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I did not go to school properly until I was 11 years old. It was wartime and I travelled the length and breadth of England with my mother who took jobs as mothers' helps, mainly. I spent odd weeks in classrooms, here and there, but these are vague memories and left no deep impression.

I consider myself fortunate as I learnt about life through finding out by watching and asking. I learnt a great deal.

I cannot remember any time when I did not read or write. Books were my dearest friends and I spent many hours scribbling poems and stories, some of which I sent to Uncle Harold in London. He worked on the Stock Exchange. I only met him once, when I was 10. He took me out for tea at Fullers in the city, just after the war ended. He wore a pin stripe suit and carried a bowler hat and a rolled umbrella. He told me to be 'mother' which meant pouring tea from a metal pot with an impossibly hot handle. We had chocolate cake.

When I was 8 my mother and I spent 3 months at Longleat. Lord Bath allowed a school for officers' daughters to use part of the mansion, but I was not eligible to attend classes. The drive was a blaze of rhododendrons and azaleas when we arrived there in June. I recall it so vividly - It was my first taste of culture and beauty. Lord Bath and I spent a lot of time together - on fine days we walked in the gardens, and he wore an old panama hat. On wet days he took me round the rooms filled with art and treasures and fine furniture, all covered in white dust sheets. He taught me so much about all the beautiful things and I had history lessons from him. We got on well together because he was very old and I was very young, and we were both out of place in the giggly girls' school.

Lord Bath also taught me to tell the time. I learnt mostly from the big clock outside near the orangery.

When I wasn't with Lord Bath, I was with the gardener and I learnt about fruit and flowers and animals and birds. I was very sad to leave. I learnt about sex when I was 10. My mother took a job as a housemother in a boys' prep school. I was invited to a farm for a weekend and the farmer's son told me all about it. On my return to the school I built a little twig and leaf hut in the woods behind and shared my newly acquired knowledge with the boys. They used to wait their turn outside the little hut, then come inside, take off their shorts and lie down. We would explore each other's bodies in the half-light among crackling twigs all mingled with the smell of peat and leafmould. My mother was asked to leave because I had an 'undesirable influence' on the boys - life was very dull afterwards, but I had a good grounding in sex.

I learnt social skills through living with 34 different families by the age of 11, in both urban and rural surroundings. I learnt how differently people lived and a wide variety of standards. I learnt how to blend into surroundings quickly and what was expected of me.

For me, my childhood travels and my mother were my primary education.

My mother always looked lovely. It was a top priority. She brushed her thick glossy hair 100 strokes each night and NEVER went down to the air raid shelters at night without her corsets which were pink and had hundreds of hooks and eyes. She always wore scent and would never sleep in damp beds or with fleas or bedbugs. Her high standards meant that we were always on the move.

My mother taught me kindness and how to laugh when life was difficult. She taught me to always look for the best in what there was and to find comfort in small things, like the glorious black paraffin heater which she bought for our cold bedroom in one of the bleaker houses we stayed in. She taught me to love music and to always say my prayers and clean my teeth before bed.

We settled in Worthing when I was 11 for 6 years in different houses, but it meant that I attended school full time until leaving at 16 with my school certificate in 5 subjects.

I loved school. I soaked up learning, like a sponge. It was all so new and exciting. All my life I still love to learn and have just recently completed the 2 year course certificate of qualification in Social Work.

From my own experience I know that there are many paths to learning and I feel that there should be alternatives to the present system. I believe that education is for life and that places of learning should be available to everyone at all ages through life - not in separate compartments as it is now, but all ages learning side by side, from 5 to 95. Not with a statutory set of years in which to calcify learning but to come in and out of it whenever it feels the right time in one's life - young and old to share education together.

It is no wonder that teenagers are often restless and rebellious after 14 or so years of being tied to one major form of learning - school. It is not surprising that they revolt against the system and are unskilled in learning how to live well. Those who conform may get their certificates and move on to perpetuate the same system. But how much talent and creativity is lost - how often practical skills are undervalued in the quest for academic achievements?

Some children are not suited to this type of learning, while for others the desire to learn may come later in life - it is about giving choices.

Schools need to be a focal point of the community - somewhere to be enjoyed and to be open. Not buildings closed in the evenings, weekends and holidays. If the schools belonged to the community and became catalysts for the free exchange of skills and for recreation, they may not be vandalised.

I believe that education, learning and life are all so intertwined that artificially separating them out does not work. Once looked at holistically, the present education systems could be swept away, schools just for children abolished, and new bright places of learning for EVERYONE on every level would be the basis of new systems of education for us all.