

On Lessons for Our Daughter  
Robert S. Griffin  
2010

I have a just-turned-six-year-old daughter who lives with her mother on the west coast of the U.S. I live on the east coast, Vermont, and see Dee--not her real name; I'm changing the names and places here out of concern for others' privacy--about four times a year. Her mother--I'll call her Margaret--and I aren't together, but we love each other very much and share parenting responsibilities well, and Margaret is a great mother, and I hope the three of us can someday be a family. Because of our geographical distance, Margaret and I are forced primarily to communicate about Dee from long range, and since I am hearing impaired and have great difficulty on the phone, that means e-mail. As I write this, I have just returned to Vermont after spending three weeks with Dee and Margaret.

Among the concerns Margaret and I are dealing with currently is what to do about lessons for Dee--in dance and music and so on. This past year, Dee took a weekly dance class (drawing on ballet and tap) at a ballet school, and this spring she was in a public recital, which I attended. Dee showed an interest in ballet early on. Without giving it much thought, I gave her a DVD of the *Nutcracker* ballet when she was four. It was the old (1977) television production with Mikhail Baryshnikov and Gelsey Kirkland. A young girl's toys come alive, including a nutcracker that turns into a prince (Baryshnikov). Dee was enchanted and watched it over and over. It is a wonderful production and Baryshnikov and Kirkland were great dancers. In this production, the young girl, Clara--Kirkland, who at the time was twenty-three but could pass for twelve--actually dances with the prince; usually an adult dancer does that. What a wonderful fantasy for little Dee, who obviously identified with Clara.

A month or so after Dee started watching the *Nutcracker*, Margaret and I were sitting at the dining room table in the large wood-floored space that serves as a living room/dining room area in Margaret's home, and Dee suddenly, with no announcement, began to dance; as Clara, she told us as she was dancing. Both Margaret and I were stunned speechless at how beautifully Dee danced. Where did that come from? Both Margaret and I have a background in dance--I was briefly in a modern dance company, and Margaret has danced on stage, and we maintain an interest in dance, in both

its classical and modern forms--but our personal involvement was long before Dee was born and we'd never discussed dance with Dee, nor had we ever encouraged her to dance herself; there was just the DVD.

Dee continued to dance spontaneously in the house, every other day or so, and did it joyously and remarkably well. We bought her a leotard, tights, a tutu, and ballet slippers, which she put on immediately several times a week after coming home from pre-school, and the dances in the house continued.

From Vermont, I mailed Dee DVDs of the ballets Swan Lake, Giselle, and Coppelia. (Swan Lake was the American Ballet Theater's production, with Marcelo Gomes and Gillian Murphy. Giselle was the BBC production with Alena Cojocar. Coppelia was another BBC production by the Royal Ballet. Dee loved them all. They are available at Amazon.) On one occasion when I was visiting Dee and Margaret--Dee was coming up to her fifth birthday--Dee and I were watching Swan Lake, and she said to me, "When I grow up, I'm going to be the white swan." Dee especially loved the performance of the Swanilda role in act two of Coppelia, watching it time and again.

We asked Dee whether she wanted to take dance lessons and she eagerly said yes, so we enrolled her in the class for five-olds-olds at a local ballet school when she turned five. She never missed her Tuesday afternoon class. Unfortunately, I was disappointed with the class and what Dee was taught to do at the recital I attended. I thought the instruction, the whole approach to dance, was pedestrian, artless, piecemeal, and beneath Dee's ability level, although I didn't say that to Dee or to the school.

Margaret and I signed Dee up for a one-week summer program scheduled for the middle of this past month--August, 2010--taught by the same teacher that taught the five-year-old class and which focused on Swan Lake (as much as one can do that with five- and six-year-olds). Dee seemed conflicted about attending: she said she wanted to, but didn't want to take classes with Miss Janet, as I'll call her. So we cancelled her enrollment in the Swan Lake program, forfeiting the tuition we had already paid, and took a trip to Vancouver instead, which Dee enjoyed immensely, as did we. Dee never mentioned the dance program in Vancouver. It appeared to Margaret and me that she was relieved she didn't have to go through with it.

All along, the dances in the house, both in balletic and, as time

went along, popular, or modern, form, have continued--joyful, exuberant, extended, remarkably accomplished. The ballet school has a weekly six-year-old class taught by this same teacher. We asked Dee whether she wanted to go to that class this coming year, and again there was a hesitant, conflicted, yes-but-no answer. Margaret and I decided it best not to enroll Dee in the sixth-year-old class during the upcoming school year because of Dee's coolness about attending, and out of a concern that Dee wouldn't be challenged by the class, and that she would get bored and turn off to dance. We thought it best to put formal dance instruction aside for a year and, probably, enroll Dee in the first formal ballet class--Beginning Ballet, it's called--when she is seven, in a year. The year away from dance would give Dee a chance to explore other activities, we concluded, including piano and, possibly, horseback riding. We made plans to go to a horse show with Dee, where young children were participating, to see how both Dee and we felt about that possibility, and whether six is an appropriate age to start riding. Neither Margaret nor I have any familiarity with horseback riding.

The five-year-olds class at the ballet school has not been the only class Dee has taken this past year that has failed to impress me. A couple of weeks ago, I observed a swimming hip hop classes Dee was taking as an optional part of a summer program in a day-care arrangement (Margaret works full-time). I couldn't have been less impressed with both classes: seemingly disinterested, distracted instructors, desultory instruction. In both classes I observed, Dee began the session interested and engaged, and by the end she was--legitimately, in my view--tuned out and turned off, as were the other children as far as I could see. In the hip hop class, with about ten minutes to go, Dee was lying flat on her back on the floor looking at the ceiling, which seemed to be just fine with her flat-affect, college-age female instructor. I couldn't discern that Dee was any better at swimming or hip hop from attending these classes, which were pricey, I might add. My experience, albeit limited, with classes for little ones has surfaced the question for me of whether, after a time, standards come to be lowered to a point that what's going on amounts to serving little or anything beyond a custodial function.

With the horseback riding, Margaret, Dee, and I went to a horse show about ten days ago and observed some classes and competitions and talked to some riders and instructors and we were

impressed, and Dee expressed interest in riding. However, the children all looked older--nine or ten being the youngest--and an instructor told us that it would be best that Dee wait until she was at least eight before she began riding.

We are getting a new piano, which will be delivered in a week or so, and we are deciding what to do about piano lessons for Dee.

Dee is starting the first grade next week, and I know that sooner or later the issue of what Margaret and my stance should be toward school-based organized sports for her--soccer, softball, basketball, gymnastics, and so on.

So that is where things stand at the moment. It's late August and I just returned to Vermont from a three-week stay with Margaret and Dee, and Margaret and I are e-mailing back and forth about what to do about Dee's involvement in what I guess can be called extracurricular activities.

Below are excerpts of a long e-mail I just sent to Margaret today (I've edited out things that don't apply to this discussion). I think my comments get across my perspective on lessons of various types for young children, and on education and schooling generally, and even more broadly, on growing up well.

The e-mail to Margaret:

I know we have pretty much decided to keep Dee out of dance classes this year, but an experience with her last week has brought that issue back up for me. She and I were playing "hotel" [a pretend game where Dee is working the front desk of a hotel and I am checking in and inquiring about a room and rates and the restaurant and pool facilities, etc.], and in the course of that she excused herself and changed into her pink dance outfit and said she was going to take a break from her hotel duties to go to a dance class. She wrote down a "phone number" on sheet of paper that she said I (as a guest in the "hotel") could call if I needed anything. She said that someone would answer the phone and help me out, and that possibly she would answer my call because the dance class is just a flight of stairs up from where the phone is (this is how complex her thinking is in these pretend games). I asked her if it was a ballet class, and she said yes.

She spent a couple of hours around the house in her ballet outfit, including the slippers. It seemed to me as if dance classes are still on her mind, within her frame of

reference. I know there is the problem with Miss Janet and the feeling that Dee wouldn't learn anything in the six-year-old class, and that not taking dance classes this year will free up time for Dee to get into other things, and all that is legitimate. But then again, there is Dee is getting in her dance outfit and talking about going to a ballet class. I don't know if it means all that much, but it did bring up the question for me of whether it would make sense for us to explore Beginning Ballet for this coming school year [the class for seven-year-olds--Dee, again, is just turned six].

Perhaps you could make an appointment with the administration of the ballet school [I'm in Vermont] and inquire about the possibility of Dee being allowed to try Beginning Ballet one day a week even though strictly speaking she is too young for that class. Show them one of the tapes you made of Dee dancing around the house--thirty seconds ought to do it. You could level with them that in our view Dee needs the challenge and maturity of Beginning Ballet and that we are picking up some reservations in her about continuing with Miss Janet, which caused us not to go through with the Swan Lake program this summer. You could say that if they don't want to let her try Beginning Ballet and see how it goes from both their perspective and ours we'll keep Dee out of formal dance instruction this coming year.

I'm fine with Dee not doing dance this year for all the reasons we talked about. It's just that the hotel game episode brought the matter back up with me. I have strong reservations about that six-year-old class with Miss Janet. It isn't good for Dee, on the one hand, to be doing the dancing she did at Bill and Linda's house last week [she danced for at least a half hour to avant garde contemporary popular music], which was remarkable, and she was obviously having a great time, and, on the other hand, to be run through little isolated exercises in a dance class that are vastly beneath her ability level and as far as I'm concerned take the life out of dance.

We don't want to do things for the sake of doing them. The proof is in the pudding--the results something attains. Better no classes, in whatever it is, than ones that don't take Dee beyond where she is and/or bore her and turn her off. The worst thing for her is that she come to think that she has to match up with children of lesser ability and zest for life--in whatever area, books, math, art, anything--or just match up with other children period; Dee should be who she uniquely is.

The best possible dance experience for Dee was the Bill and Linda night--she could go all out, no restrictions, Bob Fosse [a great Broadway choreographer], let it fly, 100%. I hope the new Twyla Tharp and Balanchine DVDs work out. [Twyla Tharp, a modern dance choreographer; "The Catherine's Wheel." The ballet choreographer, George Balanchine: "Choreography by Balanchine." Available at Amazon.] Expose Dee to the best and let her know the sky's the limit for her, in whatever it is, and that she should have fun in whatever she does, do things all out and with joy, express her uniqueness. Schools of all kinds, I'm afraid, are populated by too many teachers that think life is 1-2-3, one-way-to-do it, be-like-everyone-else, plod-diligently-ahead. Far better for Dee to be "Frances" running credit card purchases at the "Appreciation Hotel" [the pretend hotel game] than that kind of deadening lock-step conformity.

Is tai chi a possibility if dance is put off a year? To me, tai chi seems promising, the same thing as dance, basically--promoting grace, presence, alignment, dignity, and physicality. A class a week perhaps. Get Dee a tai chi outfit. The big issue with Dee is that her talent with movement doesn't square with her chronological age. She'd be able to do tai chi with ten-year-olds, and the same with dance, but I suppose she can't get into the classes because of her age.

A possible area, up the line, I imagine, when she is older, nine or ten, perhaps eleven, is painting and, especially, my read of Dee, pencil drawings, caricatures, quick sketches, like the John Lennon drawings. [Dee has really taken to a book of drawings Beatle John Lennon did for his young son: *Real Love: Drawings for Sean*.] They would give her an expressive outlet. I don't know what age is right to begin that formally. Perhaps now she can be encouraged to copy drawings from books to get a sense of how it is done and then to do some of her own. I'm reading a book now about the artist Chuck Close [*Chuck Close: Life*] and it talks about how he did that, and Lennon did it, with James Thurber and other sketch artists [see: *Thurber: Writings and Drawings*], although Close and Lennon were older, ten or twelve.

With lessons, in anything, again the pudding point: I don't see why necessarily it has to be a big deal, high-priced instructor at the beginning. A talented high school or college student perhaps. Recruit someone through the school. Pay them a reasonable wage; whatever young people make doing part-time jobs. And maybe not even formal instruction--

somebody could just come to the house and, say, draw with Dee for an hour, or show her a few chords on the piano. The idea that things have to be sequenced and Dee has to be told exactly what to do and be compelled to practice diligently every day is open to question in my mind, especially at her young age. Classes, if that is what to call them, could be in the evening, say at 7:30, and you could be there and do whatever it is too. If it is piano, you play the chords and songs along with Dee [Margaret doesn't play the piano]. And between lessons, you and Dee play the piano from time to time, whenever the two of you are in the mood. And/or get a beginning piano book at Barnes & Noble or Amazon and the two of you use it to play some chords and songs. What about something like this: *All-in-One Course for Children: Lesson, Theory, Solo, Book 1 (Alfred's Basic Piano Library)*?

When I was writing the sports book [*Sports in the Lives of Children and Adolescents*], I looked into how the people good at something as an adult---music, sports, whatever it is---started out. Most often, it was a fun, social activity with a parent. Or just being around the activity. For example, Dee could just hang around a ballet or modern dance company rehearsing for a performance, one night a week. Just be a kind of mascot in the best sense of the word. Or hang around a professional painter, sculptor, cartoonist, anybody like that. No classes, just hang around. What you are doing with Dee with cooking is so great. Dee is just, in effect, hanging around you when you cook, and at times helping out, and in the process she's learning, most importantly, your values with regard to cooking--and with regard to a lot of things beyond cooking--to engage the endeavor seriously, that cooking is, essentially, an art, that it is self-expressive, and that it is personally rewarding when done with attention and care. That is far more important to my way of thinking than Dee learning mechanically to follow the directions in a cookbook.

I looked over the attachment of the notice the school sent you, which included a lot of sports programs Dee could get involved with now and up the line. The notice brought up concerns for me around organized sports. I know well all the positive conventional wisdom around organized sports activities. And indeed, they can be good experiences for kids, or some kids anyway. But I've personally been deeply involved with organized sports, and have been around them extensively in my work in schools, and I've read and thought and written a lot about them, and from all that I have real

concerns about their worth for Dee.

The idea of practicing every night of the week under the tight control of an adult, and wearing a number, and being told what position to play and being pulled in and out of games, and being immersed in a collective enterprise, a cog in a wheel, and putting on intense public displays for an audience at a young age, and getting told that winning is a really big thing, if not the only thing that matters--I don't know. Organized sports as it tends to play out rings too much of, or too often anyway, a bee-in-a-beehive enterprise, with the coach the queen bee; or, to switch metaphors, the dictator, or the shop foreman, or the platoon sergeant. Raises issues for me.

With organized sports these days, so often it's not just what goes on during the season; they are virtually year-round activities. There are off-season practices and training sessions, summer programs, and such--the idea is that you have to get super good at the sport, and that takes a big amount of extra work (super good at something that, for the vast majority of young people, I would argue, isn't worth the time and energy to get super good at).

Playing on these teams tends to push participants into contact with commercial sports, the sport exhibition companies, the ones that put on sport shows for paying customers, the WNBA or whatever, and hero-worshipping people who play with a ball for a living as if they are prime models of what to do with your adult life. There is nothing wrong with playing a sport professionally, and, for sure, elite athletes reflect some admirable virtues, but the idea that they are role models, and that being in the sports entertainment industry is a dream come true, which is promoted as part of the sell of that industry, is open to question in my view.

There's the opportunity cost of organized sports--all the things Dee could be doing if she weren't practicing for hours every night of the week to play third base on the softball team or whatever, and getting tired and distracted from other things in the process, and pre-occupied with the big game coming up. Like reading great books and watching great films and writing for the school newspaper and acting in plays and traveling, and a zillion other things. If we don't help Dee think through the trade-offs involved with sports I don't know who else will.

I worry about Dee getting ghettoized socially in a way, just being with her sport friends and getting exposed to their

values and ambitions, which are fine in themselves, but at the same time, she isn't spending enough time with diverse kinds of people, who see the world and themselves in other ways.

More and more, school sports, colleges on down, are emulating the pros--all out, all the time, number one priority, take it on as an identity (in our time, for many young people, athletics isn't just something they do now and again, it is something they *are*; they *are* student-athletes (note the equal emphasis), or just athletes), fit everything else into that self-conception. That gives me pause.

When I think of physical activities for Dee, I think, first of all, of camping and hiking and climbing, and individual sports like golf and bowling and archery and tennis. And if it is team sports, informal activities of the intramural sort: soccer on Wednesday afternoon, no coach, no practices, play all out and go get a Coke. And then get on with your life. Don't make a huge deal out of something that can be a very good deal indeed, but nevertheless it is a small deal in the grand scheme of a life well lived; or anyway it is for most people. The problem I see is that what works for some people in sport becomes the norm, the expectation, for just about everybody who engages in it.

It perhaps doesn't sound like it, but I love sport, I really do, and I want sport and movement, physical expression, physicality, physical development, to be part of Dee's life. But at the same, I think organized sports have gotten out of hand in schools at all levels, and I want us to protect Dee from that overemphasis the best we can. Or at least discuss with Dee our concerns about it, or my concerns at least, I'm not completely sure where you are with it, and listen hard to what she thinks and why. Which is not to say I think we ought to dictate to Dee that she stay away from organized sports, try to stop her from playing, anything like that. More, I'm saying we ought to share with her what we think and its rationale, whatever that is.

And as we do that, we ought to make clear to her that we aren't sages from on high. All of what I've said in this message is offered with an understanding of my own limitations in knowledge and wisdom, and that I'm not the last word on anything. But I do love Dee with all my heart and want the best for her. Dee is a bright girl, but she is only six, and she needs protection and guidance and the very best insights we can offer her. And she'll need that at ten and twelve and sixteen and twenty-two. I work with university

students, and I know just how young and new to the world they are. They need adult wisdom and guidance.

If we remain silent or passive around sports, it's not as if Dee will then be able to choose her way forward in sports free from outside influence. We will not be the only people and ideas in her life. She is going to be exposed to strong messages, pressures really, from the sport establishment, as it were: schools, which are heavily invested in organized sports; people who earn a living from sports, coaches, athletic trainers, athletic administrators, equipment manufacturers, and the rest; the media, television, newspapers, etc., which make a profit off the ballgames; and the sport industry, the Yankees and Cowboys and so on. And just generally, there is a clear conventional wisdom or orthodoxy around the place and worth of organized sports in children's lives within which she will be immersed as she grows up. A powerful influence on her likely, her peers will be letting her know what she should think and do around sports. We will be just one voice among many, and I don't see why we, her parents, should remain silent and passive, while these other voices are so vocal and insistent.

At the same time as I say all this, I fully realize that it's Dee's life to live, not mine, not ours, and that ultimately, and especially the older she gets, it's her choice as to how to live it. What we can try to do is empower her to chart her own way forward by enriching her awareness and understanding and letting her know that she can make a call on the place that sports will have in her life, that it doesn't have to be a matter of her simply believing what's out there and going with the flow. And, when she makes that call, we can support her 100%.

That's what I just wrote in the e-mail, and I just sent it. I'll wait for Margaret's reply.