

Follow the Child

by Ann Jerome Croce

I am an introspective kind of Friend who considers every decision carefully. It takes me days to mull over a ten-minute conversation and months to work up to buying a new pair of jeans. Imagine my surprise when I became the mother of a child who has always known exactly who she is and what she wants.

One of my first clues was when we would play that game where the baby sits in the high chair and drops a toy from the tray onto the floor. My role, of course, was to pick up the toy and return it to the tray,

My baby, living ten hours from home at age 12?

again and again. But Elizabeth wrote her own rules. Whenever I handed the toy back to her, she hurled it down again with a pointed purse of the lips: what she had dropped, she intended to stay dropped.

Elizabeth was a people person even as a young child. By age four she seemed to know more people in our town than I did. She'd circulate while we waited for our order in restaurants; and when we rose to leave, the whole room would call out, "Bye, Elizabeth!" Her self-confident forays often brought me to the brink of panic in stores, and her innate trust in human nature made our "Don't talk to strangers" discussion incomprehensible.

One evening when she was 12, Elizabeth catalyzed a turning point in our lives. Discouraged by the local prospects for middle school, I was perusing websites of alternative schools, fishing for ideas about how we might meet her needs in our small Florida town. I heard her come through the doorway behind me; stop just off my

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left shoulder, and after a one-breath moment announce, "I'm going there."

There was an unimaginable step. It was the Arthur Morgan School, a Quaker boarding middle school in western North Carolina. It looked idyllic on the website—but my baby, ten hours from home at age 12?

Boarding schools have been the backbone of Friends education since the 18th century, fostering both conviction and lifelong commitment. Countless Friends have been in my position as a parent, weighing the benefits of a boarding school education against the costs. A Friends boarding school is a more dedicated Quaker community than many of us can provide at home, offering a context in which children can grow into young adults with confidence and a fully grounded experience of Quaker values and process.

My own life's course was touched profoundly by the two years I taught at Westtown School, where I experienced Friends community at its fullest and best. I have yearned for a similar community for both myself and my children ever since. But even as an as-yet-childless 22-year-old dorm faculty member, I was certain that I could never send my own children away to school. My students there were vibrant and excited about entering into adulthood with gusto, and as frustrating and challenging as teenagers could sometimes be, I knew that when I had one of my own I would want to keep him or her close to me for as long as I could.

Moreover, the youngest students at Westtown were ninth graders, and nearly all of them seemed to me too young to be away from home. Even some of my Westtown juniors and seniors struggled with the separation from their families. Elizabeth would be entering seventh grade. It

Elizabeth Croce
at Arthur Morgan School



was unthinkable.

And yet, as we explored Arthur Morgan School from a distance and then with the three-day, two-night visit required of applicants, the unthinkable seemed increasingly unavoidable.

As a parent, and I think especially as a Quaker parent, it's natural to do a lot of self-questioning. How can we maintain simplicity in our home? Did I model peacemaking in dealing with that conflict on the playground? Does the Testimony of Equality tell me anything about how to deal with a three-year-old having a tantrum? But in the face of true clearness, there is no guessing.

I found myself grateful for my understanding of Quaker "calling," for AMS clearly was one for Elizabeth. As she put it, "I just knew in my gut that I was going there, that there was something important that would happen to me there. It didn't feel especially like it was an exciting good thing or a scary bad thing—just that it was." We enacted our own informal clearness process within the family and with a few Friends from our meeting, and from her enduring clarity I learned my own mandate: support this child's calling.

Other parents' reactions revealed to me what I was learning about parenting a

Quaker child. There were those who were shocked: "How can you think of letting her go so far from home?" There were those who were critical: "I would never let my child go so far away." There were those who tried to jump on the bandwagon but ended up on some other cart: "You're right—an exuberant kid who's a kinetic learner couldn't make it in the local schools." These reactions only highlighted for me what Elizabeth was really doing in following her Inner Light. At a very young age, she had experienced what many Friends wait a lifetime to feel, a calling that transcends worldly concerns and obstacles. Her clarity about her decision to attend AMS made it easy for me to adhere to that resounding dictate of Maria Montessori: "Follow the child."

Arthur Morgan School was founded in 1962 by Elizabeth Morgan, whose vision was shaped not only by her Quakerism but also by Mohandas Gandhi and the educational philosophies of Maria Montessori, Arthur Morgan, N.S.E. Grundtvig, and Johann Pestalozzi. Their ideas guide a hands-on, holistic, and learner-driven curriculum that fosters responsibility, self-

are heated with wood that has to be chopped and stacked; meals must be prepared and cleaned up; buildings and grounds have to be cleaned; and students walk at least a mile a day up and down the hill between the boarding houses and the classrooms. Then there are the emotional challenges arising from adolescents living together 24 hours a day, as well as from the baggage that each person brings with them. Most of the students are boarders, and many share a bedroom for the first time. And extended off-campus trips requiring strenuous physical activity and long travel with others can make things intense.



talking, and music-making, simplicity guides daily life. The AMS style of fashion is imaginatively assembled from mountain gear and thrift stores, and the buildings at the school were constructed by volunteers over the years, using many local and donated materials. The testimonies of Nonviolence and Equality are woven into the fabric of everyday interactions as well as into the curriculum. Students can choose from courses on topics such as Native peoples, civil rights, gender and GLBT issues, and hunger and homelessness, alongside their regularly required courses in language arts and mathematics.

As a friend, I value Quaker testimonies and process for their intrinsic worth. As a parent, I've seen how appropriate they are in the formative education of adolescents. AMS students have a kind of self-confidence that is seldom seen in middle schoolers. When you visit, every one of them will look you in the eye, smile, and greet you, and if you sit down to lunch with them, they can hold extended conversations on their experiences and will ask about yours. They play, tease, and push limits like anyone else their age, but it's evident that for the most part these impulses come more from adolescent mischief than from insecurity. They know from experience that they are capable of working hard and effectively and that they matter in the world. They are comfortable in their own skins.

They also know from experience how to build community. Students who break the contract they signed when they agreed to come to AMS can be sent home for a few days with a list of queries that they must answer in writing. This applies to breaches of respect for others, such as bullying, in addition to infractions such as alcohol use. In explaining this use of queries to a friend in Elizabeth's presence I referred to it as a system of discipline, and she corrected me: "It's not like a punishment or anything—it's a chance for them to think about what they did so they can come back to school and participate better. It's not discipline; it's learning." Elizabeth has already begun to lobby for more Friends education after she graduates from AMS: "Now that I've lived in a community like this, I know I can never live without it." If her life takes her places where she feels the lack of real community, AMS has given

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Courtesy of Arthur Morgan School



awareness, and engagement with the community and the world. AMS is located in the Celso community northeast of Asheville, and the natural environment of the Black Mountains provides the backdrop for hiking, mountain biking, and daily gratitude for the beauty of nature.

Life can be challenging at AMS. Everyone participates in chores at least three hours a day, more on dedicated workdays. The 27 students and 14 staff constitute the entire population of the school—no groundskeepers, no maintenance crew, no janitors. Much of the school's food is grown organically on site. The buildings

Quaker process is the mechanism that guides the school—and, in my observation, makes it all work. Conflicts are quickly brought to light and discussed until they are resolved. Weekly all-school meetings and house meetings provide a structure for regular communication of concerns, and clerkships rotate among students and faculty. Corporate decision-making prevails, with students invited to participate in decisions where appropriate. Moments of silence punctuate each day.

With no-television and no-candy policies, home-grown meals made from scratch, and free time spent in reading,

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her the vision and the skills to build it, and I suspect that she will never settle for less.

Sending Elizabeth to AMS is the single major parenting decision about which I have no regrets at all, but still I can't say that it has been easy to have her so far from home. She is in her second year there now, and though I've gotten used to missing her, I don't miss her any less as time goes on. It has been especially difficult to be so far away when she has been ill and I wanted to nurse her even though I knew she was getting good care at school. When she achieved an enormous goal like hiking almost 50 miles through the mountains, I wanted to be there to celebrate with her. When our family dog died and the rest of us went out for a meal to remember her and commemorate her life, I was sad about the dog but my real grief was that Elizabeth was with us only by phone.

Even these feelings, though, have been an education for me. I've had to recognize that they are purely my own issue. Sometimes it is so difficult to separate our emotions from our impulses as parents that we mix them up and make mistakes. Parenting with integrity requires self-awareness, and I have gained that in these two years.

My favorite memory of Elizabeth's time at AMS so far is a moment that taught me how my role as a parent has been transformed. Two Decembers ago, the phone rang at 8:00 AM on a Saturday—of course a time that is only for emergency calls. It was Elizabeth, beside herself with an emotion that it took me a moment to recognize as joy. "Mom, I'm outside in my pajamas and slippers and when I stick my tongue out I can catch one, and there's only my footprints, nobody else's." It was her first snowfall. She was the first to wake up and see that the world had turned smooth and white overnight, and she had run right outside, grabbing the cordless phone on her way. It warmed me to realize that she chose to share this moment with me. Motherly admonitions about coats, hats, boots, and mittens melted on my own tongue as I realized that my role was, once again, to follow the child. "Darling, that's amazing! Is it good packing snow? Can you make snowballs? Tell me how the forest looks!" It was almost as if I were there frolicking with her in the snow. □

Laurence Signmond

Young Friends Need Elders

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zational, and if they work to create relations of love and respect between individuals and generations, they will create a space for discipline. Young Friends are desperately thirsty for guidance from our elders, but there must first be a vibrant relationship that enables such guidance. When elders have shown their love for us and their concern for our lives as individuals and as Friends ministers, they are in a position to speak with authority in our lives. This is not a relationship of domination, but one of loving concern and guidance. When those who love us speak to us in concern and out of their experience, we are obliged to listen to them, and perhaps even to take their advice over our own perception of a situation, trusting them and their proven record of loving us and looking out for our best interests.

An example of this arose for me in my yearly meeting while I prepared for the World Gathering of Young Friends (WGYF) in 2005. I had applied and been accepted to attend the WGYF, but it turned out that the total cost of my trip would be in the range of \$2,000. In the days before Great Plains Yearly Meeting, I became firmly convinced that it was absurd to spend that much to be in England for a week. I spoke up in the yearly meeting sessions and expressed my concern in no uncertain terms. To my great consternation, my yearly meeting was quite set on sending representation to England. In the end, both I and another Young Friend were sent to England, quite against my own judgment.

Having my elders set aside my concerns and act in direct contradiction to them was a deeply humbling experience for me. But it turned out that they were right: the WGYF *was* worth the cost. Indeed, the gathering in England was one of the most important events of my life. My elders did not simply accept at face value what I told them; in fact, they completely contradicted me. But they spoke with authority, and—I am now convinced—they spoke with a sense of the will of God. The basis of discipline is speaking with authority in relationships

of love, even when it does not fit in with the understanding of the person being brought under discipline.

Discipline sometimes means the ability to say no in love. It is a legitimate role of elders to speak with authority to matters of community faith and practice. It is in such a context where statements such as "you can be a Quaker and believe whatever you want" are challenged in a loving spirit. Young Friends are looking for communities that not only can love and support us, but have something to teach us and can hold us accountable. We are thirsty for elders who can provide a model as living compasses to keep us on the Way.

Young Friends are in a place of great transition and trials, which gives us at once great strength and great vulnerability. We



are, for the most part, physically able, mentally flexible and, in many cases, spiritually aflame. We have so much strength, passion, and spirit that we want to share with the wider body of Friends. But we need guidance. Young Friends need the support of elder Friends on every level, from the mundane and personal to the organizational. And we need discipline. Young Friends need discipline that stems from loving support, holding us accountable, and speaking with authority in our lives. We need assistance in finding and staying on the Way. Elders, we need you. □