

Lighting a Fire

"Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire."

□ W. B. Yeats

by Susan Richman

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I thought a lot about this quote the other day-- and I admit here that I had a tough time finding it with an Internet search, so I'd have it just right, because I thought it was Einstein who said it.

You see, I was trying to light a fire, and it wasn't going well. I had a big pile of brush built up-- sticks blown down in our yard over the winter, old Japanese knotweed stalks like ragged bamboo pulled out of garden areas, old broken boards from projects that had fallen apart in wind storms or that had collected in the back recesses of our garages and out buildings. I was ready to burn all this rubbish in our bonfire area below our barn. It was a sunny day, the wood all seemed nice and dry, there wasn't so much wind that I'd have to worry about fire leaping over to the huge hemlock tree a bit too nearby. I brought out a box of small wooden matches, and a handful of old sheets of paper, which I wadded up to fit into crevices in my pile. I thought that lighting a few of these would set the whole pile in flame, and quite quickly. After all, conditions were perfect, and this had often been my experience before. Once, in fact, a bonfire pile got so immediately roaring, that we had to bring out hoses quickly to dampen it down and keep it from spreading out into the dry grass. The flames rose 8 feet high-- making me think, looking back, that even if "education is not the filling of a bucket", maybe having a few full buckets nearby can be handy.

But that day, it just didn't work.

I lit match after match. Often the match would go out even before I'd brought it near to the paper, even though I couldn't see or feel any wind to blow it out, and the air didn't feel particularly damp to me. Once I did get the paper lit, it would burn hopefully for maybe 5 seconds, and then fizzle, with barely a corner burnt--and absolutely no impact on the twigs and boards and sticks all around it. I ran out of matches from this box, and had to go inside to get another. And I needed to get more paper, a bigger armful this time.

I truly thought for a few moments maybe it just wasn't the day for a fire--maybe something was against me lighting it. I felt like the homeschooling mother who worries that she's maybe pushing a reluctant reader too hard to try just one more time. Or like the frazzled mom who can't believe her kids aren't reacting like the "imagined" children in the lesson plan outline in the book.

Should I just give up? Call it a day? Try again another time? Sometimes we all do that in our homeschooling days. And sometimes that's the right thing to do-- especially if we look

closely and see that things really aren't optimal. To carry our bonfire analogy farther, maybe the wood is damp, the wind is whipping up menacingly, and there's no newspaper to try to coax it to a start-- and in homeschooling terms maybe that would mean our child is fired, or even ill, or just out of sorts because of eating too much cake at the homeschool event the night before. Maybe we really don't have the needed "kindling" to get this fire going-- maybe our ideas aren't so engaging, or the materials are frankly dull and tedious, with no spark to them. Maybe the timing is all wrong. Maybe it's best to wait till another day. We've all done this.

I realized that this notion of "lighting a fire" of motivation in our children isn't so easy—it's not just a nice theory about learning floating around in poetic wisps of clouds—it's something we need to meet and do on the ground. With real materials, with our real kids, with our hearts and minds. And it isn't something that just "happens" naturally always--which is maybe not such a bad thing really, as fire can also be quite dangerous when no one is watching it and seeing that it stays in some sort of bounds. I remembered then the story my kids and I read together about Thomas Edison as a young boy taught at home by his mother-- he set a family barn on fire one time, simply because he was very curious about what might happen if he just.... His insatiable fire for learning would lead him to develop a light bulb, no doubt, but it had some rough edges to start with!

But sometimes, I realized, maybe the lesson to us, as fire-lighters, is that we shouldn't give up too easily. Maybe we, as our children's teachers, need to learn some perseverance-- something we often chide our children for lacking.

So I tried once more. More matches, more paper. I tried new techniques--quick strikings of the match very close to the paper, being sure I was holding the match under just a thin edge of paper, and not on top of a blunt folded wad. I found very delicate twigs right nearby, ready to sprinkle onto the burning paper once it was clearly lit. I nurtured this flame along carefully. I kept at it. I lit small fires all around the pile, helping one fire lead into another one, supporting each other, not staying as isolated little darts of light that might too readily self-extinguish. I instead worked for creating connections, creating finally a glorious "tipping point" when the whole huge pile started that familiar roaring sound. Flames whipped up, the whole pile became engulfed in heat and light and released energy. Now the bonfire didn't need me anymore. I could stand back and admire it-- in fact I had to stand back, as the heat was intense and scorching now, full of its own life.

And I thought that, yes, at least sometimes we homeschooling parents may just need to keep at our job, to find a new way to go about it, to work at not being discouraged when our first efforts at inspiring our children seem to bring a mere fizzle rather than the hoped-for fire of enthusiasm. Maybe we need to help our children forge links in their learning, so one small tentative flame can lean into another and join up for a full-dress bonfire of excitement and connection. Maybe we need a good supply of matches—and even some hi-tech helps, like one of those new long electric lighters designed I guess for barbecues, capable of pushing deep into a pile of brush (I of course completely forget that I owned one-- it would have been handy with this fire of mine). We need lots of dry paper handy, an eye on the sky and the weather, and hope and a clear vision that this sometimes very daunting task is, after all, quite possible.

I remembered too reading with my children about the original Faraday Lectures, given by the famous British chemist to groups of youngsters each winter in London. His favorite topic was □The Chemical History of the Candle-- as he felt that everything in science could be explained to children by helping them understand this common phenomena. (If you might want to read a transcript of these amazing lectures, do a Google search for "Faraday Christmas lecture chemical history of the candle" and you'll find them right online-- very suitable for high school chemistry students-- this is not elementary school fare!). A lot is involved in this mysterious business of flame-- no wonder we sometimes have trouble igniting a flame under our students at times!

I hope you might think of all this over the summer, while you recharge and enjoy a change of pace from your usual homeschooling routines. Maybe you'll be sitting around a campfire roasting marshmallows or mountain pies or just gazing at the flames with your kids while on a camping vacation or out in the backyard as the dark comes on. Keep that vision of all the work that might need to go into lighting a fire as you envision your coming school year with your children. And don't give up. The flames of learning will yet dance in their eyes-- it just might take a little while to get going.