

Pasquaney *archives*



What is your favorite thing to do? What do you like doing more than anything else?

I love to learn.

That was not always so.

Learning happens over time. In today's world where you are one click of a button away from instant results, the a priori time commitment inherent to learning can seem frustrating, unfair and counter-productive. But what is excellent that does not require time to develop? When we asked David Lamb, the master furniture maker we visited yesterday, what his craft has taught him over his lifetime, the first trait he mentioned was patience. To learn, you must be patient.

I have not always had that patience, especially with myself. My father loves to tell the story of when I was six or seven and opened a complex Lego package for the first time – I think it was a fire engine. I tried to put it together by myself and completely failed – no fires would be put out in Legoland that day my friends. After a few minutes he found me in my room, angry and teary. He knelt down next to me, put his hand on my shoulder, looked me in the eyes and said, “Michael, you can't expect to know how to do everything right the first time.” I am still learning that lesson, but I have improved some in the last 25 years.

Learning happens in stages over time. What is at first confusing, you soon get the gist of. What you have the gist of, you soon become familiar with. What you become familiar with, you next study in depth. That in depth study reveals that you actually weren't as familiar with the topic as you thought you were, and that your study might just be endless. That's where the fun starts.

For example, when I first learned to play chess I struggled simply to understand how to move the pieces. “The knight moves in an L-shape,” I heard over and over again. Once I knew how to move the pieces, I struggled to learn what to do with them and stopped playing for a time – but I had the gist of chess and was familiar with the ideas. I thought. Later in college I started pouring over chess books – hundreds of them, to learn in depth about the game. Steinitz, Lasker, Capablanca, Alekhine, Botvinnik, Petrosian, Karpov, Fisher – to you that probably sounds like me trying to clear my throat, rather than a list of world chess champions – but to me they are as familiar as the names of other great artists like Picasso, Cezanne, or Michelangelo. Every night I would set out the board in front of me and delve into tactical drills, combination calculations, checkmate patterns, strategic nuances of knights vs. bishops or weaknesses in various pawn structures. I played in formal chess tournaments and informal matches on the street in Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C., where your opponent could be homeless or a senator, black, white or any shade in between, ninety years old or nine. It didn't matter; we were all super chess nerds. I discovered that chess was an endless avenue of learning – something inexhaustible. Even with all that study I still made simple mistakes. To this day I often forget that in addition to moving forwards, knights also move backwards - in L shape – much to my chagrin as I lose pieces. But I am not disheartened; it is just a reminder that there is more to learn. I haven't played chess for several years now, but I know I will pick it back up at some point – it's just too beautiful.

How do you learn?

Let us ask history's great teachers. Plato, whose philosophical dialogues I cannot recommend highly enough alongside my boy Aristotle's, quoted Socrates as saying, "I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think." Galileo, a leader of the scientific revolution of the 16th century said, "You cannot teach a man anything. You can only help him discover it within himself." Albert Einstein, the Nobel prize winning physicist said, "I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn." Mr. Vinnie, who is an educator on par with those previously mentioned, will tell you, "Use your judgment."

William Butler Yeats, a great Irish poet, once said, "Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire."

So how do you learn? Catch fire.

I did not catch fire until college. All through elementary and high school I was a C student most of the time. Ask my mother; she still has those report cards on file. That changed in college. It started with a small ember the first time I heard the musical poetry of Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Just listen to this excerpt for a moment,

And now there came both mist and snow,
And it grew wondrous cold:
And ice, mast-high, came floating by,
As green as emerald.

And through the drifts the snowy clifts Did send a dismal sheen: Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken - The ice was all between.

The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound!

As Tyler Brown would say, "Oh ... Baby!" That ember started to smolder as I read the 1799 draft of Wordsworth's Prelude. The smolder became a burning when I first read Richard Lattimore's translation of Homer's Illiad, and by the time I had finished Dante's Divine Comedy it was a full on blaze. When that happened, and I stopped caring about grades and started caring about learning, the grades took care of themselves. From my second semester sophomore year through graduation I was a straight A student but could not have cared less about my GPA.

I do not tell you that to brag. I tell you it to say that if I caught fire, you certainly can. I am not being modest when I tell you that I consider myself of about average intelligence – I do thank the lord daily for far above average good looks, though. That wasn't a joke. Really, I am not brilliant, and never have I been the smartest person in any class I have taken. But I am curious, I will work hard, and my mind is on fire now all the time.

Each day I wake and think, "What can I learn about today?" Each person I meet fascinates me to no end, and my bedside table is a towering Jenga puzzle made out of books.

What is the benefit of learning?

To me learning inspires a profound love for humanity and the world we inhabit. There are painful lessons of inexplicable loss, injustice, and ignorance, but those are counterpoised by the lessons of birth, redemption and

discovery. While learning catalogues our differences, at the same time it reveals our underlying unity and bond to the universe. Since I became a student of the world, I have not met a person I did not care about. Honestly. There are people I am not friends with, don't get me wrong, but the more I've learned about the beauty of the human spirit, the more able I have been to recognize it in another person, no matter what the façade of their form might take. Perhaps that is what T.S. Eliot was talking about in his poem, *The Four Quartets*, when he wrote:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Think of what you have learned here this summer, of all the opportunities for learning you have had. I hope you have relished those opportunities, even those that are not enjoyable. You may not have liked it here every moment of each day, and there is no doubt Pasquaney is an imperfect community. But there is a culture here of striving after one's best, and though that process is not always pretty, well-executed, or popular – it is nonetheless deeply admirable and important. We are not ideal people, but rather people seeking ideals the way an asymptotic curve approaches a straight line – ever closer, but never touching.

You return home soon. If your mind has caught even a single ember from this summer, I beg you to nurture it into a living flame. If you are returning to school and think of that institution more like a prison than an opportunity, consider the advice of the great French novelist Marcel Proust, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes." Consider school with new eyes. At the same time, don't forget Mark Twain's adage: "Don't let school get in the way of your education."

Ghandi perhaps sums it up best:

"Live as if your were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever."