



# ISC Views and Voices

“Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself.” - John Dewey

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## Big Changes—Big Improvement!

by Nicolette Groeneveld

At the end of January, when Kylen returned from her trip to Indonesia, she had to figure out our school building anew. Why? In her absence, we radically changed things around!

It all started when we had a visitor with two young children who pointed out that our school really wasn't young-children-friendly. Then one of our parents brought up the fact that there were things in our building that really needed fixing, and that decluttering certain areas would improve how the school looked.

As we reflected on this feedback, a major transformation began to take shape in our minds. Our first Campus Meeting after the Christmas holidays saw a motion on the table to switch several rooms around, and immediately after the meeting, the school came to life with moving energy.

The first thing to happen was that we ripped the carpet out of the Blue Room (it has since been replaced with laminate); the Art Room was then moved there. Then we moved the Toy Room into the former Art Room and put Nicolette's new desk in this same room. The TV and DVD player moved into the former Toy Room which is now officially the movie watching room. The library books got trucked into the kitchen pantry which has since become a very popular little reading/hang-out room. The Computer Room got a major

facelift as all the extra computers were removed, and the computer desks were turned around to face each other. “The bowl” was repaired, and with all the



bookshelves gone, there is now plenty of room to rock in it, so it is once again seeing a lot of action. Tim is also planning to build a 12' climbing wall in the Computer Room in the near future.

While we were moving, we also looked for “junk” we could get rid of, and Ric ended up taking several truck-loads to recycling and to the dump. We also looked for ways to reorganize the resources we kept, and with the purchase of an IKEA storage unit, the new Toy Room



in particular became much more user-friendly.

With its beautiful new laminate floor, the Art Room is also a great, new space! There is more room both to work and to store projects, and there is ample space for the sewing machine as well as the

Science Corporation's materials. The sink in the “bar” makes washing up easy,



and the fact that the room is on the North side of the building gives the room consistent lighting.

Students and parents have commented that since the room changes, there is a different feel to the school. There seems to be more “flow” and more activity at the same time. There's a lighter feeling since so much “junk” is gone, and the students who have long wished for quiet spaces now have a few rooms to choose from. Resources that were previously



tucked away in corners of rooms have also been rediscovered so activities like building with Lego have become “new” pastimes.

All in all, we're very happy with the school's new look and feel, and as we sit just a few students away from “full”, we continue to delight in the fact that all it takes is a few ideas to bring great change and “cool” improvements!

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# Students for Sale!

by Nicolette Groeneveld

The Cat Corporation recently discovered that having cats can be an expensive adventure! Mary, the grey cat, broke her jaw last year and needed veterinary care, and recently Taz, the cat with the two-colored face, needed a tooth extracted. The Cat Corporation decided to raise funds to pay the vet bills; its first activity was a student auction!

After January's potluck, everyone gathered in the living room to "buy"



students. Students up for sale were offering their time and talents—from drawing to cleaning to babysitting to computer and handyman work.

Marlaena ran the show by calling up the each student in turn, explaining their offerings and taking care of the bidding.



Alyassa and Izzy sat on the side tracking who bought whom and for how much.

The bidding started at three dollars and immediately jumped past ten. All the students sold for more than twenty



dollars, and the highest sale brought in ninety! At the end of the evening, when all the hooting and hollering was done and the numbers were tallied, the Cat Corporation was delighted to announce they raised \$664! Many thanks to all the parents who participated in the auction, and cheers to all the students who now have jobs to do!

# On-Philosophy/ Counter-Philosophy

by Nicolette Groeneveld

At the beginning of January, a few parents asked for a special meeting at which to clear up some concerns and get some questions answered. One question that kept coming up was: "What is considered on-philosophy vs counter-philosophy?"

Ric, Tim and I have found over the years that this is a question that often has to be answered from many different angles before it's truly understood. I am offering numerous ways to look at this question in the hope that at least one of these angles will be the one that "clicks" for anyone still wondering about this question.

When we have people enter the volunteer process, one of the interview questions we ask them is to explain how a volunteer can initiate an activity and still be on-philosophy. The essence of the answer is that if a staff or volunteer sits down, for example, to draw a picture s/he will be on philosophy if s/he would do that activity whether any student shows any interest in the activity or not. If a staff or volunteer were to start an activity in the hope that students will become interested in the activity, s/he would be counter-philosophy. In this case, it's about the agenda the adult has.

Another example is the difference between how an adult would share his/her areas of expertise with students. Consider these scenarios: 1) A group of students is sitting at a table chatting and doing art work. An adult walks up to the group and says, "I just thought I'd let you know that if anyone is ever interested in massage, I'm a massage therapist and I'd love to do a session with you!" 2) A group of students is sitting at a table chatting and doing art work. An adult is part of the group. As the chatting progresses, students start talking about different healing modalities and the conversation locks on massage. One student says, "I'd love to learn more about massage!" The adult tells the students that he has expertise in massage and would be happy to work with anyone who wants to learn more about it. Example 1 is counter-philosophy; example 2 is on-philosophy.

Another twist on the above: a parent

## Henna by Kylan



The process



The result

has a friend who is an amazing Aboriginal artist. The parent was wondering if she could tell one of our students about this artist. We all know the student in question is an amazing artist as well and does a lot of Aboriginal artwork so in this case it's totally fine for the parent to share the information with the student. Just as this parent could offer to do cooking classes with the older teens who are often in the kitchen doing experimental cooking and baking. *The interest is already present* which is why approaching students in these cases is totally appropriate.

A few parents wanted to know if we could create and post a list of the talents our parents have so our students could have those pursuits to choose from. Following are the reasons that is counter-philosophy.

Firstly, a list like that would be limited and would thus limit students in their idea of what is available to them. At our school, *everything* is a possibility so to post a list of just a few things may give some students the impression that those options are the only ones they have.

Another problem with posting a list is that students who have a tendency to be "pleasers" may choose to do some of those activities not because they are truly passionate about them, but because they want the approval they may think will come with choosing an activity an adult is offering.

Another danger of posting a list is that it may *distract* a bored student from his/her natural process of self-discovery. It's easy when bored to look at a list and say, "I'm so bored! I think I'll try that—there's nothing else to do" as opposed to truly sitting in one's boredom until passions and interests begin bubbling up from *inside* or are stimulated by *natural* events (which would make them genuine.)

To explain the difference between naturally stimulated events and "forced" events, I'll repeat the question one parent had: How is it different if a student becomes interested in butterflies because he is sitting around and a butterfly lands on his knee vs a staff collecting small appliances and creating a "take apart" station for students at the school? The difference is that the butterfly is an "organic", "chance" happening whereas the appliances are the result of an *adult who thinks this is interesting* and thus

creates this station with the thought that a student may also be interested in the activity. The butterfly is just "being" while the adult has the *agenda* of trying to create a stimulating (aka interest-provoking) environment.

An adult can inadvertently become entertainment for students, as did Tim when he first started at our school. In Tim's first days, the shop was abuzz with activity because there were so many cool things Tim could make. A few weeks later, the shop was empty. Why? Shop activities were not the true passion of the previously involved students so once the entertainment value of building things wore off, the true level of interest in shop activities became apparent, and Tim was left to decide what projects *he* wanted to do for *himself*. He was also now aware of the importance of avoiding being a source of entertainment for students.

Ultimately, we do a real disservice to students when we "rescue" them from their boredom. As Tim explained, it's like having a seed in the ground; we don't want to keep digging it up to see if it's growing yet. Rather, we want to leave it in the darkness of the soil until *it* is ready to move toward the light and grow in its own way to its full potential. We do give the seed water and sunshine, which is represented by having a supportive learning environment and holding the space of freedom, but we don't poke and prod the seed, trying to force it to sprout or bend in any particular direction.

The bottom line around this question is trust. Each staff member and parent needs to *trust* that each student will discover his/her passions and interests somehow, sometime. The environment at ISC is *hugely rich* with "exposure" opportunities so "forcing" exposure is not necessary. ISC's freedom of conversation gives students endless possibilities to learn about new things, and alongside that, there is access to the Internet, movies, books and all the other resources we've collected over the years *in response to students' interests*.

And what about at home? Can parents of Sudbury students initiate activities within the family? Of course, but again I'd suggest parents be aware of whether or not they have "ulterior motives". On this question, I think back to my parents: they were always doing *something* interesting, learning about something new or trying some experiment (like bee hives, worm farms, a salt water aquarium etc!)

But neither of my parents tried to force my siblings or me to participate in their activities. They were simply being interesting people, and that has always left me inspired. We also went on many family outings, but again they were things that were of interest to my parents and not just adventures my parents thought would be valuable for my siblings and me.

So once again it comes down to the agenda or motive: if a parent would do their activity whether or not his/her child becomes interested, it's appropriate. If trying to stimulate the child's interest, the activity would become counter to the school's philosophy. So taking a child to the circus just because it's fun is a great reason to go; just don't have expectations that the child will end up a tightrope walker!

In the end, it boils down to being a good role model. If we want our children to be interested in things, we have to be interested in things also. If we want our children to pursue their passions and try new activities, we need to do that too. We can invite our children to join us in our adventures, but if they decline, we are being the most genuine if we go our activity anyway. Simply stated, "Be the person you want your child to become."



# They're Older Now...

by Nicolette Groeneveld

We've had parents recently share concerns about their children who are nearing late adolescence and are not doing anything specific toward building a future for themselves. Doing "nothing" at ISC was okay when the students were younger, but they're older now so shouldn't they be planning and working toward their future?

During the drive to school today, I was thinking back to those conversations and suddenly wondered: if our students were in public school, would their parents have any reason to be less concerned?

Many grade twelve students don't know what they want to do with their lives, so in that respect, they're not different from some of our older teens who also don't have a specific direction for themselves. We know students don't need a high school diploma to get into post-secondary, so in that regard our students aren't behind either. One could argue that at least public school students are "learning something", but is it really learning that's happening? In my ten years of teaching, learning was mostly demonstrated by students as memorizing information in order to answer test questions, and then the information was forgotten—although students did retain certain details that were interesting to them. Our students don't have to write tests so they skip that stress and simply retain that which is meaningful and useful to them. One might say, then, that public school students are getting exposure to more subjects, but I find that very hard to agree with considering the endless conversations that happen at ISC as well as all the other situations that bring up an infinitely varied range of topics.

Is there anything else public school students are getting that parents might think their older children are missing here at ISC? All I can think of are the stressors: most public school students—especially grade twelves—carry a lot of stress, both social and academic. Daily, the pressure to "do well" hovers over them, and social pressures, either new or, in many students' cases, lingering from years past follow them where they go. "Real life" looms before grade twelves who, come June, walk out of school and find themselves having to be fully re-

sponsible for themselves, where before they simply followed set routines and, more or less, met requirements set out for them by outside authorities.

ISC students, on the other hand, are immersed in "real life" every day—fully responsible for themselves and their lives, and members of an active community that they always have to hold in consideration. Past issues, for most of our students, are transforming into present strengths, with self-awareness, self-esteem, self-confidence, healthy boundaries and communication skills flourishing. As I write this, the school is alive with the sound of vacuum cleaners, and I know that something as simple as our students' involvement in chores gives them practice in something that is ultimately a valuable life skill.

So, when I add it all up, I find myself hoping that when Josephine is nearing adulthood, I'll find relief rather than concern in knowing she is at ISC. Like some of our current students, she may not have a clear direction for her future, but then she will simply be like many of her public school counterparts. And for the rest? If she gets all the benefits our current students are getting, I'll consider her advantaged as she heads out into the adult world.



# Letting Go

Author unknown

To let go doesn't mean to stop caring; it means I can't do it for someone else... To let go is not to cut myself off... It's the realization that I can't control another...

To let go is not to enable, but to allow learning from natural consequences. To let go is to admit powerlessness, which means the outcome is not in my hands.

To let go is not to try and change or blame another; I can only change myself. To let go is not to care for, but to care about. To let go is not to fix, but to be supportive. To let go is not to judge, but to allow another to be a human being. To let go is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes, but to allow others to affect their own outcomes. To let go is not to be protective; it is to permit another to face reality. To let go is not to deny, but to accept. To let go is not to nag, scold or argue, but to search out my own shortcomings and correct them. To let go is not to adjust everything to my desires, but to take each day as it comes and cherish the moment. To let go is not to criticize and regulate anyone, but to try to become what I dream I can be. To let go is not to regret the past, but to grow and live for the future (or better still, the present). To let go is to fear less and love more.

## Quotable quote:

Gaian was talking to me about getting a job. I said, "You could do like Amanda who tried to get a job washing windows on skyscrapers!" Gaian said, "But I'm terrified of heights." "No, problem," I said. "After one summer of that work, you'll be fine!" "Yeah," answered Gaian, "Except I'll be down about a hundred dollars in diapers!"



Thanks to Rex Groeneveld for the beautiful lost-and-found treasure box he made for us!

# Sudbury, Tao & Zen

## Introduction: Another 'Zen and the Art of' Book?!

By Bruce Smith—Staff Member, Alpine Valley School

“Watermelons and Zen students  
grow pretty much the same way.  
Long periods of sitting ‘till they ripen and  
grow  
all juicy inside, but  
when you knock them on the head  
to see if they’re ready—  
sounds like nothing’s going on.”  
—Peter Levitt, *One Hundred Butterflies*

Sudbury schools and Zen centers aren’t settings many people would confuse. Most Sudbury schools are bursting with exuberant activity most of the time (though the contemplatives have their place here as well). Indeed, a group of monks might be hard-pressed to meditate in these schools, which to some would seem “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Yet that very nothingness is the beginning of a profound connection: both monks and Sudbury students might appear guilty to the casual observer of wasting a great deal of time in mostly point-less activities.

It is my belief, based on years of experience, that there is a good deal of overlap between the Sudbury model of education and the Eastern spiritual traditions of Taoism and Zen Buddhism. My personal introductions to the latter were indirect and came through sources more popular than scholarly: *The Tao of Pooh* and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, at least one of which was recommended by a roommate of mine. This was in the early 1990s, as I was just beginning my training to become a public-school teacher, years before I would hear of the Sudbury model.

That introduction was also fittingly random. In the summer between leaving my high-school teaching job and entering the University of Chicago Divinity School, a former student contacted me to say he’d found the website of a school I’d probably like. (He’d heard me complain often enough about conventional education to know this.) So I visited [www.sudval.org](http://www.sudval.org), was taken aback by how wonderfully it surpassed my wildest dreams of education reform...and then resumed my preparations to re-enter grad

school.

But I couldn’t get thoughts of Sudbury, and young people, out of my head. When Divinity School quickly turned out to be something other than I’d anticipated (having hoped to study comparative religious ethics in a Chinese context, I discovered years of general coursework stood between me and that field), I again reconsidered my career path. After reviewing some introductory material from Sudbury Valley School, I knew I’d stumbled upon something big, really big. If ever I’ve experienced an epiphany regarding my life’s purpose, this was surely one.

I immediately wrote Daniel Greenberg and told him, essentially, that I was set to get on a plane to Boston if he’d just give the word. Danny, to his credit, advised me first to contact the group working to open a Sudbury school near Joliet, Illinois, a mere hour’s drive from Hyde Park. That I did, and over the following months I found myself gradually dropping into Sudbury work, while gradually dropping out of the University of Chicago. In late spring, having secured a staff position at Liberty Valley School, I made my second big career leap in as many years.

I continued to read up on Taoism and Zen while immersing myself in the mind-altering experience which is being a new Sudbury staff member. I sensed early on Sudbury’s basic harmony with The Way as described in Taoism, and its paradoxical, Zen-like. Yet I have no idea when I first explicitly acknowledged connections between Chinese religious traditions and radical American education—though it might have been when I met Josh White, a Sudbury Valley School alumnus who for a time assisted the PR efforts of Alpine Valley School in the metro Denver area.

Once I’d talked a bit with Josh, I learned that in addition to earning his master’s in psychology, he was also an active member of the Great Mountain Zen Center, which was very close to where I then lived. And thus I came, at last, to experience this rich spiritual tradition as something concrete, from the perspective of a practitioner. Although to date I’ve done scarcely more than dabble, it’s safe

to say that setting foot into the GMZC zendo was another life-changing moment.

Now, almost exactly a decade after I first heard of Sudbury Valley School, I find myself in the position of being able to earn a portion of my living through writing. I’ve been involved with Sudbury schools long enough not to feel like a newcomer, and my interest in and awareness of Taoism and Zen certainly hasn’t waned over the years. Thus, the truism to “write what you know” has joined forces with the maxim that one learns best by teaching others to bring me to this topic: drawing explicit connections between the spiritual traditions of Taoism and Zen and the Sudbury model of education.

For me, these connections are both intuitive and obvious. Yet when I undertook this project, even I had little idea just how deeply they run. Simply put, I can’t imagine an educational philosophy more closely aligned with The Way in which human beings naturally learn. Sudbury is in a sense Non-education, just as Zen may be considered Non-religion. Sudbury does not set out to mold young minds in a scholarly, pedantic manner, but simply to establish the conditions where they can learn most effectively precisely what they most need to learn. It eschews external control and evaluation and, instead, fosters innate wisdom and intrinsic motivation. Taoism, Zen, and Sudbury alike trust intuition, spontaneity, and randomness; they all value what Thoreau termed “broad margins.” In all three areas, formal structure is secondary to perceiving the structure inherent in direct experience.

Others much wiser than I have been teaching for some time now that our culture is in dire need of such lessons. Our continued adherence to dualistic, Industrial Age thought patterns is poisoning our environment and perpetuating an unconscionable level of suffering. We fear what we do not know, and we either ignore or try to crush out of existence that which we do not like. As a species we are long overdue for both respecting

the human right of self-determination and acquiring an ethical vision broader than a competitive struggle for survival.

Let me be very clear, however: this book is *not* intended to make a religion of the Sudbury model, nor to suggest that Sudbury students and staff are necessarily following a common spiritual path. Also, I want to emphasize that I am not a scholar of Taoism, and only a fledgling student of Zen. What I do know is simply that there are sound, spiritual reasons why the Sudbury model works, reasons that go far beyond pedagogy and educational philosophy. It has well-established partners in its habit of turning so-called conventional wisdom on its head. In short, those seeking to understand the unorthodox potency of the Sudbury model would do quite well to look to the ancient Eastern wisdom of Taoism and Zen.



## Announcements

- Thanks to all the parents and students who came one weekend to help reorganize our school!
- Thanks to Bob van den Biggelaar for his help with the laminate floor in the Art Room!
- Thanks to Steve, Jen and Don for all their help on various jobs and for their donations!
- Thanks to Ric for all the extra time he's spent on the changes in the school!
- Thanks to Tim for all the work he's put into creating and repairing things in the school!
- Thanks to Dawn for all the time she gives us and for the sewing machine she's lending the school!
- Thanks to Trinia for all the items she donated to the school and to Denise Moore for organizing the Art Room!

*Prepared by Nicolette Groeneveld*