

Life Learning

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**No Force-Feeding
Necessary**

**Giving Up
Adult Control**

**Reading
Instruction
Is the Plague
Of Childhood**





Learning on Bikes

By Nancy Sathre-Vogel



Two “ordinary school teachers” and their 12-year-old sons are learning about life and learning while cycling from Alaska to Argentina.

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Every parent’s dream for their children is that they learn what they need to grow into capable, responsible adults while still enjoying their childhood. When our babies are born, we look into their eyes with wonder at this new life and we wonder just what path through life they will choose – and we strive to give them the best possible foundation we can.

My husband and I are just like parents everywhere and want the best for our children. To do that, we made a choice to live life outside the box – we’re cycling from Alaska to Argentina with our twelve-year-old twin sons. We pedaled away from the shores of the Arctic Ocean in June 2008 and expect to reach the southern tip of South America around March 2011. During these nearly three years on the road, our sons have learned more than we ever could have dreamed possible.

Kids learn. Their brains are designed to piece together the pieces of the puzzle and make sense of the world around them. They aren't entering into the picture with all kinds of preconceived notions and rigid thinking that we adults have; their brains are little sponges specially created for learning. Put them in a stimulating environment and they will learn.

Soaking Up Everything

Travel is the most stimulating environment around. My sons are now twelve years old, but their brains are still soaking up everything around them. They are learning as if by magic as they travel the world on their bicycles. They learned about the arctic grasses swaying gently in the tundra; they learned how the Alaska pipeline was specially designed to radiate heat. They learned why the Alaska Highway was built and about the battle between Native Americans and government forces at Big Hole. As we made our way into Central America, they learned about coral reefs and volcanoes and in South America about mysterious ancient peoples.

It seems like magic, and yet they learn. Just by being in an area, it's almost as though the collective knowledge of the people goes into my sons' brains by osmosis. I don't understand – and yet I'm thrilled.

I remember the day when I realized exactly what was happening – that they were learning even though they appeared to be playing around. That day we were in the Galapagos Islands and I decided to take advantage of that fact to help my boys learn Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection. I've taught middle school science enough years to know that, for some reason, this theory is difficult for kids to learn. In order to truly understand it, you have to connect so many dots – genetics, environment, change over time – and that's hard for most kids.

So that day I rounded my sons up, made them turn off the movie they were watching, and corralled them into our cabin. It was "school time."

"Today we're going to learn about Darwin's theories of evolution," I told my sons once we were properly situated on our beds and ready for school. "Can you tell me who made the Galapagos Islands famous?"

"Charles Darwin!" they cried out.

"Exactly," I replied. "And do you know why?"

"Because this is where he saw all the unique animals and came up with his ideas about evolution."

"You're good! What ideas are you talking about?"

"Natural selection, Mom. The survival of the fittest and all that. The animals that are best suited to live in an area are the ones who manage to pass down their genes so, over time, the whole species changes."

I was blown away. The whole time our guide had been explaining it, all I saw was the boys running around the islands oohing and aahing over the cute little





John Vogel (left), Nancy Sathre-Vogel (right) and their twin sons David (left center) and Darryl (right center)

sea lions. And yet they had learned after all. Osmosis.

“Lesson’s over!” I told them. “Go back to your movie.”

Our life on the road has been difficult in many ways – climbing from sea level to the top of a 14,856-foot pass, battling daily headwinds along the Peruvian coast, sweating like fevered pigs in Central America, and shivering in bitter cold in Bolivia. And yet, when I look back upon our time on the road, what I remember most is the magic –

the magic of being together as a family, the magic of working together toward a common goal, and the magic of seeing our sons grow and mature into capable, responsible young men.

I can’t help but be amazed at all the things they’ve learned on this journey. Yes, they’ve learned the basic “school stuff” – reading, writing, arithmetic and more science and social studies than most American adults know. But it’s the other stuff they’ve learned that will carry them through life. It’s the basic life skills of teamwork and perseverance that, I believe, will serve them best as adults.

Teamwork

More and more, we hear about companies demanding their employees be team players. In order to succeed in today’s (and presumably tomorrow’s) workplace, kids need to learn the value of teamwork and need to learn how to be a member of a team. Our kids have.

Our family has become a well-honed team working together to get all four of us to Tierra del Fuego. One day in Guatemala we were stuck on an awful dirt road. Each passing truck sent clouds of thick dust into the air which choked us and reduced visibility to only a few feet. The boys had been sick for three



days and, although we thought they were well, it turned out they weren’t quite recovered. It was a struggle to make progress, but we slowly bounced over the rocks and made headway toward our goal. And then came the hill.

It was a relatively short climb – only about three kilometers long – but the conditions were dreadful. It was very steep, the road surface was dismal, and choking dust made breathing difficult. We started up. I

quickly discovered there was no way I could ride up and got off to walk. One of my sons, Davy, joined me in walking his bike a few moments later. It didn’t long before my husband realized he couldn’t make it up on the tandem either – he and Daryl started pushing too.

So there we were in the middle of absolutely nowhere in Guatemala, pushing our bikes up an outrageously steep, rocky road and my sons learned one of the most important lessons they’ll ever learn. As it happened, Daryl (the smaller and weaker of the twins) was not able to push hard enough to get the tandem up. Davy abandoned his bike to help his father.

Daryl and I continued on – I pushed my bike while he pushed his brother’s – for a short while until we realized we couldn’t make it either. In the end, Daryl and I joined forces pushing one bike up, then the other, playing leapfrog all the way up.

Once we finally reached the top, we collapsed onto the side of the road for a breather.

“You guys did great,” John told the boys. “I really appreciated the way you jumped in and helped like you did.”

“If we all help each other,” Davy said, “we can get up anything!”

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Perseverance

Some days it would be easy to give up, to throw in the towel and go back home. Our sons have, perhaps, more reason than most kids to give up – there are times when our journey is downright hard! But that's when they dig in deep, pull out everything they have, and forge ahead. Although they are determined to break the Guinness World Record as the youngest people to cycle the Pan American Highway, that's secondary to their desire to complete the task they've set for themselves. They will keep going until they reach Tierra del Fuego – of that I have no doubt.

Davy and Daryl have kept their eye on their goal for the past two years and learned to take baby steps to reach their goal. They've learned to celebrate all the teensy tiny baby steps they've taken, and to delight in the small, daily victories and the massive triumphs we've achieved. There have been days when we considered it a miracle that we made it to our destination and times when we looked at a map and marveled at just how far we had traveled.

That's what our journey is really all about. It's about baby steps. It's about setting out in the morning to pedal thirty miles. Or forty. Or perhaps fifty. It's about reaching the next village or camping spot. It's about living for today. But when you put all those todays together, you've accomplished something great. That's what Davy and Daryl see.

When I look into the eyes of my sons, I see a wisdom brought about by their years on the road. They've seen more than most people will see in a lifetime and have learned to process it all into a global awareness that I can't help but think will take them successfully through life. I can't wait to see who they grow up to be!

Nancy Sathre-Vogel is a modern-day nomad and vagabond who travels the world in search of beads and other treasures. Her preferred mode of transportation is a bicycle, although she's been known to travel in car, bus, plane, boat, donkey cart, elephant, and camel. You can read about her and her family's travels at www.familyonbikes.org.

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Learning on the Road?

If your family is life learning in an RV or a boat, or if you know of such a family, we'd love to feature the journey in a future issue. Please email editor@LifeLearningMagazine.com.

