

# Resisting the Herd

by Jan Fortune-Wood

One of my favourite books is *Possessing the Secret of Joy* by Alice Walker. It's the third in a trilogy that begins with the more famous book *The Color Purple*. It's not a story for the faint-hearted, taking up, as it does, the story of Tashi and the consequences in her life of the practice of female genital mutilation. It has one of the greatest endings of any book; the penultimate line being "resistance is the secret of joy."

A few years ago a friend who works largely in alternative and small schools education commented that doing anything with a group of home educators is like trying to herd cats. He didn't mean it as a compliment, but it is, in fact, a huge strength, and one that we need more than ever if the freedoms we enjoy as home educators are to survive for future generations.

Home educators are indeed known as an independent minded lot. Sometimes this makes the things we do together a bit trickier, but for all that I still wish that long may it continue. Cats, after all, are not setting out to be deliberately awkward; they are simply following their nature: being autonomous and independent. However, in the face of a mainstream educational establishment that sees education as a product to be consumed and families and children as units to be controlled, then we can all too easily be conceived as defiant and to be distrusted.

"Resistance is the secret of joy"

Despite talk about diversity, society and governments seem intent on deciding what is the "norm". A recent anti-home education ruling in Europe made it explicit that minorities in particular are to be targeted for integration and the recent DfES suggestion that they should be able to monitor home educators to see that we teach citizenship similarly demonstrates an urge towards conformity not only in education, but in identity. There is a distrust of anything that is 'other'.

The pressure to conform comes in a variety of packages, but most home educators feel it at some point. We've personally experienced it from good friends who feel that our decision not to use schools reflects badly on their continued use of school provision. They are particularly uneasy when they know that their own children are unhappy or deemed to be failing at school and our home educating lifestyle seems to them to be a threat – often leading them to believe that attack is the best form of defence. In the past, we also experienced it from my former employers who felt that home education was an over-protective indulgence and that we should be taking a lead in making our children 'join in' with the local culture even if it meant they were unhappy, frightened and not thriving in education or life. Our children have experienced the pressure to conform for themselves, often from school going friends who wanted to prove that they were getting something worthwhile by being forced into school. Other families are put under pressure by their extended family or neighbours, often in the name of the children's 'best interests' although words like 'conformity' and 'fitting in' are never far from the surface.

The European Convention on Human Rights enshrined in the 2000 Human Rights Act says that children have a right to an education in line with their parents' philosophy. When the DfES begins to talk about setting criteria against which *they* will judge our education they have forgotten this. The criteria are not theirs to set, they are ours and any criteria that we set for ourselves are not likely to be homogenous; there is no monolithic voice of home education. Philosophies vary. Home educating beliefs and lifestyles cover a vast range. One of the things I most value about gatherings like HES FES in the summer is the opportunity to see this vast range of family shapes, beliefs, educational styles, political opinion etc thrown alongside one another and all equally laying claims

to 'normality'.

Home educators are a wonderful illustration of the fluidity and dynamic nature of culture and identity. We educate not according to any standardised curriculum, but according to a cornucopia of philosophies, some of them based on minority cultures, some fantastically idiosyncratic and yet all of which have a matrix of links to the cultures and places in which we exist. All of us are anchored within cultural contexts, but the difference for home educators is that whilst we participate, we do not do so unquestioningly or uncritically.

What home educators miss out by not taking part in schools is not some deeply valuable cultural experience, but simply homogeneity. What we lack, or rather eschew, is the common belief that children can be fitted into neat little boxes and that their minds are no more than empty buckets waiting to be filled with the prescribed list of so called 'essentials' that so often turn out to be little more than a veneer for control and dumbing down. That is no loss at all, but is rather another sign of our independent minds and autonomy and a gift to the communities in which we live.

As home educators we network, we support one another, we share skills or resources, we share ideas and we participate in common activities where they nurture and coincide with children's intrinsic learning motivation. What we don't do is surrender that basic learning autonomy which makes home education such an exciting, unpredictable, but still eminently 'normal' human adventure. As home educators we live within given cultures in which there are huge reservoirs of accumulated knowledge; we don't throw it all out, but we do ask questions, we do criticize, we do offer new insights to society at large and to one another.

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Trying to make home educators conform might very well be likened to trying to herd cats, but that is no bad thing. There is a wonderful poem by A.S.J. Tessimond that begins,

*"Cats, no less liquid than their shadows,  
Offer no angles to the wind."*

And goes on to describe a creature that slips through loopholes, will not be pinned to rules or routes for journeys, will not learn to answer to names and is seldom truly owned (unless shot or skinned!) For those of us seeking to respect and nurture our children's autonomy; for those of us who believe that each person's intrinsic motivation is the core of life long learning, that's not such a bad analogy. We may want to gather together to reassure and support one another, to share our resources and test our ideas, but we should be proud to remain difficult to herd, at least as difficult as cats. Cats and home educators can agree with Alice Walker that RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY.