

# Raising Global Citizens: A Father's Reflections

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A few weeks ago I read an article in Newsweek about a family of five who decided to take a long road trip. I was intrigued by the descriptions of each family member's "connection" to their myriad electronic devices and consequent isolation from each other. Five individuals traveled from New Jersey to Florida on five separate journeys and only happened to share the common space of a vehicle for convenience.

Of course, I couldn't help but reminisce about how different my family's road trips had been. By comparison, our children's travel experiences were spartan; they were devoid of electronic gadgets, and some years, when air conditioning wasn't available, we sprayed each other with squirt bottles. We were not a high tech family, but we were a family. And we were connected.

The Newsweek story started me thinking about more than a road trip; it reminded me how thankful I am for the journey our small family has taken over the last few decades. The contrast is remarkable and I began to ponder the differences: How did we raise children to be aware of their surroundings? What are the influences that lead children to become "global citizens" as opposed to children who are so focused on their means of entertainment that their immediate surrounding environment is at best irrelevant and at worst an inconvenience?

These questions caused me to reflect further on my personal journey into parenthood and the process of "intentional parenting" that my wife, Mary, and I evolved during our daughters' formative years.

I did not look forward to becoming a father. As a young man I felt awkward around little children and feared the responsibility of raising my own. Fortunately Mary was gifted in relating to children and managed to rub away a bit of my fear when we married thirty seven years ago. But I was still concerned. In the context of our surrounding culture and its forces that seemed to move children toward self absorption, I did not feel confident to help shape little human lives into persons who could rise above those forces and love God and others as much as themselves.

Mary's gifts and inclination as a mother were never in doubt; she was experienced in child care and little children loved her. Parenting for her was natural and she looked forward to it with eager anticipation, but my lack of experience and confidence caused me to think and research very carefully how we would raise our children.

I had very high expectations and wouldn't be satisfied to just raise kids who "stayed out of trouble". I wanted to produce faithful-servants-of-the-living-God type of offspring. I wanted our children to be free thinkers, lovers of nature, and zealous to further God's kingdom, children who would be strong enough to withstand the temptations of our materialistic culture. And in the end I drove Mary nearly to distraction with my continual philosophizing about how we were going to do this thing called parenting.

We decided to get pregnant.

I agonized over whether I was going to be able to bond with the squiggly, fragile little creature that was about to be born. I fretted and worried that she would be so perceptive of my terror she would be scarred for life.

Then Kresha was born and there was nothing to fear. Though she weighed only five pounds and was obviously fragile, the bond was instantaneous. All my ruminations evaporated and I only knew that this new little life was flesh of my flesh and I was willing to die for her.

Bonding with my infant daughters quickly became the most rewarding part of parenting for me. I remember a time of my life when our younger daughter Katie was about two. I was searching for wisdom through much time in prayer and study and my daily routine was to spend an hour or so in a naugahyde recliner. Katie would climb up beside me in this big chair and go through the rituals of her own daily routine. She would carefully fold the edges of her “sweeve” (the discarded sleeve of Mary’s old nightgown), insert her arm through the sweeve, place two fingers in her mouth and begin her morning journey to wherever her imagination would take her. Occasionally she would suddenly jump down to investigate something, and then would resume her position beside me.

What a strange yet touching sight that must have been to see the two of us cuddled together in that old chair, a bearded man with intense eyes brooding over the mysteries of scripture or struggling in prayer and a light hearted toddler with bright eyes dancing about in her imagination. There has been no greater gift to me than the bonding that resulted from those mornings together.

Mary and I wanted to instill in our children the values that we hold deeply, and even more importantly we wanted to make them feel secure and loved unconditionally. Those words sounded like clichés even in the 70s when we were thinking through our strategies, but we knew that if we were to succeed in raising children with our values we would need to be intentional, and the word “intentionality” became our guiding principle.

We quickly learned that one of the best ways to demonstrate to our children that we loved them without reservation was to make them feel that we valued their company. Our desire was to make being with them so enjoyable to *us* that we didn’t feel the need to “get away from the kids”. We both felt uneasy when parents were stressed by their children and felt the need to “escape”; we observed in their children the subtle recognition of not being wanted. In keeping with this somewhat unorthodox philosophy, we tried to include them in our social events as much as possible. We anticipated some negative feedback from our friends, but instead some of them chose to begin their own families after they saw how much fun children could be.

Our choice of living environments played a key role, too, in our plan for “intentional parenting.” When Kresha and Katie were preschool age we moved to a country setting that provided the ideal environment for our process. Our small house was nestled below four towering, majestic firs and a large acreage was generously available for us to explore. As part of our plan to carefully define the experiences that would shape our children’s lives, we chose to limit the toys and “stuff” they had. In the absence of these, the woods and natural setting provided an

environment for creativity to flourish. Trees were a great place to learn about insects as well as a great place to nestle in and read a book. Sticks and pine cones could be very useful. Add a little wire and the result could be – surprising.

Sometimes creativity led to natural concoctions meant for human consumption. “Nature soup” holds gastronomic memories for all of us.

We spent many happy hours investigating the unusual formations of land, trees, and rocks in the surrounding pasture and woods north of our place and have fond memories of times we spent learning “how things work”. Well, fond for me at least. (Apparently the “how things work” part was at times overlaid by me and exceeded my children’s need to know.) In this natural environment there were lessons to be learned about human psychology as well, lessons like how many times a six-year-old will fall for the same trick of being urgently requested to look at some amazing thing under a snow laden pine tree only to have a cascade of snow descend on her head. Apparently, quite a few times before suspicion is learned. I can still hear the shrill voice of “Daaaaad!” rising from the snowy woods.

Together, Kresha and Katie created a whole village in the woods with its own imaginary infrastructure and the two of them spent hours developing the systems needed for a village to function. *Wild Town* was the name of their village and they were proud to show us, and other visitors, their creation.

Both Mary and I are convinced that this physical setting, providing as it did myriad opportunities for the expression of their innate creativity, was one of the most formative elements in the raising our daughters.

Yet another important element in our plan for intentional parenting was our decision to limit the amount of time our children spent socializing with their peers. Since we placed a high priority on living simply, it seemed easiest to encourage this lifestyle without undue exposure to competing lifestyles. Our daughters had plenty of social contact with others through their school days and Sunday school, and did occasionally have their school friends over to visit or spend the night. Their time at home was largely focused on the simple chores that were their responsibility. They also had free time they could use for exploring.

In keeping with our desire to minimize exposure to competing lifestyles, we downplayed the watching of TV. Television was not forbidden in our house; instead we attempted to make it a family event and we watched many Public Television programs. We carefully chose our viewing and intentionally focused on specials that brought enlightenment to us of the natural world and other cultures. Musical concerts were also a mainstay of our programming menu.

Music became a unique glue, a shared interest, we used as a bonding force for our family. Music has always been an important part of our family and proved to be a natural way to instill habits of self discipline. For some reason, perhaps because we had limited financial resources, I was our daughters’ piano teacher for their early years. In spite of this, and undoubtedly by the grace of God, they both became gifted musicians, and even eventually agreed to be my voice students. Music is truly one of the central pillars of our family structure, and we share many great

memories of performances, contests and even boxes of medals, and more recently, family concerts laced with zany interpretations.

In their formative years, we tried to teach our daughters that simplicity, in all phases of life, was a choice. Again, Mary was central to this task. With her patience and enthusiasm we developed gardens in the years before she returned to full-time teaching, and she taught both of them the joy of raising and preparing our own food. She also taught them the practical ways of living simply. While still children they were given modest allowance money to buy their own clothes and learned how to be responsible and frugal. If they desired a particular piece of clothing they had to determine how much they wanted it versus the other things they wanted. They learned to prioritize their desires and keep track of their expenses in a ledger. They also learned practical skills and a work ethic and these were put to good use when they helped me build a new house in their teen years. Always the goal was to equip them to live simply so they could live in freedom from economic servitude.

In many ways we lived a slightly “counter cultural” lifestyle while not withdrawing from the dominant culture. Even after we gained the economic power to live more comfortably we continued to live frugally, in part because we wanted to equip our children with the skills to live in freedom. And in no way was this more evident than in our annual trips to the Midwest and other places.

Kresha and Katie had practiced the necessary travel drill since babyhood so they were veterans, but still there were challenges.

It was always an interesting experience to load our small station wagon with luggage for four people, and once under way our usual mode of travel was to drive non-stop to our destination, about sixteen hours to the middle of North Dakota. We packed a cooler full of food and made any necessary rest stops, but this was not a journey for the uninitiated. There were ample opportunities to learn about patience and compromise, not only in such things as the negotiation of back seat space, but in learning to adapt to various travelers’ variant senses of humor. There were endless rounds of word games and consequent arguments about the legitimacy of words, owing mostly to my slight dyslexia.

On one of our trips a book of folk songs was brought out and we all sang together, or we listened to a duet of two sopranos or best of all, to Katie’s “creative” renditions of Broadway tunes. Laughter is a good way to shorten Montana.

Another joint family venture was our annual camping excursion. We developed a deep loyalty to a small number of campgrounds and loved to return to these favorite places on a rotating basis. We were also choosy about our campsites. We developed a plan for securing the best possible campsite by circling through the campground depositing a person to secure that site while the rest of us continued the hunt. When only the driver was left in the vehicle, we backtracked to the best of the secured sites, collecting depositors along the way. The teamwork continued as each person was assigned to specific tasks as the campsite was set up. Gathering around the campfire we experienced times of quiet contemplation of the mysteries of life and other times of raucous arguments, mostly arising from word games. Again, these arguments erupted due to some

creativity in the thinking process that led one of us to see patterns the others didn't see. On one of these occasions, I apparently uttered a phrase that has become part of the family lexicon: "I have a Bible, I HAVE a Bible, I have a BIBLE." This profound thought was expressed when I suddenly realized I had a source to look up the spelling of an arcane word, a source that, sadly, proved I was wrong.

A deep love of nature has always characterized our family, but Katie's love was perhaps the deepest. From the time she was a toddler we noticed Katie was fascinated by all things little. She was strongly attuned to the natural environment and spent hours observing everything around her. One day when she was about two we were hiking, she in a back carrier, along the side of a road with a small stream running in the ditch. We came upon a cross road where the stream was emerging from a culvert and I heard her exclaim in her small but excited voice, "Oh, that's where the water comes from!" I was dumbfounded by her intense interest.

Katie's love of the small details of nature persisted through all her childhood and adolescence and even created some interesting dynamics for our family hikes. There were two of us in the family, namely Kresha and me, who wanted to move along the trail and get to the next grand vista, delighting in the adventures of rock scrambling above the timber line. Katie and Mary, however, wanted to stop and examine the flowers. (We soon learned to take different hikes in groups of two.) Mary and I were fascinated by these differences and we endeavored to nurture these "sparks" we saw in each of our daughters. (When Katie grew tall enough to see over the bear grass she too acquired a love of rock scrambling.)

In retrospect, we can see that the simplicity of our love and our lifestyle instilled in our daughters a sense of assurance and well-being at an early age. A few years ago our daughters shared with us a story that demonstrates how secure they felt as children. Katie, who was about four, asked Kresha, aged seven, if we were millionaires, and Kresha immediately responded in the affirmative that yes, we must be millionaires. In their child minds we were rich. The irony and beauty of this story is that it occurred when we as a family of four had been living for several years with an income level that was well below the "official" poverty level with no outside assistance of any kind.

Perhaps one of the most important traits we hoped to instill in our daughters was their awareness of others. Setting boundaries for our daughters was an important part of this learning process. We worked to create an environment where they could feel secure and significant but not "the center of the universe." (Unfortunately, I must confess I expressed that cliché to them on several occasions.) We were especially concerned that they learn to see themselves as strong and gifted persons and important members of our family, but at the same time we wanted to help them develop those strengths within the context of humility. We did not have a list of rules for them to follow, but rather we tried to model for them a life of intentionally exercising our skills in ways that were focused on others. Of course there were times when consequences needed to follow behavior, but we limited those times and we also learned early on that different consequences were needed for each of them.

Opening our home to travelers was an elemental part of growing the idea of the global family. For many years our family has been part of a hospitality network, called *Mennonite Your Way*.

We have received visitors from various countries and have especially enjoyed the Europeans who give us a broader perspective with their personal stories. There were many hours spent talking and laughing as we discussed different traditions or idioms: “Why are there so many animals that are driven flat along the highway?”

It was important to us to model for our children the value of service, especially intergenerational and cross-cultural connections. Mary was especially gifted for this. She took them with her on her rounds of delivering *Meals on Wheels* and introduced them to older members of our church community. They walked with us in the *Crop Walk* and marched in the *Martin Luther King Day* parade. They listened to folk music from other cultures and attended art shows. And in all of this they were learning about the greater world; they were becoming aware of the global human family.

A most formative experience for learning to serve was their participation in the Jubilee sale at our church, a large annual event which features fairly traded international crafts. Beginning in 1988 when Katie was seven, Kresha and Katie worked at this event and did whatever was needed; they unpacked boxes, served meals, listened to people tell stories of their international adventures, and helped with cleanup. We never considered that a long weekend of work would be too much for them; they were a part of the team and took great pride in their accomplishments. As the years passed, their responsibilities grew until they assumed leadership responsibilities.

Another important part of our children’s formation were the trips we took to learn about other cultures and help in the establishment of various ministries. In the summer of 1989, when Katie was only eight, the four of us joined a small group from our church and visited the Navajo mission at Hardrock, Arizona and in 1994 we worked on a project in Cozumel, Mexico. Kresha and Katie both energetically threw themselves into these projects and spent long hours with the people we were visiting, eager to learn and absorb whatever they could. Mary and I watched with admiration, and a little envy, as they with their young and flexible minds could take in and retain so much new information.

In 1992 Kresha and I traveled to Brazil with an intergenerational team from First Presbyterian Church – Spokane to work on a building project for a local ministry outreach in a very poor area of the city of Salvador in Northeastern Brazil. At fourteen she was the youngest in our group and contributed much to the social mix with her language skills and musical gifts. The experience for her was formative and led to a life long love of Latin American culture. We returned to Brazil in 2001, this time as a family of four adults, to reconnect with the people we had grown to love on our earlier trip. The connections for the “newbies”, Mary and Katie, were immediate and the musical camaraderie was even greater than the first trip with spontaneous duets between Junior’s guitar (a local leader) and Katie’s oboe.

The family international experiences were formative for both our daughters and soon they formed their own connections to Latin America and Africa. At the age of eighteen Kresha spent five months in Central America with a study program that allowed her to live for a month, away from her team mates, in a remote village in Honduras. Her later description of the realities of that experience made us proud of her endurance, and thankful we didn’t know the details. We have

images of our precious child lying sick in a hammock within a one room, dirt floor home that housed eight other people and various animals. The nearest help was a two hour hike plus a two hour vehicle ride to the nearest town where telephone contact was possible. It's better to know these things later when we can be free to feel pride unhindered by fear. Her experiences have led her to a deeper love of Latin America and its people and she continues to return to El Salvador almost annually from her home in Canada.

Katie chose to study in Belize for a term at the end of her college career and her love for that country has kept her there even to the present day. Mary and I were privileged to visit her and listen to one of her passionate lectures on the ecology of the local rainforest, a subject that she brings to life with much humor. If you've ever seen her photographs of snakes eating each other, one of which was highly venomous, (she has actually posted this photo on her blog) you will understand her deep interest in all elements of nature. Katie also poured her heart into South Africa during her three summers of work there for the South Africa Community Fund, a project that provides an introduction to post-apartheid South African culture for students from the U.S. and other countries.

My experience as a father began with reluctance on my part; I was fearful of embarking on a journey for which I felt so ill prepared, but I was surprised by the thankfulness I felt even in the early years of parenting, a thankfulness that has grown deeper over the years. Fatherhood has become by far the greatest blessing of my life. Reflecting again on the road trip of the Newsweek story, I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the gift of connection that we are blessed to have with our daughters, a gift that has been fostered and nurtured for many years, but is a sheer gift of grace nonetheless. We have attempted to raise children who are sensitive to the needs of others, are willing and able to immerse themselves in other cultures, and are engaged in caring for the natural world they love. They have taken what we've given and established their own place in the world as global citizens. I cannot imagine feeling more thankful.

Perhaps the only thing for which I do *not* feel thankful is the "downside" of raising global citizens: they tend not to live anywhere near you when you get old!