



6

Fishing

Every year in early June John came to school to chat with me about his son. John was a gentle, intelligent man, warmly supportive of his son Dan, who attended the school.

But John was also worried. Just a little. Just enough to come once a year for reassurance.

Here's how the conversation would go.

J.F.: "I know the school's philosophy, and I understand it. But I have to talk to you. I'm worried."

Me: "What's the problem?" (Of course, I know. we both know. This is a ritual, because we both say the same thing every year, five years in a row.)

J.F.: "All Dan does at school all day is fish."

Me: "What's the problem?"

J.F.: "All day, every day, Fall, Winter, Spring. All he does is fish."

I look at him and wait for the next sentence. That one will be my cue.

J.F.: "I'm worried that he won't learn anything. He'll find himself grown up and he won't know a thing."

At this point would come my little speech, which is what he had come to hear. It's all right, I would begin. Dan has learned a lot. First of all, he's become an expert at fishing. He knows more about fish – their species, their habitats, their behavior, their biology, their likes and dislikes – than anyone I know, certainly anyone his age. Maybe he'll be a great fisherman. Maybe he'll write the next "Compleat Angler" when he grows up.

When I reached this part of my spiel, John would be a little uncomfortable. A snob he wasn't. But the picture of his son as a leading authority on fishing somehow didn't seem believable. I continued, warming up to my subject.

Mostly, I would say, Dan has learned other things. He has learned how to grab hold of a subject and not let go. He has learned to value the freedom to pursue his real interests however intensely he wants, and wherever they lead him. And he has learned how to be happy.

In fact, Dan was the happiest kid at school. His face was always smiling; so was his heart. Everyone, young and old, boys and girls, loved Dan.

Now my talk came to its close. "No one can take these things away from him," I said. "Some day, some year, if he loses interest in fishing, he'll put the same effort into some other pursuit. Don't worry."

John would get up, thank me warmly, and leave. Until next year. His wife Dawn never accompanied him. She was happy with Sudbury Valley, because she had a child who radiated joy.

Then one year John did not come in for our chat.

Dan had stopped fishing.

At fifteen, he had fallen in love with computers. By the age of sixteen, he was working as a service expert for a local firm.

By seventeen, he and two friends had established their own successful company in computer sales and service. By eighteen, he had completed school and gone on to study computers in college. He had saved enough money for his tuition and expenses. Throughout his years at college he was employed as a valued expert at Honeywell.

Dan never forgot what he learned in his many years of fishing.

Many people have written volumes about the wonders and beauties of fishing. We have seen it for ourselves at the school. Kids love to fish. It is relaxing and challenging. It is outdoors – rain or shine. Standing on the bank of the school's millpond, you are surrounded by the rustling trees, the soft grey granite buildings, the rushing stream under the mill dam. Most of the kids who fish see the beauty. All of them feel it.

Fishing is social. They fish with friends, or learn from their elders. Every year we see a new generation of five and six year olds struggling to learn the ropes.

Fishing can also be asocial. You can be alone, if you want to. No one will bother you. It's the code. Often someone will go out for a day with a rod and reel just to be alone, to think, to meditate.

Fishing, in a quiet way, is an important part of life at school. I often wonder at how lucky we were to find a campus with a pond.

My experience with Dan and John happened in the early days of the school. It made me think about the school and what it means. So I was completely comfortable when my youngest son started to fish all day long.

It was *deja vu*.

And I knew that he knew what he was doing.