Chapter Five

The Universal Gifts

Shift Begins with Me

Two parents approached me, along with their amazing daughter, after attending my "Understanding the Right-Brained Child" workshop at a conference. They were eager to learn more about how to be facilitators for their creative child who has a passion for learning. I heard how the mother was working with her daughter's love of math by sharing her own passion in the subject, but it was creating disillusionment for both. I saw the sparkle in this incredible daughter's eyes, and I saw the real desire in the parents' eyes to keep that spark alive in their daughter's learning life. Why wasn't it working and what should she do?

The mother figured out through conversations with her daughter that the young lady viewed math like a giant puzzle. This creative daughter found it intriguing

to figure out where the missing link in the equation was via algebraic solutions through her gifted visualization skills. Yet, she struggled with simple math facts.

I directed the parents to look at the love of learning exuding from their daughter. I said, "Just feed that! She knows what she loves to do in math. So whatever is emanating from within her, you feed. Having faith that by valuing whatever she loves to pursue, her gifts will be revealed down the road. For today, fan the flame of passion that comes from within her, and that is enough."

This approximately nine-year-old girl didn't take long to show her parents how to fulfill that advice. They came back to me later and said, "Our daughter came out of the play area and said, 'I'm interested in LEGO®. It looks like geometry.'" Since the parents had attended my right-brained learner class, they knew LEGO® was one of the gift areas (see Chapter Six) toward which a creative child could gravitate. We all stood in awe at her cleverness at recognizing the geometric attributes that LEGO® inherently provides. LEGO® it would be, and we smiled at this young person's passion for math and how she wanted to explore her potential in this arena.

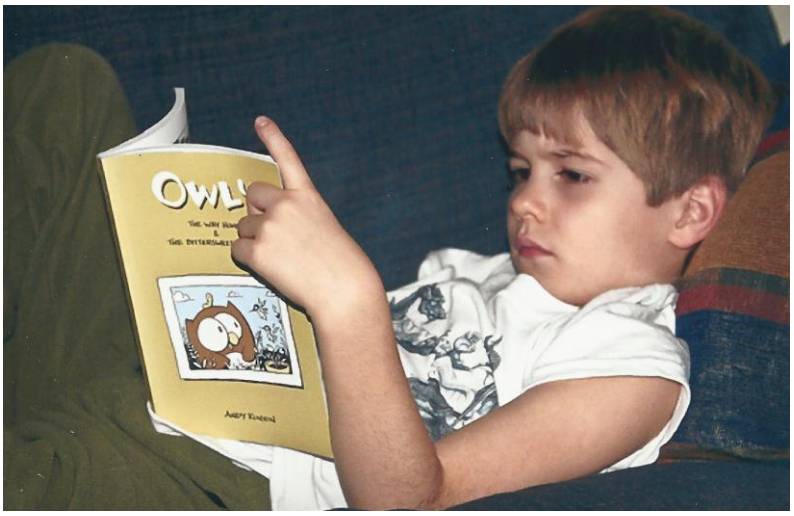
Interest-based, child-led learning emanates from within the child outward. As children's learning facilitators, we can be astute observers who translate what we see into additional resources that can feed the flame of passion within the child. Some make it easy, like this young lady. In fact, right-brained learners often are insatiable learners, but they're passionate about areas that aren't highly valued in our society. So these areas of interest—like art, drawing, music, LEGO® building, sewing, gardening, video games, etc.—are often overlooked. To honor the path each type of learner is meant to follow, it's important to value the interests, pursuits,

and goals that come from within and through each child. Thus, successful support of learners requires observation of these things.

It's natural that children are drawn to the subjects and activities that engage and expand their foundational strengths and gifts. Unfortunately, it's common to steer right-brained children to the left-brained learning path and strengths. The mother at the conference tried to direct her daughter to arithmetic when she noticed her daughter's interest in math. But closer observation reveals it wasn't math *facts* that intrigued her daughter, but math *concepts*. The young lady was drawn to her natural path as a right-brained learner when she pursued learning concepts before facts. The good news is that there's a natural learning path for this learner. The information in this book will help each of us educating right-brained children create an environment of both resources and time frames well matched to these eager and bright learners.

Core Traits

I presented my first right-brained workshop from a list of traits I created based on my observations of my right-brained children's journeys. After receiving stories of positive change for their families about their right-brained children from attendees to these workshops, I was eager to learn more. I researched others' work regarding the right-brained learner and general knowledge about the brain. I discovered the left and right hemispheres of the brain are mirror images of the other, each specializing in opposing traits. Armed with this understanding, and influenced by lists depicting right hemisphere traits created by professionals in the field, I streamlined my list of attributes to focus on core traits.



Right-brained children are attracted to comic books because this resource supports the picture-based and whole-to-part core traits. (Image[1])

A common characteristic listed for a right-brained learner is "prefers sight words." This isn't what I call a core trait. Why not? A right-brained child typically prefers to learn to read with sight words because of the core traits of the *whole-to-part* preference and the *picture-based* processing. The right-brained child wants to take in the whole word (such as for reading) before understanding its parts (such as for spelling). Since the right-brained child also needs to visualize a picture when learning, these can be created for a whole word but not parts of a word. So, the core traits are *whole-to-part* and *picture based.* These two core traits *impact* how a right-brained child learns to read which *results* in the preference for sight words. These particular core traits also impact spelling, writing, and math strategies as well, to name a few. Understanding how core traits impact learning will affect crucial change for right-brained children when creating a well-matched learning environment.

Below is a list of core traits that showcase the opposing specialties between the brain processing preferences.

Left Hemisphere	Right Hemisphere
reality	*imagination
*word based (symbolic)	*picture based (3-dimensional)
*sequential	global
part	whole
memorization	association
logical (mind)	intuitive (heart)
compliant	resistant
external perfectionism	internal perfectionism
product	process
time	space

*Universal gifts

Universal Gifts

One of the first questions I asked myself was if there are traits common to most right-brained or left-brained people. As noted in Chapter Two, Linda Kreger Silverman delineated these traits as visual-spatial for a right-brained person and auditory-sequential for a left-brained person. And yet, she went on to conclude that the most reliable way to determine if a person is right-brained is if they engage in what I call the creative outlets (see Chapter Six).[2] This shows that the visual, spatial, auditory, and sequential traits Silverman uses to categorize right- and left-brained learners can't be considered universal if these traits aren't good identifiers. My experiential observation after speaking with thousands of right-brained people is that she was on the right track, but the theory needed a little tweaking. I've denoted two particular core traits in the list above to be universally common in each brain processing preference. I call these common traits universal gifts.

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Reality vs. Imagination

The first of the two universal gifts of right-brained, creative learners is their extraordinary imaginations. Naturally, childhood is a time of playing pretend and using one's imagination, but with the right-brained child, you'll notice he goes beyond the typical left-brained reality-based elements of expression.

Costume Play

I often use the photo at the beginning of this chapter as a pictorial representation of the difference in imaginations among children. My strong right-brained, creative learner is the child in the king outfit. My youngest child is in the John Deere® tractor costume. They were both excited to receive new Halloween costumes and eager to have their pictures taken in them. My youngest son *loves* John Deere® tractors so was smiling broadly while displaying his find. On the other hand, my creative learner *is* the king in this picture. He's not just showing off his costume; he's portraying his kingliness in expression and actions. There's a difference. It's all about a highly developed imagination.

This creative child displays his imagination through costume play. When he decides he's a police officer, he creatively uses objects and items to depict the various accoutrements. For instance, he dons an older brother's Boy Scout™ shirt as his uniform top, and employs his father's garden belt as his holster. When converting into a soldier, he uses buckled belts crossed over in the front along with a Game Boy® carrying case as a supply kit. From the moment he becomes the police officer or the soldier, he must henceforth be referred to as "police officer" or "soldier." If called by his given name, he becomes visibly upset and corrects your misidentification. My theater son's dress-up and costuming are representations of a creative imagination.

Figure Toy Play

Another of my strong right-brained, creative learners focused his imagination on his toys. He was easy to buy for at Christmas because he was theme-based every season. There was the Power Ranger® season, the Star Wars® season, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle™ season, and a Pokémon® season. This creative child meticulously set up extensive play scenarios and got lost in the drama that unfolded. As a social introvert, my artist son especially enjoyed directing and producing willing peers into his creative process and was fortunate to find other children willing to follow or friends who preferred supporting roles. The gift of the imagination begets amazing fantasy creations.

My theater son also enjoys creating elaborate play scenes.

Stuffed Animal Play

Many of my right-brained children developed special bonds with one or more stuffed animals. When the movie *Toy Story*® first came out, I witnessed the reaction of my two oldest children at the revelation that stuffed toys were alive. They looked at each other and I "heard" the unspoken communication: "I knew it!" My writer daughter carried four to five stuffed cats around all the time for many years. They were ready companions as real to her as any human friend, maybe more. During her early teen, nature hike exploring days, a Pikachu® backpack was as much a required escort as her two pet dogs.

My youngest son is known for his attachment to stuffed animals as his constant buddies as evidenced by the four new additions this past Christmas. He has an uncanny knack for moving them in such a way as to appear life-like. His stuffed "friends" often help me convince my son to do unwanted activities when I engage their help. Even though at 11 years old my youngest son realizes his peers feel stuffed animals are "childish," he openly interacts with his stuffed playmates at home, and secretly in public.

My high energy son always has a menagerie of stuffed animal "friends" tagging along.

These life-like attachments mean I could never randomly decide to clean out their collections to donate to others. My children would stare at me in horror at the thought. Certainly Sid from *Toy Story*® didn't help my case any as my children feared a new child wouldn't adore the toy as they had. It wasn't until late teens, just like Andy from *Toy Story 3*®, that enough distance between their rich childhood imagination and grown perspective allowed separation to occur—for some of the toys, anyway. I believe the imaginative quality related to the stuffed animal play strongly identifies them as imaginary friends.

Imaginary Friends

My strong right-brained, creative builder son developed imaginary friends during his childhood. He'd spend hours building with LEGO®, K'NEX®, and such simple devices as paper and tape. When he was asked who his best friends were, his quick and truthful reply was, "My LEGO®." Some felt sorry for him, but I recognized that his passion and happiness were strongly connected to his creative outlet, so I didn't put *my* social perspective on him. Later, this right-brained learner informed me that he had imaginary friends depicted by various LEGO® guys. They were John, Jack, Joe, Jeff, and Jessie (he felt he needed a girl represented). These imaginary friends were around long enough that one served a particular function. John told my son things he didn't know when he needed to know something. He then admitted that

John represented the Holy Ghost (one of our spiritual beliefs). It makes sense that he created a visual image of a non-pictorial belief (see next trait section, "Word Based vs. Picture Based"). Imaginary friends are simply representations of a right-brained, creative learner's extraordinary imagination.

Skewing the Line between Reality and Pretend

With such vivid imaginations, young creative learners easily skew the line between reality and pretend. There are three common instances where a right-brained child may need a different style of support or understanding. The first is the impact TV and other visual media have on this child's highly sensitive nature. The second is the fear a right-brained child often exhibits associated with people dressed up in face make-up or bigger-than-life costumes. The last is the attraction these children have toward the belief in make-believe stories and social customs such as Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy. All three of these areas stem from the imaginative world that is the foundational trait of a right-brained child.

TV and Visual Media. Visual media are wonderful resources for our visually-based, right-brained children; but they need to be used carefully to protect their highly sensitive natures (see the work of Elaine Aron in *The Highly Sensitive Child*[3]). For instance, because this child needs fairness and has high compassion for humanity, television news programs tend to be a poor choice for these highly sensitive children. Some creative learners will naturally censor themselves, such as my oldest child, who refused to watch a cartoon dinosaur movie for some reason when he was 3 years old. While young, he always asked his father and me if a movie was appropriate for his sensitive nature. On the other hand, those children with impulsivity may find it harder to self-protect so are more willing to request media that negatively impact them, such as those that lead to scary nightmares. I collaborated with my fifth son, who fits this description, by helping him understand

he has more time to imaginatively process the visual input if he watches these high-interest, overstimulating media earlier in the day. It's important that a parent be aware of what these highly sensitive people are exposed to on TV and other visual media.

Fear of Clowns and Other Dressed-Up Caricatures. There may be two reasons why the right-brained, creative child experiences a season of fear around clowns and other dressed-up caricatures. The first may be the overwhelming sensory visual impact (see Chapter Nineteen). The second may be that it's too difficult to differentiate between the person and the character. One of my creative children *loved* dinosaurs. He knew all there was to know about more than 50 dinosaurs at age 5 before he was reading. When we learned there would be a dinamatronic display at SeaWorld®, we thought he'd enjoy it. We explained it to him and he was eager to attend. When confronted with the reality of approaching these machines made to look real, he completely melted down and refused to go anywhere *near* the dinosaurs. To get to another park area, we had to pass by the display a time or two. The only way this child would do so was blindfolded! His understanding of dinosaurs was still too greatly married to an immature ability to differentiate between real and pretend.

My artist son's inability to differentiate between reality and pretend during a trip to see a dinamatronic display prompted him to demand he be blindfolded to deal with it.

Social Customs. The creative, right-brained child takes very seriously the social customs we create, such as Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, or other make-believe characters. Because of their imaginations, Santa Claus is very real. I discovered I should allow my children to learn

about the reality on their own and in their own time frames. This means it usually extends to somewhere around 11 to 12 years before the child is willing to show he understands these customs aren't real. Many right-brained children don't want "the talk" from others verifying that this is so. To soften the transition, we could honestly rally around ideas such as, "We believe in (the spirit of) Santa Claus." These can be very positive, warm memories for our creative children because these bigger-than-life characters draw out their strengths of imagination.

Reality-Based Play

In contrast to the imaginative play of a right-brained child, there's reality play. As a left-brained dominant person, I recall my own childhood summer days with my best friend. One season we made up "shows" that we worked on for days in order to perform them for the neighborhood (which never did happen). In our shows, we never pretended to be another person; we always played "ourselves," sharing our talents. We created commercials in-between acts. Even for these we used real objects, such as our bikes, instead of coming up with imaginary marketing ploys.

I remember my friend and I taking a great interest in "saving the underground spring" in our nearby woods. We spent days and weeks trying to create a path for this underground spring to make its way down to the pond. Both of these childhood endeavors focused on reality-based themes.

Object Manipulation Play

My sister and I enjoyed such indoor activities as putting all of our stuffed animals into a pile in our room and taking turns choosing which we would play with. When this process ended, we couldn't take it much further creatively, so that would end the "play." The same happened with our doll play. I

had Crissy and she had Mia[4] and we'd dress our dolls in a clothing set, show it to one another, and repeat. My strength wasn't in imagination but in the manipulation of real objects.

Doll dress-up is an example of a left-brained play activity.

There's a difference between an imagination-based perspective and a reality-based perspective. It's not that the way I played wasn't enjoyable to me, because it was, and it's not that the way I played is "less than" the creative learner and his play process. When we understand how the differences in brain processing preferences impact the learning process, and even the play process, we're better equipped to support all learners by recognizing and creating different environments for different needs.

Left Hemisphere	Right Hemisphere
reality	*imagination
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logical (mind)	intuitive (heart)
compliant	resistant
external perfectionism	internal perfectionism
product	process
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*Universal gifts

Word Based vs. Picture Based

The second universal gift of right-brained, creative learners is that they think in pictures. I asked one of my right-brained sons what he sees in his brain, and he replied, "It's better than the best three-dimensional computer software available. It's more like the holodeck in *Star Trek*® where you can place yourself in the setting, yet still view it from any angle. It's as if you're really there. It's better than any movie." I've heard thousands of similar explanations of the visual imagery enjoyed by a right-brained person.

Visual Imagery

After careful research on the topic, there's ample empirical evidence supporting the idea that the right-brained learner is amassing a library of pictorial images in his brain's filing system. These are three-dimensional images seen from all angles. Temple Grandin, a person with autism who performs at the top of her field in the area of designing equipment for humanely slaughtering animals, described in her book, *Thinking in Pictures,* how her visual imagery works:

> *I create new images all the time by taking many little parts of images I have in the video library in my imagination and piecing them together. I have video memories of every item I've ever worked with—steel gates, fences, latches, concrete walls, and so forth. To create new designs, I retrieve bits and pieces from my memory and combine them into a new whole. My design ability keeps improving as I add more visual images to my library.*[5]

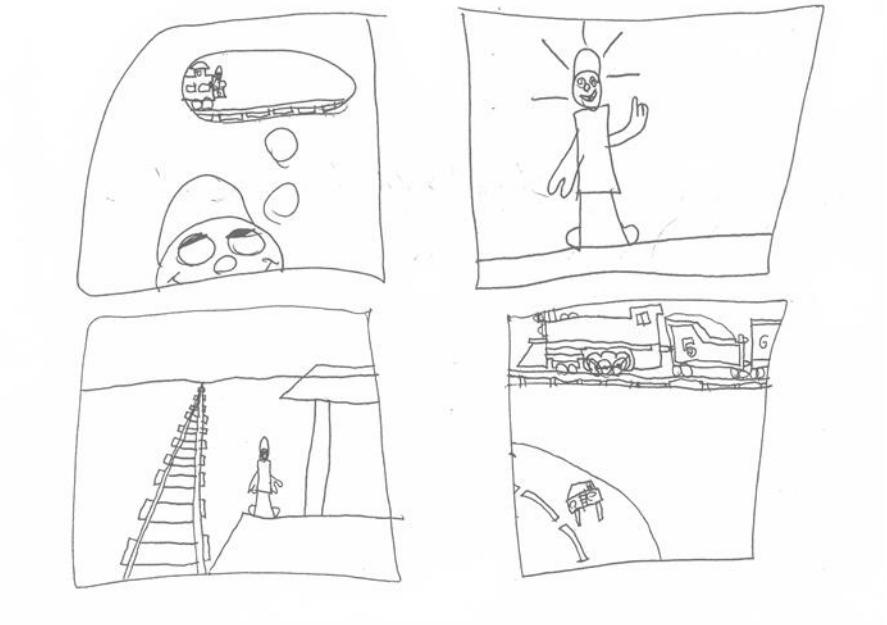
If a parent or teacher carefully observes, there's evidence of the picture-based three-dimensionality at work in children. I remember observing my builder son when he was heavily into his train interest. He started at 18 months, so young,

meticulously linking the die-cast metal Thomas the Tank Engine™ trains together on the kitchen floor. My creative builder would lie down upon the floor, close one eye, and pull the trains toward him, watching one aspect of the train entourage as it passed him. Then, he eagerly moved himself into another angled position and repeated. When he graduated to the wooden train sets at age 3, this three-dimensional visualizing continued as he observed from the top, sides, back and underneath.

My builder son observing three-dimensional angles during train play.

Final evidence emerged when he shifted to LEGO® at 5 years old. This right-brained builder initially assembled the sets as they came packaged. Then, he'd venture off on his own creations as intricate on the inside (where nobody was going to look, right?) as they were on the outside. Further, I was sure he utilized his strong visualization skills in a manner similar to what Temple Grandin described by taking various visual snapshots of his previous LEGO® creation bits and pieces, then combining them in his mind to create a new design. Three-dimensional picture-based thinking is a gift that the right-brained person uses to innovate.

If there's an artist in your midst, you can observe for clues to his picture-based three-dimensional processing nature. The following drawing from my builder son, made when he was around ages 8 to 9, depicts a figure, only half shown, thinking about going to watch a train that will arrive soon. The train is only half shown, as well. The ability to draw some of the parts of a whole image implies the artist has an understanding of the whole but is comfortable sharing only the relevant parts.



Drawing in perspective, using three-dimensional attributes, and creating pictorial imagery can often be seen in drawings of right-brained children at a young age.

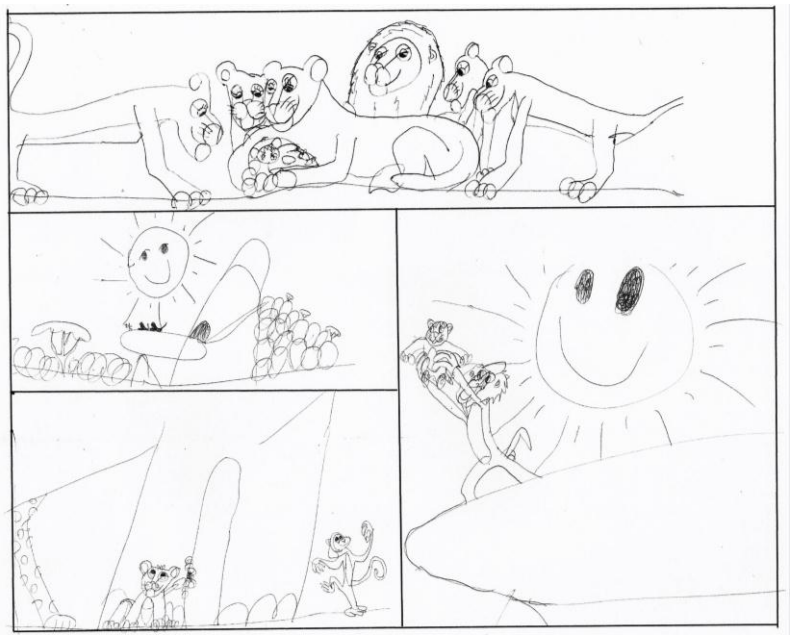
If a right-brained person uses visual images to process information, it makes sense that they spend lots of time in their early years building up their mind's library of pictorial images. Thus, the right-brained learner will utilize pictures to develop concepts being pursued.

A Comparative Example

Reading aloud is an activity that easily lets you observe whether the learner is focusing on pictures or words. When I read aloud to my two oldest children individually when they were quite young, I noticed the oldest artist son was always looking at the pictures. My writer daughter, on the other

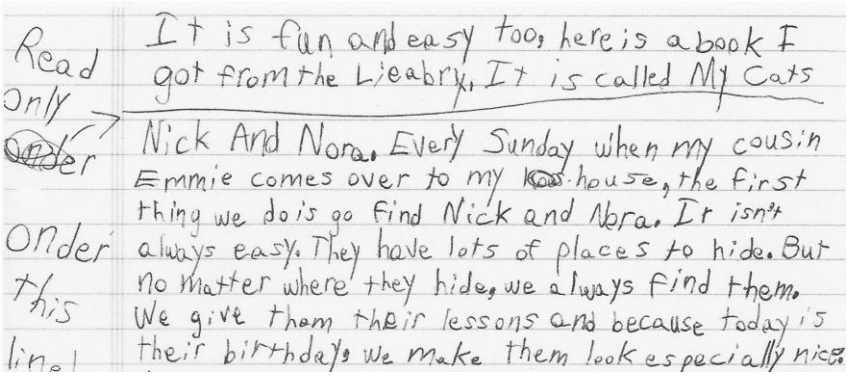
hand, was following the words. In fact, she taught herself to read in this manner.

The early writing process also provides opportunity to discover a picture or word focus. Here's an example during the stage of mirroring a storyline (see Chapter Thirteen). The drawing series below, depicting a scene from *The Lion King®,* comes from my artist son's 8 to 9 year portfolio. It's completely pictorial in nature, yet beautifully captures the story line.



A beautifully depicted (copied) pictorial story. (Image[6])

Next is a sample from my writer daughter's portfolio when she was about the same age, rewriting verbatim, on her own initiative, from the now out-of-print book, *My Cats Nick & Nora* by Isabelle Harper.[7]


Read only order Onder this line

It is fun and easy too, here is a book I got from the Liebary. It is called My Cats Nick And Nora. Every Sunday when my cousin Emmie comes over to my house, the first thing we do is go find Nick and Nora. It isn't always easy. They have lots of places to hide. But no matter where they hide, we always find them. We give them their lessons and because today is their birthday's we make them look especially nice.

A (copied) word-based story.

Although it was a picture book, this is completely word based and provides the same benefits of learning the intricacies of a good story line as did my son's drawings. (See Chapter Fourteen for a discussion of cheating or copying versus modeling or mentoring.)

In our left-brained-based value system, the child who uses words to express her ideas is typically given more credit than the child who uses pictures to express his ideas. The picture-based child would be persuaded to add some words to describe his picture in order to complete the lesson. On the other hand, the word-based child might be encouraged to draw a picture to go with her story as an "added benefit," depending on the age. The words are "required" because that is the goal, while the picture is "extra" because it's not foundational. The good news is that each of these children is simply following his or her preferred path to expressing ideas. Each process is valid.

Right-brained children need different subjects in the elementary years to develop their universal gifts.

The two universal gifts of the left-brained child are thinking in words and sequential processing. These are the traits that should be developed during the early foundational learning years of 5 to 7. School meets this need by introducing reading, spelling and concrete ideas such as community helpers and the human body. The two universal gifts of the right-brained child are thinking in pictures and an extraordinary imagination. During the foundational years of 5 to 7, these needs are most effectively and naturally met through completely different subjects (see Chapter Sixteen) and the creative outlets (see Chapter Six). Unfortunately, most schools don't address the early subject strengths of right-brained children until later and have cut out of the school budget most creative arts opportunities in the classroom. This means right-brained children begin their school careers without benefit of developing their universal gifts that helps them succeed in learning more easily thereafter. To understand and honor the natural learning path for our right-brained, creative children, changes need to occur in the education establishment to recognize and value the right side of normal.

References and Notes

[1] The resource being used in the image is: Runton, Andy. *Owly:™ The Way Home & The Bittersweet Summer.* Marietta: Top Shelf Productions, 2004.

[2] Silverman, Linda Kreger. *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner.* Denver: DeLeon Publishing, Inc., 2002.

[3] Aron, Elaine N. *The Highly Sensitive Child.* Three Rivers Press, 2002.

[4] Copyright 1968-1970 Ideal Toy Corporation as noted on the imprint of the dolls.

[5] Grandin, Temple. *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from my Life with Autism.* New York: Doubleday, 1995.

[6] The Lion King® is a registered trademark of Walt Disney Pictures registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office. All images and characters depicted in the movie are copyright © 1994 and 1995 the Walt Disney Company. The drawings found in this body of work based on The Lion King® characters are not intended to challenge any copyright but were the innocent reflection of a young child's enjoyment of a children's movie.

[7] Harper, Isabelle. *My Cats Nick and Nora.* Blue Sky Press, 2002. The copied story found in this body of work is not intended to challenge any copyright but was the innocent learning tool of a young child. Inclusion in this work is strictly being used to demonstrate the value system between written word work and pictorial work.