

## IDLE CURIOSITY

The Philosopher: When Newton looked at his famous apple, was there anyone there who said, "Now, Newton, look at this apple, I say! Consider the apple. First, it is round. Second, it is red. Third, it is sweet. This is the Truth about apples. Now let me see if you have grasped what I have told you. What are the three leading facts about apples? What! Don't you remember? Shame on you! I fear I will have to report you to the mayor!" --did anything like that happen?

The Teacher: Newton was not a child.

The Philosopher: You should have talked to Newton's family about him. This is just what they said he was... was Newton busy when he lay down under that tree? Did he have an appointment with the apple? Did he say he would give it ten minutes, and come again the next day if it seemed worthwhile? What is disinterested curiosity, in plain English?

The Teacher: Idle curiosity--I fear.

(From "The Child" by Floyd Dell, reprinted in Thinking, Vol. 1, Nos. 3 & 4, p. 7.)

I have just completed participation in the second year of a philosophy for children program at the Ransom Public Library in Plainwell, Michigan. Both years have been sponsored by the Michigan Council for the Humanities, which has awarded the library two grants to run the program. Director of the program is Jan Park, head librarian. It was my pleasure to meet with different groups of 4th and 5th graders during this time to discuss Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery and related materials.

This program was entirely voluntary for the children. We met once a week after school in the library. There were times when I wished we were meeting more often, especially when we had to leave conversations unfinished. However, each week I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the topics of the previous

week had received further consideration through conversations among the children during the interim. So, each week they were eager to continue where we had left off. One of the most exciting features of our sessions is that I could never predict the twists and turns our discussions might take. "Lesson plans" seldom carried the day. Topics considered included: whether people are animals; what fairness is; the nature of belief, evidence and proof; the relationship between the brain and the mind; whether computers can think; whether we can control our dreams; and what it might be like to be a cat.

I was continually amazed at the philosophical quality of our discussions. Many times I had difficulty finding an opportunity to enter into the discussions. At times my students were so eager to comment that they all burst out at once. And they stayed on the topics. Departures from lesson plans bother some teachers. We live in a time of accountability. We must make plans, stick to them, and produce results that are measurable. Fortunately, there was no special need for me to be bound by such principles of accountability. But we did make a videotape so that others ) might view a sampling of what we were doing.

Recently the videotape was shown to a group of teachers in another part of the state. The videotape begins with my asking the students if they believe that computers can think. The main topic of conversation has to do with relationships between minds, brains, and machines. About 5 minutes of the 30 minute discussion consist of the students reflecting on what it might be like to be a cat. One of the teachers afterward asked me if I often permitted "digressions" like this to occur. Another

commented that she hardly had time to allow digressions from lesson plans. Both comments reminded me of Newton's appointment with the apple. In fact, the conversation about what it is like to be a cat was not a digression from the topic at all--it actually had an important bearing on the main issue. But, in this case, I don't think it would have mattered if it were a digression. The closing remarks made during this "digression" will make clear why I think it would not have mattered.

Rick was apparently not satisfied with the other students' speculations about how cats see things. Here is what he said: It's hard to think of if a cat would say, "I wonder what those people sound like." They may not even know what people are. They may just go 'buhlalalala' inside their minds. We don't know it. Like, if you had a wish and you wished you were an animal, you'd probably think like yourself and say, "Oh, this is what a cat feels like." But, then, if you do that, you don't know what it feels like because you're still kind of feeling part of a human. So you should wish you were just like a cat for one whole day with the natural instincts of a cat and you don't know anything about humans. You'd just act like a cat, and you wouldn't really know any human words or anything, unless cats do.

I then asked, "If you were a cat for a day, and you were really like a cat, do you think that, when you became yourself again, that you would remember what it was like to be a cat?" This was immediately followed by a chorus of yes's from the group. Then there was a loud voice of opposition, "No! No!". I asked Rick why not. He continued:

Because, if you're thinking just like a cat, you won't remember what it's like because maybe they may not know what "remember" is like. If you're not remembering why you became a cat, you might just think you were a cat all of your life. And maybe you've used up eight of your lives already. So you wouldn't remember it.

Now, it would be an exaggeration to match Rick's insight up with Newton's reflections about the falling apple. But I don't think I would trade the "idle curiosity" that culminated in his remarks for even three good lesson plans.

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