

How We Learn

Theme Description

The stories in this theme focus on the many ways that people learn and grow. From formal teaching in classrooms and colleges to lessons picked up from parents and employers, these stories discuss the lifelong process of receiving an education.

1) Earle Peterson

File Name: 1.Earle_Peterson_FarmKid_Education

Interviewed: 2013

Biographical Info: *Earle Peterson was born in 1933 in Yonkers, New York and grew up on a farm. He has a doctorate in veterinary medicine from Cornell University, and he worked as a veterinarian on farms and in an animal hospital. He established the Greenwoods Conservancy in Burlington, New York and was one of the founders of the Otsego Land Trust in Cooperstown, New York, both of which are dedicated to protecting the local environment.*

The school bus came within a mile of our farm, so I only had to walk a mile to the bus. Bus kids were basically farm kids, and when you went to the high school, there were town kids and bus kids – farm kids. And the farm kids, I recall that when it came time for me to go to high school, they said “He’s a farm kid, he’s going to take Ag and Shop as his major.” Whereas the town kids, they would be saying, “They’re going to go college and they’re going to go to business school, and they’re going to become secretaries and whatever,” but the farm kids were expected, I would say they dumbed us down. I didn’t know what a college was—even though my mother had attended college, and she had majored in, of all things, Classical Greek and Latin, which was an acceptable thing for a woman to do. It wouldn’t be acceptable for her to take many of the other majors that are open to young people today. But she never really got an opportunity. She did teach. She taught English to young Swedish immigrants, and it was there that my father met her, taking a course in how to speak English, and that is how they had met. In high school, I majored in Agriculture, that’s what you did as a farm kid pretty much, and two of my teachers, a History teacher and an English teacher, had sent to Cornell for an application and applied to Cornell on my behalf. I didn’t know it. And so, I went to Cornell. I was the first person from our village who had gone through grade school in the village to go to college.

Sample question prompts:

- How did far did you and/or your kids travel to get to school? How did you get there?
- What did you study in school?
- Did you go to college, and if so, did you have help getting there?
- Did people expect you or your family members to do a particular thing in school, based on your background?
- Sometimes society expects you to take a certain path in life—have you ever had that feeling, and did you want to take that path?
- The mother in this story went to college, and the major she chose was considered “acceptable” for women. Have you seen women pushed in certain directions in their education?

2) Fran Plank

File Name: 2.Fran_Plank_Misbehaving

Interviewed: 2010

Biographical Info: *Fran Plank was born Francelia Roiter in Schenectady, New York in 1938. She attended the University of Rochester and worked as a teacher for a while before raising children. In this story, she talks about making mischief as a child and what she learned from her punishment.*

Fran Plank [FP]: I had a good time in school. One thing I do remember, if you can believe it, I had long black ringlets halfway down my back which my mother always put up on rags which I also did not like very well. She always put a big bow in my hair when I went to school. Well, I didn't want any big bows in my hair so I took them off, stuck them in my desk and then toward the end of the school year, I had this desk full of bows. So now what am I going to do? So I took them and I stuffed them down the storm drain on the way home from school. Another thing I would do on the way home from school, I was curious and I liked to check out people's bathrooms, so I stopped at a different house every several days on the way home and asked if I could use their bathroom. Well, one day I must have hit the same person twice and she told me she thought I could wait until I got home. So I thought, well okay, I guess we won't do that anymore! One other time, and I was only in first grade, a new family had come in and there was a little girl in kindergarten that I was supposed to pick up and bring home from kindergarten. Well I didn't remember, I totally forgot. I got home and I guess her mother called my mother, well where was Carolyn? And I said well I don't know, maybe she's hiding in the clothes basket in the basement. Well, the truth came out and I was back in my doghouse.

Interviewer: So did your mischief ever get you into trouble?

FP: Oh yes! I just found out a short time ago that one time my sister really ratted on me. I was in what we would call junior high then and was going to go to a movie with some friends. But I liked to buy comic books and my mother would let me buy one once in a while. Well, one day I decided I wanted some more. My sister said she went with me, I don't remember that, but I guess she probably did. My mother, she was pretty savvy, she knew I was up to no good. So I went and bought some comic books and she found out about it and I did not get to go to the movie. My sister did, my friends did, and I got to go to Sears with my dad! So sneaking didn't work real well.

Interviewer: So would you say that your parents were pretty strict?

FP: They were very fair. I would get spanked. A really annoying thing is I can never remember a time when I didn't deserve it. They were very, what shall I say...consistent, you know? This is good, this is not so good. You do this, you're fine and dandy, you do this, well, you take the consequences. So I learned very early on that I better be ready to take the consequences if I was going to get myself into jams.

Sample question prompts:

- Did your family have strict rules when you were growing up?
- If you raised children, were you strict with them?

- What sorts of lessons do people, young and old, learn when they make mistakes?
- Did you ever get away with doing something you should have done, but still regret it?

3) Kenyon Parsons

File name: 3.Kenyon_Parsons_Learn_to_Grow

Interviewed: 2016

Biographical Info: *Kenyon Parsons was born in 1966. He worked on his family's dairy farm in Sharon Springs, New York before attending Syracuse University and receiving a graduate degree from the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. After returning to his family's dairy farm, he converted it into Parsons Vegetable Farm. In this clip, he talks about how growing organic crops can be difficult.*

Kenyon Parsons [KP]: You can grow anything, but I'm willing to spend a certain amount of time on any one crop, and if a crop starts to turn into too much work for the return, I just dump it. It's not worth it. That said, we still mess around with stuff. It takes three years for me to really hate something. The first year, I probably will blame it on doing it wrong myself. The second year, I'll blame it on the weather. And the third year, I either hit it or I'll just give up. . . I'm trying to be a better grower. I'm not organic. I should have been just because my management was pretty low spray anyway. It's just in the last few years, in this spot in the world, more and more people are asking me if it was organic. . .

Interviewer: Have you thought about trying to go more organic?

KP: Yeah, I have about ten acres that is organic. I don't know quite what crop I want to mess around with for that. My neighbors do organic garlic. That's no real trick. The people that impress me are the people that are trying to do organic sweet corn. That's a labor of love. I don't know how to do that. It would be fun to learn how to do that. Most of this stuff, my only complaint about organic was the fertilizer cost is brutal. If you can get your organic matter levels up to where you want, then your initial fertilizer cost sucks, but it gets better. But that first hit is just horrible. If I could kind of try to do more cover crops. In the last couple years, we have been trying to improve the soil more. I did it before to sell the straw and now I can really see the benefits of it besides the straw. It's not just the crop to sell. It's okay to have stuff in the ground. A couple acres of tillage radishes just to see what it will do for compaction, and that's kind of fun. It's fun to grow some stuff. It's fun to mess around. Otherwise, it just becomes drudge, you know?

Sample question prompts:

- Can you tell me about a time you tried to grow something?
- Who taught you how to grow plants?
- The man in this story talks about a three-year process of trying out new crops—the first year if things go wrong it's his mistake, the second year it's the weather, and the third year if it still doesn't work he gives up. Is there anything like this in your life, maybe a cooking recipe or a song or a new skill?
- Have you found that trying out new things in your own work makes your tasks more fun?

4) Mary Ellen Fenner

File Name: 4.MaryEllen_Fenner_Reading__During_Retirement

Interviewed: 2009

Biographical Info: *Mary Ellen Fenner was born in 1929 in Cooperstown, New York, and raised three children in Herkimer, New York. Mrs. Fenner attended Oberlin College and Cornell University. She is a talented musician and has played an active role in her community. In this story, she talks about continuing her education in her retirement by reading books.*

Interviewer: It seems after he retired you guys kept pretty busy.

Mary Ellen Fenner [MEF]: Yes we did. Actually very busy. Someday too busy. You know, it just, uh, well, it doesn't matter. I've been doing a lot of reading lately or trying to.

Interviewer: What type of reading?

MEF: Well I've read two of the most wonderful books lately. I read the book on, uh, the second President of the United States, you know.

Interviewer: John Adams?

MEF: John Adams. What an interesting character, oh, I just loved him. So then I, someone over there, somewhere I heard a review on the one on Ben Franklin by Isaacson and that's the one I'm almost finished with now. I can't say that I like that character as well. But he's, but it's certainly an eye opener to how things were like in those days. One thing I didn't mention to you is that when I went to Oberlin I had hoped to major in history. And my history teacher was this over-educated person who used to—I say that because he had this big reputation. He'd pace back and forth and lectured every morning at 8 o'clock, five days a week. And when the first exam came, I couldn't even understand the questions. I didn't know how to think in concepts in those days and I thought I'm never going to make it, you know, as a history major. Which is really too bad because I think with a little, with the help I got from the English teacher, I learned more about concepts then and that I ever had before and seemed to be reason more effectively than I did then. So I'm making up for lost time.

Interviewer: Do you have any particular favorite era of history?

MEF: Well I've been interested in this one right at the moment. Uh, I don't know it depends. I buy too many books, I know that. And then I get sidetracked by Cindy who's a school librarian—I guess I didn't mention that. And, so whenever she has a new book she recommends, and she recommend one recently which I bought called March by somebody named Brooks. I don't know what it's about because I just have it and it'll probably be the next one I read. But it's probably, not a teenage book, she's dealing with high school students. And the last one she recommended that was just wonderful was called The Book Thief, have you ever heard of that book? Golly that's a nice book. So that's fun just going back and forth, you know, between the stuff she's letting me read. See her stuff is easier to read than Franklin. This book I got kinda bogged down with—strange character. But anyway I guess now I've covered everything.

Sample question prompts:

- Have you ever been much of a reader? If so, what do you like to read?
- If you're retired, how would you say learning is different in retirement?
- What kinds of things can you learn outside of school that you never learned in school?
- Do you write at all—maybe letters, a diary, record-keeping, or stories? If so, why is it important to you?

5) David Plank

File Name: 5.David_Plank_Treating_Students_Equally

Interviewed: 2010

Biographical Info: *David Plank was born in 1938 in St. Johnsville, New York. He attended the University of Rochester and taught for four years before becoming an Episcopal priest. In this story, he talks about the values he learned in school.*

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little bit about going to school in St. Johnsville?

David Plank [DP]: Well you know the old stories about having to walk through snowstorms and all that. I did. I had to walk a mile to school. It was an old building. My mother went there, I went there. The floors, when they were cleaned they had oil on them. If there was a fire, there were two stories so it would have been a disaster. Every year the dental hygienist came and cleaned everybody's teeth free and did a check, which was a very great service. The problem was if you didn't have a dentist or couldn't afford a dentist there was nothing to do about the cavities that were found. And we had vaccinations. So in 1950 they built a new elementary school and that's where my mother went to be a secretary. My sister was in first grade when that happened. It was a small high school. And the course offering was limited. But somehow I think we got, I got, a good education. I went to the University of Rochester and was outclassed academically by kids from the city and from the New York suburbs who had all kinds of educational advantages. But I nevertheless think I had a good educational experience. It was broad, and I think we learned to get along with each other and to accept each other. Which I think is a great lesson.

Interviewer: How do you think they taught you that? As far as how to get along with each other.

DP: Well my sixth grade teacher really worked at that. He came...it was his first year of teaching. He'd been to college on the GI bill. And for some reason that was one of the things that he wanted to instill in us. Each person was as good as someone...as the other person. And he had bulletin boards up that would emphasize that. I was pretty smart but he never treated me any differently than any other kid. And we had two girls who were twins come to our class after the year had started and they were in foster care and their dresses were made out of flour bags and he made it so that nobody looked down on them. And he told me a few years ago before he died, he said that "when they came to my class I really did not know what to do" and he said, and I'm only saying this because he told me, he said that I had somehow helped him to be able to incorporate them into the class. And I think my mother instilled that in me because I always tried to reach out to the ones who were different or poor. And I think because it was so small everybody knew everybody and you sort of just accepted them for who they were.

Sample question prompts:

- The boy in this story learned an important life lesson when his teacher made the class treat the two girls in foster care with respect. Did you go to school with people who were different than you, and how were they treated?
- Do any of your teachers or mentors, either in or out of school, have an especially strong influence on your life?
- Do you think your education prepared you for the rest of your life?
- In this story, the man remembers dental visits and vaccinations at his school. What kinds of services have you seen schools provide, beyond basic teaching?

6) Charlotte Collett

File Name: 6.Charlotte_Collett_Music_Politics

Interviewed: 2016

Biographical Info: *Charlotte Collett was born in Harlem, New York in 1951. She grew up in government housing during the 1950s and 60s, and attended the State University of New York at Old Westbury, Columbia Teacher’s College, and received a PhD from New York University. In addition to teaching in New York City public schools for over 30 years, she has played the violin and sung the blues around the world. In this story, she talks about her own educational path.*

Anyway, I played violin and sang in the chorus in middle school and then applied to Music and Arts High School and the High School of Performing Arts, which at that time was located on West 46th Street in the theater district. Music and Art was in Harlem near City College, so I ended up going there. In elementary school I had a guidance counselor named Mrs. Giddings. She was the only black professional who worked at the school. All of the other blacks worked in the cafeteria.

She [Mrs. Giddings] recommended that I get a scholarship at something called the Metropolitan Music School, which was located off Central Park West in the 70s. And Paul Robeson’s granddaughter was going to school there too. She was taking music lessons there. I decided to go to Music and Art instead of Performing Arts High School. They both are now combined as Fiorello H. La Guardia School of Performing and the Arts. It’s now located at Lincoln Center in the Lincoln Center Area. I went to high school in Harlem and Miriam Makeba’s daughter was in my school. She went to Music and Art at that time.

I just remember we organized something called “Music and Art Students against the War in Vietnam.” We joined with other high schools throughout the city to organize against the war. I was once told by one of my history teachers, that I was the best example of participatory democracy she had, because I was always out with my bullhorn or passing out leaflets. I worked with a girl named Laurie. I can’t remember her last name, but we would write flyers against the war or whatever political thing was going on at the time.

We decided we would use at least two or three new vocabulary words, so we would learn something as we were writing our leaflets and stuff. So I went there and one day in homeroom I was asked by a student, because I was known as being politically active, if I would come to her to a meeting across the park, Morningside Park, on the other side, down in Harlem proper, and

she asked me if I would be willing to tutor black kids after school? I said, of course I would love to do that.

I went with her to a meeting and it turned out to be some kids from SUNY, State University of New York at Old Westbury on Long Island. I met these students there and hadn't thought much about going to college. College is something people have to talk to you about as you grow up. You have to have some kind of contact and know how to negotiate the world outside of your home. Someone has to kind of guide you there.

At any event, I went to this meeting and I ended up visiting SUNY Old Westbury and ended up applying to SUNY Old Westbury. I got in. That's how I got to college. That was an interesting experience. I was there for four years, and college wasn't enough even then. I graduated in 1974, probably before you were born. I applied to Columbia Teacher's College.

Sample question prompts:

- Did you do any extracurricular activities in school—music, art, sports, clubs, etc.?
- The young girls in this story spent time protesting the war in Vietnam. Do you think getting involved in politics is an important part of education?
- Over the course of your life, how have you learned about politics and government—either in or out of school?
- When you were growing up, did most of the people around you go to college? Is it any different now?

7) Orrin Higgins

File Name: 7.Orrin_Higgins_Downsides_of_Technology

Interviewed: 2014

Biographical Info: *Orrin Higgins was born in 1940 in Hunter, New York. He worked in law enforcement for more than twenty years. Higgins was a state trooper, a judge, and the town justice of Hartwick, New York. In this story, he talks about his moral issues with learning to adapt to new technology.*

And I know all the high technology has a lot of advantages, especially in the field of medicine and all that type of stuff and as far as emergency calls: police, fire, it's a great thing. But I see it as a day-to-day thing where people just walk down the sidewalk and they got a cell phone to their ear, and it's a wonder they know where they're going. I know I have a grandson that came from Washington, state of Washington, and we were driving somewhere, and he's in the seat there with his iPod, or whatever it is, his tablet there, and he could have been back home in his backyard for all he was taking in and acknowledging and when I said something to him about, you know, "Look at the environment, look at the farms, look at the animals in the field, look at this," he just didn't have any interest, and when you travel 3,000 miles to an area that's unfamiliar I would think that you would want to take in your environment, to take in where you are. Technology has made the world smaller, it's drawn the people closer together in a lot of ways, such as your demonstrations in some countries. They're more up on what's going on and things, and as I say I realize that, and that's a positive aspect of it. But as I say, it seems to have a negative aspect also to go along with it, and that's what troubles me is that they seem to be unaware and unconscious of the present. I grew up right after the Second World War. We grew

up poor and we were very lucky, I guess, to eventually have a TV in the home, and that made quite a change for us all, just having a television in the home. And there again, it led to more couch potato type of existence in some ways because we weren't out on the street playing Kick the Can or Hide and Seek and on the street. We were in there watching Tom Mix or Roy Rogers or Lassie or some of those other shows at the time. So that was, as I say, I guess that was a change for us, that was the beginning of the electronic, technical world, but, other than that, it was a slower pace, I guess, the changes were slower paced. It didn't seem like we had big changes within five years like we have now. It seems like every five years or whatever everything has changed. I guess, I'm at the age, I kind of want to stay in the twentieth century and yet I see all these changes around me and I just sit back and just say to myself, "Well, I wish you luck, I hope it all works out for ya." [chuckle] I know there's nice, wonderful, positive benefits to a lot of this, but, as I say, I also see the other side which is probably because I'm older and getting older all the time, and the changes become more and more difficult I guess.

Sample question prompts:

- Can you tell me about a time you learned to use a new technology?
- Is it easy or hard for you to learn to use new technology?
- The man in this story talks about how having a TV made him less likely to spend time outside. Was this the case in your life?
- Do you think there are things you can learn from TV, computers, and other newer devices that weren't possible before?
- Do you think that technology is changing faster today than it was when you were younger? How do you feel about the changes?

8) John Dunlap

File Name: 8.John_Dunlap_Dyslexia

Interviewed: 2015

Biographical Info:

John Dunlap was born in New Rochelle, New York in 1940. His dyslexia had a major impact on his education, and with the help of teachers he graduated from the Taft School and attended Johns Hopkins University. When the Vietnam War began, he joined the Air Force and became an officer. After serving for nearly five years, Dunlap came home to the United States but was unhappy with civilian life. He taught English in Laos and Indonesia before moving to Cooperstown, NY. In this story, he talks about what motivated him to teach.

I went to school in a private school. Thornton-Donovan School, an interesting place that was run by two ancient ladies from England, wonderful, wonderful people. I was a dyslexic kid. I had lots of problems and Bertha, the eldest, I think, no, the second of the girls, she was about eighty-five, and she taught me how to read. I was quite a burden as you can imagine. Dyslexia wasn't even [recognized as a disability]—they didn't have any idea what it was. It kind of relegated people who had that kind problem. I went to public school until they asked me to leave. Anyway, I grew up there in New Rochelle for a few years until I was about eight or nine [fourteen years old] and then we moved to Larchmont, New York. And then I started traveling by train to Rye Country Day School. I went there with my sister and other friends. Have I told you what you wanted to know or do you want me to go on? Okay, well after I went there for a while and I graduated the eighth grade or the ninth grade, my parents put me into a private school, the Taft

School in Watertown, Connecticut [which was] one of a group of prep schools in the area. They were all pretty good. They put up with me for a while, I mean they didn't kick me out or anything, but you know, I had to repeat eighth grade. Dyslexia really had an effect on me for a long period of time. Oh how I got into teaching...I think it had something to do with the fact that I was a dyslexic kid and teachers really made the difference in my life. I was a difficult child, because of that, you know. Now they have names for it, I don't know. So, it seemed like a reasonable way to go. I taught, also, when I was living in the Philippines. I studied some in the Philippines too, but I was in the military. I became interested in teaching perhaps through that, but then I was sent to Thailand during the war and I had relationships with young kids, their moms, and dads in Nakhon Phanom, which is northeastern Thailand. I taught little girls a little English, you know that kind of thing. I've always been interested in teaching and studying. I mean I'm still a student.

Sample question prompts:

- Have you ever had any problems learning—either in school or out of school?
- In this story, we hear about the teachers that inspired a young boy. Who inspired you in your own work?
- Have you been a mentor to anyone who was trying to learn something?
- Have you ever learned to speak a different language? Did your family speak any different languages in the home?

9) Roger MacMillan

File name: 9.Roger_MacMillan_Learning_Priorities

Interviewed: 2009

Biographical Info: *Roger MacMillan was born and raised Schenectady, New York in the years surrounding World War II. He received a medical degree from Columbia Medical School in 1965. MacMillan moved to Cooperstown, New York, to work at Bassett Hospital. In his story, he talks about learning from his patients.*

I graduated in the class of '65. We were trying to learn to become doctors. It was the Kennedy era and all of that, so we didn't have too much political stuff going on. I remember Kennedy was assassinated, that was a day I'll never forget, like everyone else. And that was the day that I learned a lesson as a doctor that every doctor should learn. Will learn, but certainly by listening to this story will never forget. I had a clinic called Well Baby Clinic, this was when I was in pediatrics, and the mothers would bring in their 4-6 week old infants who were allegedly well babies. And you would ask, "How are things going" and listen and check them all over, and the baby was in fact a well baby. I came back that afternoon and I think the clinic started at 1:00, I can't remember.

Anyway, I looked at my roster and I had a mother with a baby in the room already waiting for me. And I suddenly heard an urgent page, a voice page because we didn't have phone pagers, so I heard all these urgent pages for H. Huston Barrett, a professor of neurology, and J. Lawrence Poole the professor of neurosurgery. And I'm saying, what the hell is happening with these urgent pages? Well, basically Kennedy had been shot in the head and they were calling for the neurologist and surgeon, and the idea had been that a plane was being readied. Incredibly quickly. The plane was being readied at LaGuardia and they were going to fly these guys to

Dallas. Well of course, then he died, so they stopped that whole deal. So I walk into this mother, Kelsey, and I say, “Mrs. So-and-so, you’ll never believe this news, President Kennedy has just been assassinated in Dallas and he’s dead!” And she said, “Oh isn’t that something. Now, Doctor, about my baby...” You see? You learn the priorities really quickly. Even though the President of the United States had just been assassinated. You learn right away what people’s priorities are in life. It was a very, very good lesson that I learned that day in about two milliseconds.

Sample question prompts:

- Do you have children? If so, what lessons did you learn from being a parent?
- What kinds of priorities do families have?
- In this story, the assassination of JFK was the major event that inspired this lesson. What major moments affected your own life, whether large-scale political events or personal moments?