead of seeing it as an innovative use of the Slinky I viewed it as a lack of understanding on how to play with the toy properly.

Dr. Peter Gray, in his research on self-directed learning among children, writes, "Albert Einstein, who apparently hated school, referred to his achievements in theoretical physics and mathematics as 'combinatorial play.' A great deal of research has shown that people are most creative when infused by the spirit of play, when they see themselves as engaged in a task just for fun. As the psychologist Teresa Amabile, professor at Harvard Business School, has shown in her book *Creativity in Context* (1996) and in many experiments, the attempt to increase creativity by rewarding people for it or by putting them into contests to see who is most creative has the opposite effect. It's hard to be creative when you are worried about other people's judgments. In school, children's activities are constantly being judged. School is a good place for learning to do just what someone else wants you to do; it's a terrible place for practicing creativity."<sup>11</sup>

If you don't learn how to be creative in school, then what makes people creative?

Neuroscience tells us that certain regions of the brain activate together during creative moments, but if and how creativity can be taught as a result of this information is not clear at all.

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<sup>11</sup> Gray, Peter. (2013). "The Play Deficit." *Aeon*, 18 Sept. <https://aeon.co/essays/children-today-are-suffering-a-severe-deficit-of-play?fbclid=IwAR2UkzdRCziBu7OJp4wT8drB7-MldEsyfkpsR4n-4daKyzxNMo2fg5XSU0>

An article about current brain research on creativity claims that “a crucial trigger of creativity is the experience of unusual and unexpected events.” My first reaction to this was, “It took a research study to establish this?”<sup>12</sup>

Artists, intellectuals, and avid travelers have long known and written about how novel experiences excite the imagination: Is it any wonder that so many musicians, from Dvorak to Miles Davis, were inspired to compose music based on their travels? There’s only one way to experience unusual and unexpected events, and that’s to disrupt your routines and comfort zones, something that travel can facilitate. Of course, you don’t have to travel to experience unusual and unexpected events, as Lauren’s Slinky shows. Here are other examples.

Thelonious Monk said his first piano was a player piano: “I saw how the rolls made the keys move. Very interesting. Sounded pretty good to me. I felt I did not want to waste this person’s gift, so I learned to use it.”<sup>13</sup> Author Robert Doershuck writes about Monk practicing at home with, “a mirror [had been] mounted on the ceiling over the piano to reflect the rise and fall of the piano hammers, the shifting of the dampers, as he played. The visual balance, as well as the sounds, pleased him.”<sup>14</sup> The visual, tactile, and sound qualities of the piano attracted young Thelonious to play it, not parental or school demands. I must also mention, it was his sense of relationship and respect for the person who gave his family the piano that also made him desire to learn more about it. I suspect deep learning and creativity arise more from these moments of human kindness than from no excuses, high-pressure school environments. And though Monk

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<sup>12</sup> Kaufman, Scott B. (2012). “Why Weird Experiences Boost Creativity: Unusual and unexpected events facilitate flexible thinking.” *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beautiful-minds/201206/why-weird-experiences-boost-creativity>

<sup>13</sup> Kelley, Robin. (2009). *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*. New York: Free Press, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Doerschuk, Robert L. 88: *The Giants of Jazz Piano*. New York: Hal Leonard, p. 113.

did study formal piano technique and repertoire, he noted that he began teaching himself how to play “as soon as they rolled the old upright into the door.” Further, it was Monk’s sister who first got the piano lessons, not him. That didn’t stop him from listening to his sister’s lesson, observing how she played, and learning to read music. Monk said, “I learned how to read before I took lessons, watching my sister practice her lessons, over her shoulder.”<sup>15</sup>

The combination of self-teaching and a multidimensional approach to music are hallmarks of Monk’s work, but that is also how so many young people learn when they are not forced into competitive learning. Children—all of us—are learning all the time from our environment, our thoughts, and our actions, and our creativity is stirred by all those elements.

Prodigies, like Mozart and Joey Alexander, are not common, but creativity is.

Everyday people *are* creative. Creativity in music doesn’t automatically mean you are creative in the kitchen, or with computer code. Genetics and environment are not destiny: in my many years of helping families homeschool I’ve encountered many unmusical parents—meaning parents who didn’t play instruments or listen to music avidly—who nonetheless had very musical children. I’ve also encountered highly musical parents whose children prefer carpentry or science for their careers.

For instance, Nancy and Bob Wallace were homeschoolers and neither considered themselves musical. When they moved into a rented house there was an old piano there that their son Ishmael fell in love with it. His younger sister, Vita, also developed a passion for music, though her instrument soon became the violin. It is important to note that neither child just played music all day; doll and toy play, games, outdoor activities, visits with neighbors, also

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<sup>15</sup> Kelley, p. 25.

filled their days. Neither went to school until they entered music school in their teens. Both are now adult classical musicians living and working in Manhattan.

I recently spoke with two young jazz musicians who were unschooled for all or part of their schooling. Miro Sprague came from a musical family (“There were lots of hand drums in our house” he noted), and his dad gave him a recording of *Kind of Blue* one Christmas that he fell in love with. Miro tried to figure out how to play those tunes on the piano, and the concept of improvisation really impressed him from this album, and he wanted to know how he could do improvise, too.

School didn’t fit Miro’s personality: he describes his younger self as having a stubborn, wanting to do things his own way temperament. But he didn’t get seriously into music until he left conventional school. From the beginning, Miro said school gave him the feeling of “Why should I be learning what these people dictate what I should learn? I learn, just at my own pace... it didn’t make sense to me.”<sup>16</sup> When he was in seventh grade he asked his parents if he could leave school and attend North Star, a self-directed learning center for teens near his home in Western Massachusetts. Becoming a homeschooler and enrolling in North Star gave Miro a lot more time: “My passion was ignited and I was able to go for it and spend a lot of time just playing. At first I taught myself, then my dad gave me a self-teaching piano book. Then he recommended I take lessons. I was resistant to that because of my school experience, but the piano teacher lived up the road and I started lessons with him after six or seven months of being at home. He gave me little composition assignments at our second lesson.” After a year with this teacher, Miro was playing 6 to 8 hours a day and he wanted to study with a serious jazz piano teacher. Eugene Newman, at the VT Jazz Center in Brattleboro, became his next teacher, and

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<sup>16</sup> Interview conducted by author with Miro Sprague, November 28, 2018.

Miro's parents drove him across state lines every week for his lessons. Miro didn't return to school until he entered the Manhattan School of Music as an undergraduate. After he graduated, he attended the Thelonious Monk Institute at UCLA and now works as a full-time jazz musician and composer.

Claire Dickson, who never attended elementary or high school, is a senior at Harvard, double majoring in music and psychology. Like Miro, she comes from a musical family and was encouraged, but never pushed, to learn music. Claire discovered her passion for singing when she was young: she liked the physical feeling and emotional outlet vocalizing gave her. When she was 12 she discovered Ella Fitzgerald and vocal improvisation and was deeply moved. She eventually asked her parents for formal voice lessons. A few years later, Claire was singing in jazz clubs around Boston while others her age were cramming for exams. For Claire, music is a part of her life, but not her whole life. She said, "I always want to have the option of narrowing my focus and not have the environment narrow it."<sup>17</sup> As a composer, Claire is open to inspiration from everywhere, and enjoys co-composing with a colleague. She notes how she uses voice memos on her phone to record ideas she gets as she walks; she finds this encourages her flow state and maintains her playfulness without making her think about what she is recording.

Both Claire and Miro note the incredible value of *time* that they were given by being homeschooled. We've all heard that it takes about 10,000 hours of doing something before you become truly adept at it. Claire emphasized to me: "It is important to take advantage of the time and space of *not* being in school. You need to use the school when you need to, instead of it using you."

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<sup>17</sup> Interview conducted by author with Claire Dickson, November 30, 2018.



Miro said, “Not being in a conventional school I had a lot more time. My passion was ignited and I was able to go for it and spend a lot of time just playing.”

In today’s world, we think every great discovery must be attributed to a school or a scholar and that to live a creative life one needs a foundation grant, a patron, or to become independently wealthy. Let me share a few more stories to remind you of what ordinary people are capable of creating without going to school.

Here is the great pianist Mary Lou Williams, quoted on a record album jacket, *Jazz Women: A Feminist Retrospective*:

“I have to give my mother credit here. She used to tell the story that I was a nervous child. To keep me out of mischief, she held me on her lap while she played an old fashioned pump organ that she had at home. One day my hands beat hers to the keyboard and I picked out a melody. She was so surprised she dropped me on the floor and ran to get the neighbors to come and hear me. That was the beginning and from that time on (I was three) I never left the piano. She never let a teacher near me. She had studied and all she could do was read. She couldn’t improvise on her own at all. So instead, she did a very good thing. She had professional playing musicians come to the house and play for me. .... Some days I’d stay at the piano twelve hours. I didn’t stop to eat or anything—sometimes I’d drink just a glass of water.”

George Coleman is an iconic tenor saxophone player. In an interview, it was noted: “Coleman began his journey in Memphis, Tenn., in 1935. He took up alto and was already gigging as a teenager with B.B. King in the early ‘50s. He learned basic music theory in high school but was essentially self-taught: for knowledge, he turned to Memphis musicians such as arranger Ozzie Horne, piano modernist Bob Tally and stride pianist Eugene Barlow, among

others. “The stuff that guys were learning at Berklee,” says Coleman, “I knew when I was about 17 or 18 years old.”<sup>18</sup>

Please don’t think that just jazz musicians from the old days learned without, or in spite of, school. As I noted earlier, many successful people feel school was a constraint on their intellectual and creative development. Here’s an example from astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, who was invited to give a commencement address at his elementary school but refused. In a *New Yorker* profile he recalled telling the administration:

“I am where I am not because of what happened in school but in spite of it, and it probably is not what you want me to say. Call me back, and I will address your teachers and give them a piece of my mind.” A more important education came from his parents ... Tyson’s mother gave him a pair of folding opera glasses, which provided his first magnified look at the night sky. In middle school, he bought a telescope with money that he earned by walking neighbors’ dogs—“It was the golden age of dog walking, because you didn’t have to clean up after them,” he recalls—and studied the sky from the roof of his apartment building. In his bedroom, he arranged glow-in-the-dark stars in the shape of constellations.”<sup>19</sup>

Gunther Schuller was the head of the New England Conservatory during the 1960s and 1970s and a noted jazz musician. Schuller didn’t get interested in music until he was 12. In his speech at the New England Conservatory Centennial Dinner, he addressed himself to this point:

“Forgive me for becoming autobiographical for a moment, but I do it only to make a point. I stand before you as one of the original dropouts. I do not have any degrees, and I do not

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<sup>18</sup> Adler, David. (2016). “Bright Moments with George Coleman.” *Jazz Times* (14 Sept.). <https://jazztimes.com/features/bright-moments-with-george-coleman/>

<sup>19</sup> Mead, Rebecca. (2014). “Starman.” *New Yorker* (17 & 24 Feb.). <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/02/17/starman>

have even a high school diploma. Now I'm not advocating this necessarily as a road to higher education, and I am aware of the fact that times have changed tremendously in the twenty-four years since I left high school. But I have the feeling I would not have been a very good music student in, for example, the rigid programs which allow for almost no electives, which some of our schools demand."<sup>20</sup>

As I noted earlier, it is difficult to hold on to original thinking and remain creative in a society that demands obedience to authority and rewards standardization and mass production. Thelonious Monk didn't get truly appreciated until towards the end of his life, and the same is true for any number of creative people: Van Gogh, Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Galileo, or from the last half of the 20th century, musician Nick Drake, comic book artist Jack Kirby, and sci-fi author Philip Dick. All these people struggled to create their works and earn a living and it wasn't until after they died that they actually earned recognition, and royalties, for their works. Most creative people care if someone positively recognizes their work, but they continue to create even if fame and fortune avoids them. They aren't creating because they want to please a teacher or an audience—they create because there is something inside them that must be articulated and until they do so to their satisfaction, they are compelled to try, over and over.

Which brings us back to our common ground: we were all babies once, we were all beginners at our instruments once—we were all self-motivated to try to do something, over and over. In his book, *Never Too Late*, John Holt describes the technical aspects of learning the cello as a middle-age adult, but he also delves into the emotions and ideas that music brings up for him

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<sup>20</sup> Schuller, Gunther. "Centennial Address by Gunther Schuller, President-elect." *New England Conservatory Archives*. <https://necarchives.omeka.net/items/show/1>

as he learns the cello. Even though he was learning on his own, with some private lessons, John kept comparing himself to his fellow musicians and found himself lacking.

Holt writes, “A voice in my mind began to say, ‘What’s the matter with you? There’s nothing but quarter and eighth notes, you ought at least be able to play them right.’ Of course, these thoughts only made me play worse. After a short while I took hold of myself, and began to say to that scolding voice in my mind, ‘Shut up; what difference does it make what they can do, or what I *ought* to be able to do? I am doing the best I can, and that is all I can do.’ After silencing that scolding voice, I said to my playing self, ‘Don’t worry, do your best, you’ll get better.’

“... Once again the voice began to tell me that the music was easy and that I ought to be able to play it. Once again, I had to remind myself that ‘ought’ has nothing to do with it; if it was hard for me, then it was hard, that was all there was to it.”<sup>21</sup>

Later in this chapter, Holt realizes how silly it was for him to berate himself for not playing what others could play easily: “The baby learning to walk does not reproach himself every time he falls down. If he did, he would never learn to walk. . . . What I am slowly learning to do in my work with music is revive some of the resilient spirit of the exploring and learning baby. I have to accept at each moment, as a fact of life, my present skill or lack of skill, and do the best I can, without blaming myself for not being able to do better. I have to be aware of my mistakes and shortcomings without being ashamed of them. I have to keep in view the distant goal, without worrying about how far away it is or reproaching myself for not being already there. This is very hard for most adults. It is the main reason why we old dogs so often do find it

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<sup>21</sup> Holt, *Never Too Late*, p. 194–195.

so hard to learn new tricks, whether sports or languages or crafts or music. But if as we work on our skills we work on this weakness in ourselves, we can slowly get better at both.”<sup>22</sup>

I always enjoy how John views learning holistically: by practicing our music we can also develop our personal growth—but we must consciously work at both. If you mindlessly spend an hour running through music exercises your fingers may get a workout, but did your brain and spirit get into the practice session too? Or were you going through your exercises with part of your mind thinking about dinner, or your next gig? You need to bring your focus and emotions to what you are doing in order to truly grow and understand yourself.

So, what does unschooling show us that can help those in school or who want to be more creative?

First, we need time to ourselves to nurture our own thoughts, experience things we want to explore or do, and to develop skills that further our personal goals. Make space in your life for your own thoughts and experiences to take root and grow. Carve out the time for self-reflection—such as daily walks or meditation—but self-reflection is also spontaneous and can occur at any time, so learn to recognize it when it happens. Like so many things in life, the more you do it the better you get at it—and self-reflection is a great way to learn from your mistakes.

Second, get away from your instrument and seek novel and unusual experiences: books, movies, museums, travel, crochet, bocci, barefoot running. You never know what might inspire your music: think of young Thelonious Monk watching the player piano keys move on their own, or looking at the mirror over his head as he made the piano hammers move: did the physical combinations of the hammers inspire Monk’s harmonic approach? All we know is that these things were important to Monk and he mentions them when asked about his piano playing. This

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 196–197.

is an interesting point about self-directed learning: only the learner can explain why they took a particular journey to learn something, and sometimes they can't explain how or why they learned something anyway! Learning is also unconscious, subliminal, which is more evidence that we are learning all the time, not just when a teacher instructs us.

Related to getting away from your instrument are personal relationships. You might think that creative people only have a strong relationship to their art and don't need or want others' support, except as admirers. This is a stereotype of the creative genius, of course, and it was applied to Thelonious Monk often: He was described in the press as the high priest of bop, a lonely iconoclast, lost in his musical thoughts. If you learn about Monk's life, you realize he fought against significant prejudice for being black, outspoken, and for the way he played piano; he also advised and befriended many people and musicians—notably, Bud Powell—and participated in benefits and protests to advance the civil rights movement throughout the 1950s and 60s. His wife, family, and friends were vital to keeping Monk from falling into despair, especially towards the end of his life when mental illness hit Monk hard. The romantic stereotype of the creative genius is a far cry from reality, especially for people of color. Do not neglect your personal relationships in pursuit of your creative muse; many artists gain inspiration and insight from their personal relationships, which, as all lovers and friends know, can also trigger creativity caused by unusual and unexpected events.

Finally, don't let your schooling get in the way of your creativity. A good teacher teaches us how to teach ourselves. For instance, a good teacher won't just tell you to relax when you play, they will tell and *show* you how to relax, and thereby help you play better. We do need teachers, but let me repeat that quote from Illich: "The teacher–student relationship is a special one and should not occupy more than a small part of life." John Holt echoes this throughout his

work, especially in *Never Too Late*, where he writes, “Most of all, I need the experience of playing for a critical listener, to get over any stage fright I might feel about that, and to learn to play my best under pressure—just as in sports. But even while giving me this help, the teacher must accept that he or she is my partner and helper and not my boss, that in this journey of musical exploration and adventure, I am the captain. Expert guides and pilots I can use, no doubt about it. But it is my expedition; I gain the most if it succeeds and lose the most if it fails, and I must remain in charge.”<sup>23</sup>

Unschooling and letting the learner remain in charge of their learning is hard for many parents and teachers to appreciate, because it requires our trust and hope in the learner. Trust and hope are in scant supply in today’s increasingly transactional society. In his second book, *How Children Learn*, which celebrated its 50th year in print in 2018, John Holt wrote:

“All I am saying in this book can be summed up in two words—Trust Children. Nothing could be more simple—or more difficult. Difficult, because to trust children we must trust ourselves—and most of us were taught as children that we could not be trusted. And so we go on treating children as we ourselves were treated, calling this ‘reality,’ or saying bitterly, ‘If I could put up with it, they can too.’

“What we have to do is break this long downward cycle of fear and distrust, and trust children though we ourselves were not trusted. To do this will take a long leap of faith—but great rewards await any of us who will take that leap.”<sup>24</sup>

I hope the stories and research I shared with you today give you more confidence to trust yourselves to be open to life and aware of all your learning, not just the learning you get credit

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<sup>23</sup> Holt, *Never Too Late*, 216–217.

<sup>24</sup> Holt, John. (1967, 1983, 2017). *How Children Learn*. New York: Da Capo Press, pp. xii–xiii.

for in school. As many unschoolers and self-taught musicians do, you can use school as needed to mold your own creations, instead of school treating you as a lump of clay to be molded.

Thank you.