

June 2002

**From the Heart** – Where have you been?

Education is certainly a journey; it is the day-by-day experience of learning. A generation ago, when you and I were in school, our education taught us about new people, places, and things. I'm sure my teachers "covered" all the right material and I was a pretty good student, yet it seems that elementary school, high school and college left me ill-prepared for the real world. What we studied went from topic to topic, round and round, but seemed to have little connection with what was going on in the real world; it never seemed to go anywhere and did little more than leave me disoriented, reminiscent of a ride at the fair. Now that you are taking your child(ren) on an educational journey, beware the strange compulsion to follow the same itinerary. Try a fresh prospective.

The common traditional approach to school tends to teach things to children too fast, before they are ready, before they have any use for them and without significant or practical application. What is the result of "covering" the same things public schools teach in each grade? Certainly, it is important to get children to learn, but the most vital questions are: What should they learn? When should they learn it? How should this be accomplished? Instead of emphasizing grade-level academic content which leads to a regimen of "covering" of "required" material, it is wise to consider alternatives. Ideal home education is not duplication of a grade-level public school classroom in your home. Rather, effective teaching is training your children to accurately perceive the world in which they live; to understand application of the laws of science, to comprehend geography of the world, to grasp the history of man on earth, and to know language and its uses for communication. To gain the wisdom that comes from understanding consequences—this is the goal of education.

Looking online<sup>1</sup> recently at aerial photographs of places I've been, I realized that my usual vantage point always followed the road I was on; when it turned, I tended to think I was going the same direction as before, giving me a distorted perspective. I was surprised how often the roads which I commonly took made surprising twists, bends, and changes in direction. Perception of the familiar is foundational; to the extent that it is inaccurate, comprehension of other places, things and people will suffer accordingly. Common examples teach better than rules. (How did you teach your children the meaning of the word *blue*?) Comprehending simple things in a concrete way is a prerequisite to understanding complicated things and abstract concepts.

These things all require accurate perception of the world around. The senses are the vehicle by which the world is conveyed to the mind. Visual perception is not just the ability to direct, coordinate, and focus the eyes, but accurate interpretation of what is seen. Here is one demonstration of visual perception: Have the student stand back about twelve feet from a table. Set an empty plastic drinking glass at the end of the table closest to the student. Then, with eyes closed, have the student walk over and attempt to grasp it. (The results are often interesting.) If the student is unsuccessful, make it easier so that the student does not get frustrated.

We recently tried to adapt this to auditory perception. We had one of our girls sit on a step in the front yard with closed eyes. We set our small electronic metronome to give a continuous tone (A440), placed it some distance from her, and turned it on *momentarily*, and then asked her to walk over and pick it up without opening her eyes. She found this nearly impossible. Next, we repeated the procedure, but left the tone on constantly while she sought it out. This was a lot of fun. Then, to make things a bit more challenging, we

repeated the procedure but changed the setting on the metronome to its "beat" mode. This really showed us how to listen carefully, intensively. It reminded me of a story of two Indian boys who blindfolded themselves for an entire week, foraging for food in the wild. At the end of the time, they felt that their ears were radar towers, able to pinpoint the sources of the faintest sounds. Auditory learning is an often-untapped educational resource. We found a website that had an audio recitation of eleventh-century Old English.<sup>2</sup> It was delightful to watch a student listen to the passage several times without seeing it and then nearly gasp upon recognizing what it was. The goal is to teach children to hear and see, to use their senses to comprehend what is happening in the world around them, and to discern the unseen causes.

The key to education is not memorization, but making connections—relating things together; this is best accomplished by the use of context. In our study of Spanish, I found an amazing article<sup>3</sup> that gave a short history of the Spanish language, describing the phonetic changes as it developed from Latin and relating the geographic origins of the Spanish people. The most valuable thing I've learned in language study is that words are transmitted from one tongue to another, not by the way they look, but by the way they *sound*. People of one language *hear* a foreign word and adopt it into their language. Many of the strange spellings and pronunciations (including "silent" letters) in words result from sounds that were once pronounced in the original language. Because the Spanish tend to avoid beginning a word with an "f"- or "s"-sound, the Latin *facere* (meaning "to make" or "to do") became Spanish *hacer*, the silent "h" being the remnant of the now-lost initial consonant sound. This same tendency made the Spanish *estudiar* from Latin *studere* (meaning "to study") and Spanish *estar* (often translated as "to be") from Latin *stare* (meaning "to stand," and from which we also derive words such as: stay, stasis, static, and thermostat). Knowing why Spanish words are as they are, taught me in a few minutes what two years of high-school Spanish had not. (Ser, or *estar*: that is the question.) To learn Spanish, begin with something familiar. Listen to Genesis 1:1 in Spanish, "*En el principio creó Dios los cielos y la tierra.*" As often as possible, learn word meanings by making connections to familiar English words derived from the same root. (Such "cognates" demonstrate the common ancestry of English and Spanish words.)

Advanced studies require preparing the mind to grapple with diverse concepts and terminology. Since words are the medium by which the mind handles concepts and ideas, language skills are the key to study, regardless of the discipline. Seek understanding of the meanings of words, their origins, their transmission from one tongue and culture to another, the effects of history on them and their influence on history. Etymology, the study of word roots and origins is fruitful because wherever men have gone, they have taken pieces of their language with them. Such a study of word and language goes far beyond what is traditionally called "Language Arts"; it encompasses and connects history, geography, literature, science, politics, economics and nearly every other discipline. Consider the word "terminology." It was first used in English in 1801, and was borrowed from the German *terminologie* which is derived from Medieval Latin *terminus* (meaning "end" or "boundary line") and *-ologie* (suffix meaning "study or science of"). The latter is derived from the Greek word *logos* (meaning speech, word or discourse.)<sup>4</sup> To learn more about the fascinating study of words, check out links at the website [www.eleaston.com](http://www.eleaston.com).

At our house I am now teaching phonics to Hosannah, who is five and a half. This is done in a very informal way; we don't do it every day and we usually spend no more than ten or fifteen minutes at a sitting. Often at the most inconvenient times, she brings me the "phonics machine" and wants to do her "reading." She has learned the sounds of most

consonants and short vowels, one at a time. Recently, she has learned how "special e" causes vowels to say their long, "name" sound. Instead of emphasizing "rules," we have tried to use examples as the primary teaching method. For instance, we looked at the word "hat," and then added a "special e" to make the word "hate," and then considered others words such as "fate," "mate," "cape," etc. Although she has done no worksheets or other written work, I could tell we were on the right track when she asked when she was going to get to learn how to sound out Spanish words. I think she's off to a good start in her journey of learning.

For His glory,

Greg Stablein

1<http://teraserver.homeadvisor.msn.com> (Find your city)

2<http://www.wordorigins.org/histeng.htm>

3<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/2444/splatin.html>

4*The Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology: The Origins of American English Words*, by Robert K. Barnhart, 1995