



And
the skylark
sings
with me

*Adventures in
Homeschooling and
Community-Based
Education*

David H. Albert

FOREWORD BY

Joseph Chilton Pearce, author of *"Magical Child"*

In this clear and often magical account of how David and Ellen helped their kids find ways to take charge of their own education, a universal lesson is written: real learning is much richer and more mysterious than any school can encompass, and institutional habits, rules, and assumption — which usually masquerade as scientific pedagogy — are an enormous handicap to growing up whole. Albert's intense thoughtfulness about every aspect of waking up to full humanity is a treat you should not miss.

— John Taylor Gatto, former New York State and 3-Time New York City Teacher of the Year; author, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*



An utterly fascinating critique of American education, as well as a joyous celebration of the creative potential in every child.

— Anthony Manousas, *Friends Bulletin*



This invigorating adventure story is about more than homeschooling and community-based education. It is about honoring our appetite for what is real. It is about drawing out the innate creativity and brilliance of a child.

And that's good news for the child within each of us.

— Joanna Macy, author, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*

David Albert's *And the skylark sings with me* is a beautifully told story about how he and his wife are raising their daughters outside of conventional schooling, and the amazing results that they see unfolding before them. Albert's careful descriptions of what he and his wife do to nurture, support, and direct their children's learning will give heart to parents worried that before they can help their children learn about wolves, astronomy, biology, nature, math, and music — to name a few of the subjects covered — they must become certified teachers.

A joyous and memorable book!

— Pat Farenga, President, Holt Associates,
publisher, *Growing Without Schooling*



We are tempted to say that *And the skylark sings with me* is of the greatest value to all homeschoolers. That would be a mistake. This articulate and moving description of care and love in education is of the greatest value to all parents and educators. May the inspiration in this book enter our hearts and minds as we honor children and life."

— Sambhava and Josette Luvmour, Encompass:
The Center for Natural Learning Rhythms, Nevada City, CA

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NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS

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NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS

Gabriola Island BC, Canada

I love to rise in a summer morn
When the birds sing on every tree;
The distant huntsman winds his horn.
And the skylark sings with me.
O! what sweet company.

But to go to school in a summer morn,
O! it drives all joy away;
Under a cruel eye outworn,
The little ones spend the day
In sighing and dismay.

Ah! then at times I drooping sit,
And spend many an anxious hour,
Nor in my book can I take delight,
Nor sit in learning's bower,
Worn thro' with the dreary shower.

How can the bird that is born for joy
Sit in a cage and sing?
How can a child, when fears annoy,
But droop his tender wing,
And forget his youthful spring?

O! father & mother, if buds are nip'd
And blossoms blown away,
And if the tender plants are strip'd
Of their joy in the springing day,
By sorrow and care's dismay,

How shall the summer arise in joy,
Or the summer fruits appear?
Or how shall we gather what griefs destroy,
Or bless the mellowing year,
When the blasts of winter appear?

William Blake, "The School Boy"
from *Songs of Innocence*

This book is dedicated to
Krishnamal and S. Jagannathan,
and Jyoti and Malini Desai

And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love

William Blake, "The Little Black Boy"
from *Songs of Innocence*

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Foreword

Joseph Chilton Pearce

Here is a brilliant, insightful description of the challenges with which Nature confronts perceptive parents and a clear prescription for that mediated learning critically needed by a developing intelligence and spirit if a child is to actually embrace the world, rather than be intimidated by and retreat from it.

And the skylark sings with me should now be considered the definitive work on homeschooling, that reciprocal adventure between parent and child that allows true education to take place — for both of them. It is a journal describing what happens when parents joyously enter into their offspring's unfolding and find their own fulfillment thereby. This account of the nurturing of child genius strikes me as a superb model of what all parents can do to bring forth the best in their children, and to share in the joys and riches of doing so.

David Albert gives us, with unpretentious clarity and admirable economy, as profound an insight into the development of intelligence in children as is to be found in many a ponderous professional tome. I would go so far as to say that the perennial “nature versus nurture” debate must be seriously reappraised in the light of this book. DNA might carry essential blueprints for a range of intelligence, but the environment provides the raw materials through which these blueprints are actualized, as Ali and her adopted sister Meera demonstrate. All seeds contain life, but those dropped among rocks and thorns simply stand far less chance of expressing that life than those

falling on fertile soil. When that environment provides the appropriate model-stimuli, the young spirit will flower. If environmental nurturing is not there, that same young spirit wilts.

This book stands as an urgent reminder that parents are the first and foremost environment, the fundamental determinant not just in conception and pregnancy, but through the developmental years. Meera and Ali's story is not just an account of exceptional precocity, but of exceptional parental support and guidance as well. As Albert so ably demonstrates, every child has his or her own particular genius, but it will manifest itself or not according to nurturing, the calling-forth of that genius. Here we see nature and nurture as an interdependent dynamic, rather as Meister Eckhart and the Sufi sage Ibn Arabi spoke of, creator and created "giving rise to each other."

Albert's description of the overwhelming failure of conventional schooling is unique and enlightening. Free of polemic, accusation, or casting of blame, his insightful, rather wistful perception of the tragedy schooling has inflicted upon childhood and society stands in stark contrast with the wondrous world his daughters reveal to us. To one well into the seventh decade of his journey to wherever, this marvelous magical tale brought poignant and disturbing reflections on my own childhood and semi-sleep-walk parenting, my sad witness to too many budding intelligences' failure to flower, too many promises broken. David Albert shows how it should have been for us readers, but, far more importantly, how it can be for our children, if we readers will accept the challenge presented. There are far too few Alis and Meeras — and Ellens and Davids — in our world, so take up the challenge and let there be more!

And the skylark sings with me is an intellectual tour de force that is a sheer delight to read, an elegant and graceful work of literary art; an exquisite portrait of the magical child's emergence into and embrace of the world as Great Nature intended. The text is multi-layered and filled with profound insights and discussions that will draw the perceptive reader back again and again, finding more every time. Accept then, this unique, delightful gift by reading with an open heart and mind, and share it with as many others as have ears to hear.

Saraswati

Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of peasant glee,
On a cloud I saw a child
And he laughing said to me:
“Pipe a song about a Lamb!”
So I piped with merry cheer,
“Piper, pipe that song again;”
So I piped, he wept to hear.

William Blake, “Introduction”
from *Songs of Innocence*

Saraswati had not prepared us for musicians. Serious musicians, two of them, each with very different and unique talents.

In Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva has two daughters: Lakshmi and Saraswati. A family can hope to win the blessing of one perhaps, but likely not both of at the same time. Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and abundance. We have enough for our needs, praise be, but certainly not enough to cause much envy among our friends. But Saraswati — the goddess of memory and music — has blessed our household many times over.

And so we were caught almost totally unprepared. My partner Ellen had played the flute and oboe through junior high, could carry a tune, and

enjoyed listening. Her musical tastes around the time of birth of our older daughter Ali leaned toward the political gospel of Sweet Honey and the Rock and the feminist folk-rock of Holly Near. I was a different story. Though without any childhood training to speak of, I had strong music and music history interests throughout my college years, sang in the college choir, and loved opera. I pursued virtually none of these interests for almost 15 years preceding Ali's birth, and had practically given up listening to classical music. Neither Ellen nor I had attended a classical music concert or an operatic performance in almost a decade, and counted no classical musicians, amateur or professional, among our friends.

There was the barest of threads. In my 30s, while in India, I had taken up the veena, the seven-stringed South Indian musical instrument made from the wood of the jackfruit tree. The veena is sacred to, and played by, the goddess Saraswati. I turned out to be quite good at it, for an American. The number of Americans who master the veena's intricacies beyond the beginner's level can be counted on two hands, with several fingers likely left over. I had played for religious rituals with up to 5,000 people in attendance in South India, a benefit concert in Sri Lanka, and at musical soirees in the U.S. At the time of Ali's birth, I hadn't studied the veena in several years, and rarely practiced.

Not a particularly propitious beginning for musical children, I would have thought. Ali played happily to the sounds of the Beach Boys during her first year or so, and Ellen and I were working so hard we scarcely gave music a second thought.

The fateful turn of events occurred at a Handel's *Messiah* Sing-and-Play-In held in July. Yes, July. Santa Cruz, California, possessed the unusual distinction of holding its yearly participatory celebration of Handel's great oratorio shortly after its annual July 4th "Anarchist-Socialist Softball Game," which now must be approaching its 25th year. And I, for reasons having nothing to do with religion, musical upbringing, or tradition, somehow decided I had to attend. Ellen also thought this would be a fun outing and decided to bring 20-month-old Ali along.

We arrived early and Ellen, trying to amuse the already-squirmy toddler, decided to lead her by the hand up to the makeshift stage to look at

the instruments, none of which Ali had ever encountered live before. To Ellen's astonishment, Ali knew their names — flute, cello, trumpet, clarinet ... We don't know from where — we didn't teach her. We've assumed she must have picked up this information from an episode of *Sesame Street* when we weren't looking, but honestly we just don't know. (It would be years yet before Ellen and I would have a serious "kids and TV" discussion.)

We had explained to Ali that we were going to sing the "Hallelujah Chorus." I have no idea why we thought this might be a useful explanation, as Ali had never heard the Hallelujah Chorus! After examining the instruments, Ali turned around to face the gathering singers, and in her high-pitched toddler's voice urged, "Now let's all sing together," and launched into her version of "Michael Row Your Boat Ashore," the only song she knew with "hallelujah" in it.

Ellen hustled Ali off the stage and, to keep her occupied, asked whether she'd like to learn to play any of those instruments some day. Ali replied, "The violin. I want to learn to play the violin. *Now!*" Ellen assured her that someday she might learn to play. The rest of the evening was uneventful; I don't even remember whether we stayed late enough to sing the "Hallelujah Chorus."

Nothing would have come of this except that every day, sometimes twice a day, for the next three months, Ali demanded that she wanted to learn to play the violin. This sounded absolutely crazy to us. Did they make violins that small? Could a teacher be found who would be willing to teach a toddler still in diapers? Would a bad experience turn her off from music-making for life? Would she learn anything that would be of value?

The answers to the foregoing questions are: Yes, Yes, No, and emphatically Yes. Ali's first violin was 14 inches long (a "1/64th" as it's called), and currently sits atop our piano. A local teacher versed in the Suzuki method found the idea of teaching an under-two-year-old somewhat amusing, and Ali was pretty determined. Ali had now given us two of our most important homeschooling lessons, both of which carried over into all aspects of our learning adventures: first, that we weren't going to be able to do everything ourselves, and hence would have to learn how to find other resources; and second, that we were going to be experimental in approach rather than be