

Profile of Brent Cameron, in Memoriam, a Decade After His Passing

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Abstract

This article celebrates the life of Brent Cameron and his contributions to Holistic Education.

[AERO presentation on Brent Cameron by Michael Maser](#): “The presentation really starts at around 5’20”. I hope you enjoy it.”

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Earlier this year at the 2022 AERO (Alternative Education Resource Organization) conference, I gave a presentation honoring my late colleague, friend and mentor, Brent Cameron, who passed in 2012 in British Columbia, Canada, after a lengthy fight with cancer.



Image: Brent Cameron (1947 - 2012) (smiling on boat)

Yes, it’s been ten years since Brent passed, but I continue to admire and reflect on his many contributions to education – especially alternative education. I think it’s important to share some insights of pioneers who helped change lives and influence our directions, and I think Brent is a very worthy subject of such retrospection. If you’ve not heard of Brent, allow me to shed some light on his pioneering spirit and accomplishments.

If you are associated in some way with Wondertree, Virtual High, SelfDesign Learning Community or the SelfDesign Graduate Institute (now merged into the Individual Masters program of Antioch University) - all alternative learning programs that first sprouted in British Columbia - you have been directly or indirectly touched by Brent. He toiled to conceptualize, launch and then run the first three programs mentioned. Unfortunately, he didn’t live long enough to experience the launch of the graduate institute but it reflected his craftsmanship, nonetheless.

If you’ve benefited from a personalized learning, home-learning or social-emotional learning program, you may also have reason to nod appreciatively in Brent’s memory, as I’ll explain.



Image: Brent sharing some insights with parents and kids at an outdoor presentation

Like an exceptional craftsman, Brent studied people young and old, and especially children and youth, and he dedicated himself to designing a learning environment in which they might thrive. The model he conceptualized in the 1980s had little in common with conventional schooling because it wasn't created to serve bureaucracy or technocracy or process children like cans of beans. Rather, Brent's model reflected the original thinkers that inspired him like the architect Christopher Alexander, English philosopher Douglas Harding, zoologist Jane Goodall and the polymath Buckminster Fuller.

But far and away the most important inspiration in Brent's life in conceptualizing a new model of learning was his daughter, Ilana, in whom Brent saw an emerging being seeking to live and learn joyfully. Together with Ilana's mother, Maureen, he saw his role to support Ilana through a conscious and conscientious parenting that synched harmoniously with Ilana's enthusiasm for learning from moment to moment, month to month and year to year.

It was and is a different model of parenting than is often practiced in our society. It doesn't serve 'helicopter' parenting or striving to be 'best parent' or any model of coercive parenting. It is a transformative model that grows infinitely through love and mutual respect.

From this model of parenting grew the educational imperatives that Brent - a frustrated public school teacher - dedicated himself to developing. I first met Brent in the early 1990s after having just finished three years of conventional teaching and was chafing from that entire experience. I attended an evening seminar featuring John Taylor Gatto, the award-winning and iconoclastic teacher from New York.

For six hours John enthralled a standing-room crowd and then raced away to catch a plane. I inquired who had organized this remarkable event and was introduced to Brent.

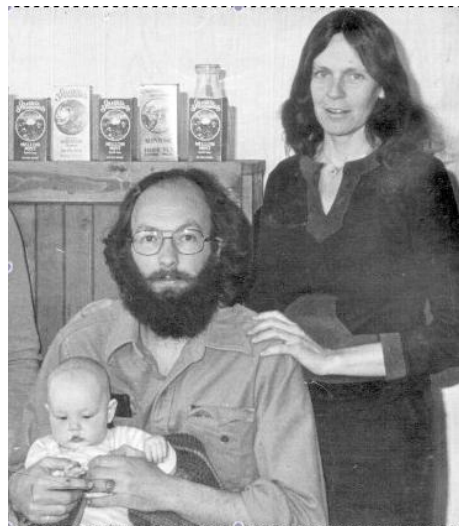


Image: Brent, his partner Maureen, and baby daughter Ilana, the inspiration for Brent's 'Natural Learning' model.

We re-convened soon after and he offered me his then-recent Master's thesis to read about Wondertree, the learning program he'd pioneered in Vancouver for Ilana and a gaggle of other pint-sized students. In his thesis I learned that for seven years these children, with Brent as their "learning consultant", had convened around a hand-crafted circular table (Brent's creation), modeled after King Arthur's legendary table where Arthur took counsel from his knights.

That was the set-up for a remarkable narrative to unfold in the pages of his thesis unlike anything I'd read previously in education. Much of it sang to me, including his framing of Wondertree:

Wondertree Learning Centre has been designed from a unique perspective, representing and incorporating a shift in perspective of 180 degrees. The initial and only question asked at its inception was, 'What is the optimum interactive environment to support a child learning naturally?' ... It is my opinion that real educational change will take place when the natural experts of learning, the children, redesign the education system as an extension of their natural learning processes. (Cameron, Personal Communication, 2010)



Image: Brent playing with young children on beach, exploring the nature of sunlight (CA, 1987)

From the moment I first encountered Brent, and in the subsequent years when I worked in partnership with him, he worked to bring definition to his concept of "natural learning" as defined by children and learners. He viewed it as his mission to give voice to the learner (especially the child or youth) whose natural learning proclivities had been ignored or sullied by an indifferent or self-devouring education system.

I joined him in this work to the best of my abilities, as did many others, but his work ethic challenged the most diligent of us. His visions, enlivened by new friends and emerging technologies, seemed to sprout effortlessly from his imagination. He was immersed in his work at times like an automaton, and he could be difficult and naive to a fault. But there was little time to ruminate on challenging issues because he always had a new idea to share. And share he did, as one of the most generous people I have ever known.

A partial list of Brent's remarkable accomplishments include:

- pioneering alternative learning communities: Wondertree (1984-1990), Virtual High (1993-1997), and SelfDesign (2002 – present)
- developing a (truly) personalized learning model to enfranchise learners of all ages to self-direct ('selfdesign') their own learning, as documented in his book, *SelfDesign: Nurturing Genius through Natural Learning*.



Image: Presenting Jane Goodall with the first Wondertree Award. We have given the award ever since to honor adults who work lifelong to make the world a better place for children to grow up in, and who set an inspirational example.

Image: Brent and Wondertree students presenting Jane Goodall with a Wondertree award for helping make the world a better place for children. Brent was inspired by Jane Goodall's research studying chimpanzee behaviour in their natural habitat.

- initiating Wondertree learning awards (later SelfDesign learning awards) to offer to people doing remarkable things in the world that the learning community agreed was making a positive contribution to humanity. Recipients included Linus Pauling (scientist), Jane Goodall (primatologist), Humberto Maturana (Chilean neuroscientist), Raffi (children's musician), Noam Chomsky (social advocacy), Michael Moore (filmmaker), Mark Achbar (filmmaker) and a few others

- crafting a Declaration of Learner's Rights and Responsibilities with youth of Virtual High that was presented to and accepted by the United Nations (1996)

I feel I was very privileged to 'ride the range' with Brent for around 20 years. As I say in my presentation-video, Brent led all things he did with his heart as he set out to make the world a better place for all children and youth, including his daughter Ilana. My adult life as an educator, parent and person were deeply enriched by knowing and communing with Brent and working with him to co-found Virtual High and SelfDesign Learning Community were highlights of my learning and education career of the past 30+ years.



Image: Brent on the edge of Kootenay Lake (pointing)

To his enduring spirit I say: I continue to think of you often and reflect on how today's advocacy of 'Personalized learning', 'Homeschooling' and 'Social-Emotional learning' in mainstream education reflect your contributions in some ways. Yes, others have contributed to advancing these, too, and I know you would enthusiastically acknowledge them were you here to do so.

In my heart, Brent, I will continue to recognize your remarkable contributions and honour your friendship.

Acknowledgements

Michael Maser is a PhD candidate at Simon Fraser University, adjunct faculty for the Antioch University (online) Individual Masters program, and helped co-found and run SelfDesign Learning Community and Virtual High Learning Community with Brent Cameron.

More information on Michael can be found on his website: [Dreaming Dragon Consulting](#).