

Learning
By
Daniel E. White September 22, 2024

The “feel good” story at the end of a recent ABC Nightly News broadcast featured a mother and her five-year old daughter. The little girl is autistic, and speech has come slowly to the little girl. In particular, she has never been able to articulate emotion verbally.

One day, the little girl asked her mom if she could use the mom’s cellphone camera for a while to take some video pictures. The girl proceeded to take video of the grass, of a tree, of clouds, of birds. With each image, she narrated, “this is the grass, this is a tree, etc.”

Then she took a video of her mom, walking a short distance away, with her back to the little girl. The video rolled. “This is my mom. She is so pretty. She is the best mom in the world. I love her so much.”

That was the first time the mother had ever heard her daughter verbally express that she loved her.

It is hard not to conclude that the camera had been crucial to the little girl’s breakthrough in her ability to express her emotions verbally.

In explaining our move to the Sonoran Desert in 2020, Judy and I noted how the possibility of our taking road trips would be enhanced, since we wouldn’t have to fly six hours each way and rent a car for the time of the trip. We could just get in the car and go. And we have done.

An unanticipated outcome has been how my interest in the Ancient Puebloan cultures (for Judy, it has been a continuation) has been sparked. In particular, I have been enlightened about just how impressive the people were in constructing surprisingly sophisticated buildings, often using materials obtained at some distance away without the use of wheels or precise measuring instruments and such.

Equally impressive about the ancient Puebloans was the transmission of learning without the aid of the printing press and the response of communities to their surroundings and circumstances.

We in the modern age, generally speaking, don’t give much thought to the intellectual prowess of such people from the past. Nor do we pay attention to their architectural and building accomplishments, perhaps because they lie in varying states of disrepair. For much of the historical period between the Puebloans and the present, people would refer to such cultures as primitive, dismissively.

I suppose it depends on one’s definition of primitive.

The drone is a recent addition to the arsenals of modern armies and much in use today. The 2015 movie, “Eye in the Sky,” starring Helen Mirren as the key military decision maker, revolved around the process of deciding whether or not to kill a notorious terrorist, then known to be in Kenya.

The means would be a drone. The operator of the drone was sitting at a console at a base near Las Vegas, Nevada. The soldier had honed his skills playing video games for much of his life.

Recently, Frederick M. Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of The Phi Beta Kappa Society, noted in *The Key Reporter* that the key awarded to every member has three stars. They represent Learning, Morality, and Friendship. Learning, not knowledge. Learning, an active verb but also a noun. In what sense did the people who designed the key mean learning?

Smart people over time have offered their insights about learning and knowledge. “The illiterate of the future are not those who can’t read or write but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn,” wrote Alvin Toffler. A century before, Henry David Thoreau said, “when any real progress is made, we unlearn and learn anew what we thought we knew before.” The former Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, would agree: “the greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance. It is the illusion of knowledge.”

So, I suspect that the star on the key represents the active verb and advocates a never-ending process.

Albert Einstein quipped that “education is what remains when you have forgotten everything you learned in school.” We who taught for a living for a while might wince at this but then we recognize that, at our best, we were inspiring curiosity, flaming intense interests, demonstrating the value of healthy, informed skepticism; in fact, coaching minds, not just filling them with facts.

Along the way, many of us came to see learning more broadly. Whole educational philosophies were founded on the idea of learning by doing; that came to be called experiential learning. Einstein thought that experience was, in fact, the best teacher. For a time, schools discouraged the use of calculators because of concern that students would not learn to calculate in their heads or on paper, showing their work of course. Calculators are now normal equipment in classrooms.

The ABC News story describes a cellphone camera as a facilitator of learning. The Helen Mirren movie informs us about how a skill at something easily dismissed as wasting time came to be a valued capacity in fighting modern wars. The cultures constructed by the Puebloans are reminders that intellectual prowess and practical problem-solving are not confined to more recent times.

In short, we are in the midst of un-learning and relearning about learning. That’s worth recognition as a star on a key.

Click here to email your comments to Dan: danwhitehi@gmail.com