

On Education, A Letter to My Children
From Bill James

May 1, 1982 (updated periodically)

Dear Travis, Kory, and Terra,

The limits you see are more perceived than real. It is within your abilities and the strength of your character to reach beyond the limits that are known. Education is the process opening minds to possibilities, souls to justice, and bodies to implementation.

As a young person, you will likely feel powerless to change the world; you are not:

Society is an illusion to the young citizen. It lies before him in rigid repose, with certain names, men, and institutions, rooted like oak-trees to the center; round which all arrange themselves the best they can. But the old statesman knows that society is fluid; there are no such roots and centers; but any particle may suddenly become the center of the movement, and compel the system to gyrate round it, as every man of strong will, like Pisistratus, or Cromwell, does for a time, and every man of truth like Plato, or Paul, does for ever.

Emerson, Politics

This letter is my best guess on how to direct and accelerate your development as a positive force in your lives and time.

Ignorance and apathy seem the greatest enemies of any free people; they welcome human predators and the path to decay. Education is process of structuring your dreams into actions so you will fulfill hopes and needs as they unfold.

OBJECTIVE OF EDUCATION

The power to change the world rests with you as individuals. This power is simply your will and abilities applied towards achieving objectives. Your minds wrench concepts for what is needed; your souls sense the justice of alternatives and build the courage and will to reach acceptable objectives; your bodies apply your abilities of strengths, spirit and wisdom.

The objective of your education is to develop principles with which you can guide and project your lives; so you understand power and use it wisely, so that you are thoughtful, compassionate and courageous.

Despite some of the problems likely to be encountered, education is the dynamic process that develops harmony within you, so that just reason is your ruling principle. Achieving and maintaining this objective will allow you to be a force of positive good in your lives.

As a guide to defining reason, periodically read the works of Plato, Thomas Jefferson, Emerson, Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain and Milton Friedman. Study the Constitution, its development and the individualistic nature of American culture to see how reason can be applied to practical and just governing. Regularly apply your ideas to develop your skills with the power of reason.

ELEMENTS OF LEARNING

In developing your ability to reason, consider that there are three elements of learning: instincts, experience, and abstract concepts.

Instincts form our basic character, the background against which we project our learning. Experience and abstract concepts are the intertwined elements of form and substance that allow us to apply ideas in a practical world. Think of yourself as a cup of water: the base of your cup, **instincts**, combined with the walls, **experience**, providing the form that allows the water, the **thought**, to be handled and used.

The combining of these elements is important. To tell a young child that he will be hurt by eating food that is too hot is an abstract concept. Once he burns himself, combining that experience with his instincts, he develops a form for using the concept, "hot." He develops the ability to use experiences and concepts to project thoughts, to avoid or seek situations—he begins to reason. The more constructive experiences you have, the larger your cup. Train your mind and drive your spirit to fill that cup.

TWO WARNINGS: First, there are experiences that are destructive to our nature, so use your instinctive sense of good and bad to guide your choices. Second, the assumptions on which we base our concepts can be flawed, forming cracks in our cup. It seems that many of the crimes against humanity have been supported by good people acting on poor assumptions. At times we have failed to reason and blindly "followed orders" and at other times we have avoided conflict only to allow greater destruction. Maintaining a balance requires that you judge your efforts regularly, test your assumptions, and check for and repair the cracks in your cup.

SCHOOLING

The activity by which you build your framework and develop concepts is schooling. This schooling, extending far beyond the classroom, is the process of interaction between you and all the forces of culture, environment and basic nature. To develop as a whole person, to maintain your ideals and succeed in this complex and dangerous world, your schooling should be divided into four equal parts:

1. HISTORY, LANGUAGES AND BUSINESS

Study history in the context of the cultures in which it was recorded to learn where we have been and how we got to where we are today. Participate in society to experience how we relate, behave, and work with each other. Take note of how we have succeeded; recognize that individuals, working against the odds, have repeatedly reached beyond the known limits of their time. Take special note of languages—their concepts and words are a reflection of our minds.

2. ART AND MUSIC

Study the arts and music so you develop skills for dreaming the dreams that have never been dreamt before. Develop self-discipline so you can translate those dreams into reality. It is in the arts that you can perceive a reflection of our souls.

3. BASIC SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING

We are tool makers. From the study and application of basic science and engineering learn to build, operate, and control the tools to bridge the gap from where we are today to where your dreams will take us.

I would like to add one judgment. There are many dreams and tools that are contrary to our nature, items that should be guarded against and should not be used. And if built, they should be dismantled. Nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, the implements of mass destruction, are such tools and their use is a bridge that can only be crossed into oblivion.

4. THE MILITARY, WILDERNESS, ATHLETICS and FAITH

Personal physical skill develops the courage to face the uncertainty in bridging from where we are to where your dreams will lead. It seems there are 4 classes of enemies:

- Vested institutional interests which hold to what is known, controlled by them. Unlike innovators, whose sense of worth is based on replacing their last best idea with their next idea, institutional people's self-worth and reputation are based on their past published work.
- Good, well meaning people doing what they think is right, for all the right reasons, but based on the wrong assumptions resulting in unintended consequences (Nuclear proliferation and Welfare Programs are examples).
- Ignorance, Arrogance and Apathy
- Predators

Learn to deal with it. "The lion shall lie down with lamb" only when lambs are tough enough to make lions eat grass. Competition, not peace, is the natural order of existence. Peace is the enforced absence of war. Forcing this absence is everyone's personal responsibility. You cannot ask another to stand your watch for you. Every soul needs to train for its faith and every body needs to guard over our general freedom. Beyond peace, liberty is even more rare, existing only when the powerful appreciate, tolerate, and embrace the creativity of others. I believe we make the powerful appreciate the value of others by making everyone powerful, a society without victims.

Use athletics to train and drive your body. This, like commerce, is mock combat. Delight in victory and learn from failure. Our rock climbing, cliff diving, swimming, running, kayaking, skydiving, and other adventures serve to introduce you to your strengths and character.

Next, there is an honesty, directness, and self-searching simplicity that often develops in those who have endured hardships to protect the liberty of others. I would have you develop this by serving in the defense of our Republic.

There are two other critically important reasons for serving in the military. First, as a citizen, the rulers of our Republic, you need personal experience with the institutions of power you command.

Second, the concentration of power in the military goes beyond any policing force. Its behavior is controlled only by the ethics of those who command and serve it. Citizens must participate so military customs and traditions remain one of Duty, Honor, and Country. If you think those commanding our forces will never misbehave, think of the Trail of Tears, Sand Creek, and Wounded Knee. Even the recent Ruby Ridge stands as a small example that the government cannot and does not have a soul. Governments operate on rules and regulations enforced by men. Ruling its behavior depends on each of us, every citizen, personally being skilled in the use of force and wise in its application.

From the wilderness, I ask you to learn of god and the everyday courage and harmony in life, death and existence. We have been given great gifts. Stewardship of passing these gifts is also a personal responsibility.

FORCES SHAPING YOUR LIVES

As you develop there will be three primary forces that will act on your development. There are always interactions among these, but each will dominate for a period.

1. AUTHORITY

When you are young, your cup will be built for you by authorities. These authorities consist of your mother, teachers, television, books, churches, others and me. Authority will tell you what the world is, interpret it for you, and tell you how to act towards it. Your mother and I participate in our schools and community to build a viable network of authorities to help you develop experience and form your thoughts.

Even with participation, the assumptions of some authorities are flawed so we limit your access to these authorities. Television is of particular concern; it allows almost no participation and operates on some

poor assumptions. For these reasons we are strict in limiting the time you spend watching TV. Be a participant, not a spectator, in life.

2. PEERS

As you grow into your teens, your peer group will become a major force. Contained by a cohesive community and dynamic culture this is a very positive force. It allows you to challenge the assumptions of authority while avoiding the consequences of individual failure. But as a favor to your mother and me, choose your tests wisely and trust your sense of good and bad.

3. YOURSELF

The last force is you. It seems that girls in their very late teens to mid-twenties and boys in their early to late twenties become the dominant force in their own lives. This is the dynamic age, the vigor of which will last as long as your mind remains flexible, as long as reason drives your courage and contains your desires. This is the age of reason. Make the most of this time, reach out to build your cup, extend yourself to fill it. Remain watchful for cracks and build a better world.

Although I still have much to learn, these are some of the observations your mother and I have made so far in our lives. They are the guidelines we use in the process of parenting. I hope they are of some value as you develop and become positive forces in your lives and time.

Love, your dad

My assumptions:

Nature, the foundation of life, is the gift given us. Effective stewardship is both our moral obligation and in our self-interest.

Life is perishable not sacred. How we expend our life is sacred, the core of our souls. Immortality assisted by technology is within arms reach, I do not think it should be picked.

Your ancestors and the instincts they gave you are worth honoring. Every one was perceptive enough to be biologically successful; a billion year track record.

Self-interest is reliable; altruism is wonderful but not steady enough to be a foundation for action. Cooperation is a result of self-interested specialization.

Competition is natural. War is a natural extension of competition. Peace is not natural. Peace is the enforced absence of war. I believe everyone should be trained as a soldier to enforce the absence of war. "The lion will lay down with the lamb" operating instructions are that lambs have to be tough enough to make lions eat grass.

Commerce is ritualized competition within enforced rules where winning is profits, adding more value than the cost to compete.

Liberty balances on a narrow fulcrum, tyranny on one side, anarchy the other. Like peace, liberty exists only when enforced by the people so choice of the individual is respected, good or bad.

Power is the will and ability to win applied to achieving an objective. (Von Clausewitz)

You can and are obligated to ethically use power (My interpretation of West Point's training):

Duty, do the greatest practical good

Honor, do the least practical harm

Country, for the whole before yourselves