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Loving, Learning, and the Learning Project

I remember my first day at Midland Elementary school when I entered kindergarten, and I remember when I was first fed up with school and wanted something better, and due to the elasticity of memory I remember them as the same day. They could not have been, but they might as well have been because ever since I have been puzzled by what I was told I was supposed to achieve.

At the start of every school year I was sure it would get better. “Now, I will be taken seriously.” But, of course, I never was. With each year, an appreciation of meaning and insight just got further away, until I reached graduate school. At that point it evaporated entirely. Was education just a hoax, or did I misunderstand it?

After graduate school, I thought a mature approach to knowledge exists in business, so I went into business, and to some extent it does. I met a few people who were committed to their craft and found personal meaning in their work. But for the most part, the question of meaning in life was still absent.

All our lives we’re told to develop discernment, exercise judgment, and find the importance in things, but I found scarce few who were doing it. Around 2000 I decided to retrace my steps, and ask those people who were living a committed life what they were doing, and why. So started “The Learning Project,” which is now a book set to be published in January of 2019.

My First Interview

In 2005 I collected my first interview. It was with Charles Hard Townes, an employer and mentor in my last year of college in 1979. Townes invented the laser the year I was born, and went to Stockholm in 1964 to join his family friend Martin Luther King, where they each received a Nobel prize. Townes was a special person, always welcoming and attentive. He could be heard minutes before he arrived at our 4th floor offices singing his way up the stairwell. There was something in his enthusiasm that was infectious.

“When I was a youngster I was very interested in natural history. I used to walk in the woods and the streams and catch butterflies, and watch birds, and look at the stars, and so on. All the universe was fascinating to me...”

– **Charles Townes**

Then I went to an old schoolmate, Neil Tyson, the director at New York’s Hayden Planetarium and an astrophysicist. He shared my interest and he’d since become an icon in education. What would he say?

“I would rather have someone who is inspired by their work stand in front of me and be my teacher, even if they don’t know how to teach. Because – you know something – that doesn’t matter. In the end what matters is the osmotic link that is made between your and their enthusiasm. Just by being in the same room at the same time...”

– **Neil deGrasse Tyson**

In the subsequent 11 years I collected 40 interviews: 14 from kids in grade school and college, 10 from people over 70, and the rest from people in between. I traveled all over the continent and interviewed a few people in South America. I asked everyone the same questions: “What is learning? How did you learn? What have you gained from it?”

“It’s an interesting question. I’ve never been asked that before... I really, honestly, don’t understand the question.”

– **William Ashburton**

“Look for mentors; it’s a very simple learning process. Look for the mentors. Channel, find purpose, and look for your destiny. Search for the moment when opportunity will knock on your door...”

– **The Phantom Street Artist**

“How did I become an activist? ... I had to learn it all. Why did I have to learn it? Because I wanted to accomplish certain goals. How did I learn it? Basically by running for office... Attitude is the key.”

– **Phyllis Schlafly**

Some answers were cerebral and others physical, creative, organized, or chaotic. In the end, I organized the voices into the 11 fields of art, biology, computers, film, medicine, outdoors, physics, society, trade, wrestling, and writing.

I did not know the answer, I did not have an answer, and I did not know if I would get one. It has taken many years, and I am still thinking about these questions. As recently as last night I was still trying to make sense of what seems to be the best answer I found. And it was not an answer I was expecting.

The answer, as best I can determine, did not come most clearly from those people who I expect would know. The answer I discern is that one must learn how to love and, especially, love one's self.

"It was the day I came back from the treatment center... (my sister) gave me a hug for the first time ever... and I started to cry. I've never gotten a hug from her. So I had to love her back..."

– **William Ashburton**

"To Really Love Who I Am"

The two people who expressed the role of love as the basis of their own transformation are gay. None of the others are, and none of the others said it as directly. Was that because for these two people personal relationship was of the greatest importance? When I go back and examine all the other stories, I can hear this as an undercurrent in every case: one must learn to love one's self.

"I think if there's one thing that I would do differently... it's to really love who I am... There are directions that you might go in if you understand and really love who you are. There are things that you'll give yourself if you do and that you won't give yourself if you don't..."

– **Michelle Murrain**

What kind of answer is this? It is one that takes us back to the deepest forms of identity and the earliest mythology: the role of the true mentor and the fundamental stages of growth. It is an "answer" that raises the question of light and dark, good and evil, chaos and humanity. I find myself holding a key, but what it unlocks I don't know.

The Learning Project, Rites of Passage will be published and go on sale January 1st, 2019, in both paper and digital editions. The paper version should be available through most online booksellers, the digital version will be available only through Amazon for the first 90 days, and after that in other digital formats from other retailers.

[The book is listed on Amazon here.](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07HX1VK6F)
(<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07HX1VK6F>)

It's a large book with 418 pages and 42 photographs. The paper version retails for US \$24.95, the Kindle version for US \$8.95, but **for the first 5 days of January Amazon will be giving the Kindle version away.**

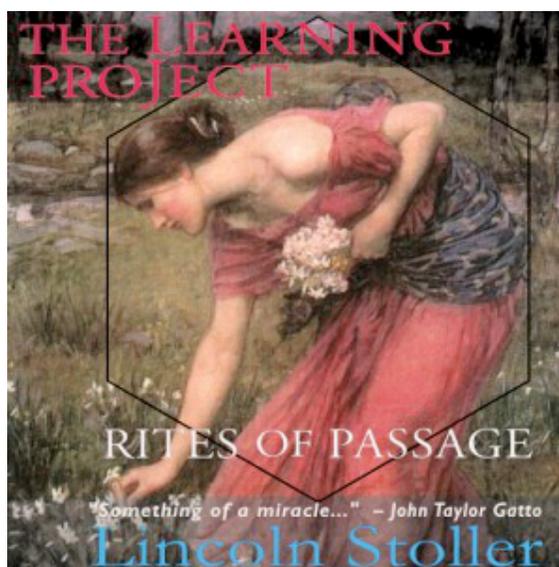
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