

## The Box

by *Kevin Swanson*

My parents put me in a box for one year out of my life. It was in 1975. As I recall, nobody seemed particularly happy to be in the box, but they thought it was odd that I had not been in the box for the six years of my academic journey. Looking back at that one year in my life I was in the box, I remember finding it uniform and boring, and you had to ask permission to go to the bathroom. If you weren't boxy, you weren't accepted into the main cliques down at the school playground. The goal was to achieve the 50th percentile in everything from clothing to hairstyles to vocabulary in and out of the classroom to math, science, and English. You had to be average. It would be a sin to be less than that or more than that.

I am not the only one to call modern, conventional schooling a box. It is the most common word I have heard used among my home-school friends. Most of us brought the box home with us when we started to homeschool. As the years went by, we began to shed the six sides of the box. Occasionally, we were shamed back into the box.

What would this world be like if we left every child in the box and nailed in shut with longer nails? What would this world be like if Patrick Henry had been kept in the box? His father pulled him out at 10 years of age, because Patrick could not support the confinement and toil which education required. It wasn't until he was 24 years old, that he borrowed three law books from an uncle, studied for six weeks, and passed the bar exam. Then went on to become the greatest governor of Virginia, the greatest orator in our history, and the lynchpin to establishing a free nation.

After only three months in conventional school, Thomas Edison was expelled for being an empty-headed fool. Later he said about his mother, "*She instilled in me the love and purpose of learning.*" You cannot look around your room without finding ten or fifteen inventions directly attributable to Thomas Edison.

Still considered the greatest photographer of all time, Ansel Adams was also removed from school for hyperactivity. He said of his father, "*I am certain he established the positive direction of my life that otherwise, given my native hyperactivity, could have been confused and catastrophic. I trace who I am and the direction of my development to those years of growing up in our house on the dunes, propelled especially by an internal spark tenderly kept alive and glowing by my father.*"

What would have happened if Patrick, Thomas, and Ansel had been kept in the box, and put on drugs? Thank God, every now and then, somebody gets out of the box.

Several weeks ago, I had the privilege of helping a single mom

get a little extra curriculum for her fifteen year old son. I asked her why she pulled him out, He was bored. He was an outcast. Upon further enquiry, I discovered that they had little formal curriculum, but they had been busy. I questioned her, What else have you been doing? The young man answered me, I invented a portable washer and dryer machine for travellers, and we are selling the design to a local manufacturing firm. Sheepishly, the woman admitted that they had used some of the money they could have used for curriculum to build prototypes. I couldn't believe it. I was speaking to Thomas Edison and his mother right there in our resource center in Parker, Colorado! Who was I to critique? Thank God, every now and then somebody gets out of the box.

1. The box utterly ignores the principle of individuality. As our children first started taking the nationally standardized tests we were initially delighted to see that they were achieving the 90 percentile marks. Ah, We thought, We are making a fine contribution to the homeschool mean scores on those nationally standardized tests. Fine specimens indeed. It wasn't until one of our children was scoring in the 50s and 60s that we began to wonder about the test. While this little girl doesn't do that well on her math problems, you should see the beautiful drawings she makes in the margins of her test papers! Incredible! You can imagine our horror, when the tests were returned to us, and they had forgotten to score her on her artwork! The box is very narrow and only tests a narrow band of human giftings and achievements, and they do not take into account the beautiful and highly-individualized set of gifts that God has given each of our children. I'll never forget the time I was gloating over the fact that one of our children had achieved the 99th percentile. My wife commented wryly, Yeah. But I don't see a score for character anywhere here? Where's the percentile for humility? Or honor? Or self control?

The box is uniform, standardized, and centralized. The dimensions of the box are set by Departments of Education in every state and at the federal level.

When you walk into a classroom and you tell the students either by implication, by standardized test, by the grade number over the classroom door, or by any other means, If you don't achieve 50 percentile in math, reading, literature, history, and geography, there is something wrong with you, you are sending the wrong message. Nearly half the class will be intimidated and the other half, bored.

2. The box utterly ignores the principle of life integration. It removes knowledge as far away from life application as possible. Whereas, the Bible tells us, Be doers of the Word and not hearers only, the box says keep education in a classroom. Keep education as far away from real life as possible. Keep education away from phone conversations, business transactions, family relationships, church

ministries, hospitality, and every other part of life. Just keep it away from real life!

The first day we homeschooled, we brought our children home in the box. Then, as life goes, one day we were very busy. So, we looked both ways to make sure there were no school district officials around, and I turned to Brenda my wife and said, Psss. Let's blow off school today and go visit a widow in the church. The children can recite verses and we can sing that psalm we have been working on. How about it?

#### BUT WHAT ABOUT THE FOUR CONTACT HOURS?

I'll never forget the night we were preparing for bed and my wife suddenly gasped, Emily forgot to do her grammar lesson today. It being 10:00 at night, we were reluctant to get her back out of bed, even to cap off the four contact hours required by the state. I ventured a question, What was Emily doing today, seeing as she has fallen so miserably short of state requirements?

As it turns out, she was writing a letter to Grandma. We both thought for a minute about this cruel twist of fate and then realized maybe it wasn't so bad after all. Think about it. Why do you study grammar? Is it because one day you will be 27 years old, and you will have to do your grammar lessons, every day? Are you preparing yourself to do grammar lessons everyday for the rest of your life? You are studying grammar so that you can write letters to Grandma!

As the years go by, the household hums with children 7, 9, 11, 13 years of age typing out letters to Grandma, cooking meals for the family in the church who just had a baby, making business phone calls for me, doing research on the legislature's website for my next legislative update on the website, pulling together research for the radio program, and a hundred other projects.

Did you ever wonder why A students grow up and teach, and B students end up working for C students? Thank God there are a few that make it out of the box.

4. The box utterly ignores the principle of relationship and nurturing the hearts of our children. You will never be a teacher, a pastor, or a mentor, until you can look at those that you lead and say, They are my friends. Jesus called his disciples friends, and then he laid down his life for them. Do you think they were inclined to listen to his teachings then? Since the 19th century, churches, schools, and even businesses are filled with programs and systems designed to efficiently process people and information. But they are hopeless at reaching the true heart of faith and character. They simply do not understand the power of relationships. How can you be careful not to extinguish the flame, when you never saw a flame to begin with? I didn't understand the power of relationships until I began to work side by side with my son for 12-14 hours a day. I had to be with him long enough to sin against him and ask his forgiveness. The long hard days began to solidify our relationship. Eventually, I would come to see his struggles, and he would see mine. It was inevitable.

Now I miss him, when he is not with me. I am his teacher, but he is my friend. I remember when I was in the box, it was lonely. Thank God, there are some that make it out of the box.

5. The box utterly ignores the freedom that Christ provides by his life. As western civilization has increasingly abandoned a biblical way of thought and life in preference for the social systems recommended by Rousseau, Mann, Dewey, Marx, Keynes, and all the other philosophers of our times, we have climbed into a very small box indeed. Jesus said, If the Son will make you free, you will be free indeed. And, as it turns out, that freedom includes economic freedom, political freedom, and educational freedom. That is freedom that comes when we apply the principles of God's Word to real life. The world convinces us that life in the box is the good life. It's not.

#### How You Can Know When You Have Climbed Out of the Box

You know you have pretty much climbed out of the box, when you have a choice between putting your son on Ritalin or going for a year long bicycle trip across America with him, and you choose the latter.

You know you have pretty much climbed out of the box, when somebody asks your children what grade they are in, and your children give them a blank stare.

You know you have pretty much climbed out of the box, when your children look at the school bus, and turn to you and smile.

You know you have pretty much climbed out of the box, when your 14 year old son is earning more money than you do with whatever he is making out there in the garage.

You know you have pretty much climbed out of the box, when you no longer see education as something that comes in a box by UPS.

You know you have pretty much climbed out of the box, when you forget to look at your child's standardized test scores before you file them, but you listen intently when they pray and watch carefully how they treat their siblings.

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