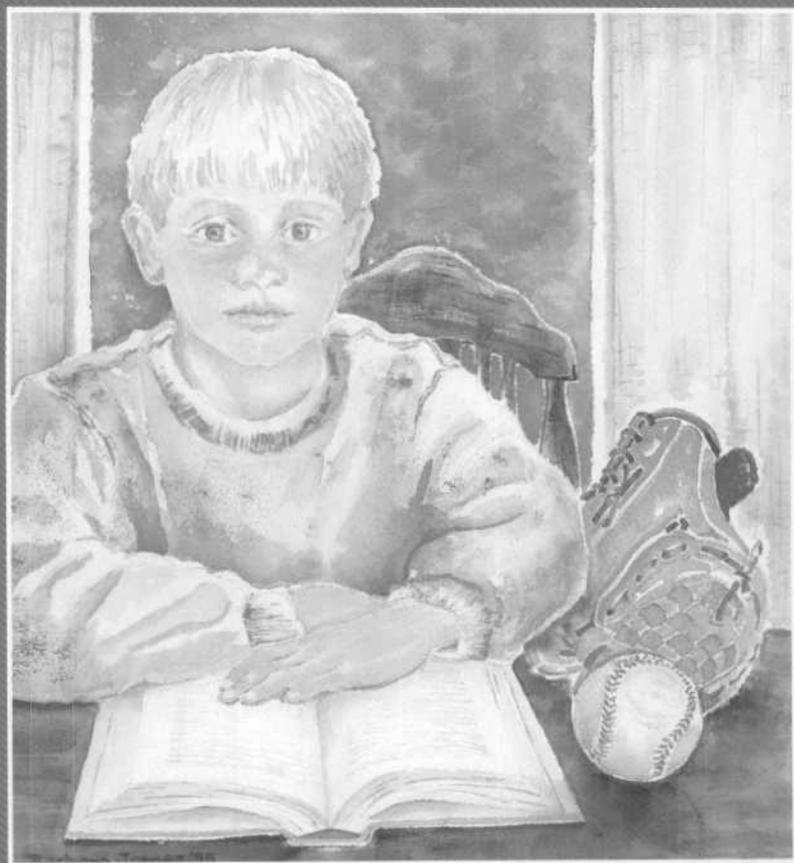


# Homeschooling Odyssey



**Matthew James**

# Homeschooling Odyssey

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# **HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY**

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**Matthew James**

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***For family***

# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>A Parent-Teacher Conference</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>School at Home</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Forest Through the Trees</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Charles Dickens, Lightweight</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>No Telly on the Mountain</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Farm-School, Dad-School</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Mr. P. and the Livestock Auction</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Learning to Read</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>School in the City</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Grading and Testing</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Emma's Educational Choices</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Keep Homeschool Fun</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Sex Education in Utopia</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>The Big Kids Go to High School</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>The Myth of the Teenage Monster</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>The Socialization of Julia and Tom</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>From ADD to AAA</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Piano Lessons with a Boa Constrictor</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Homeschoolers in College</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Artists and Artisans</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Adventures in the Working World</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>A Day in Tom-School</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>Adam Meets the Walrus and the Carpenter</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>Afterthoughts — Fix the Plumbing</b>	<b>120</b>

# **HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY**

## *Introduction*

**Our family began homeschooling when our oldest child struggled with her reading early in first grade. Jenny progressed rapidly at home, and we all had fun. My wife and I were encouraged to try the process with our other children. The results have been wonderful. Now that a few of our kids are grown, I can tell you that homeschooling works, and it is rewarding in more ways than we ever imagined.**

**We have sent three children to Stanford, a fourth is on her way to that university, and our younger kids, Julia and Tommy, look forward to their own exciting aspirations. While academic achievements are gratifying, they represent a drop in the bucket of benefits in store for families who choose to homeschool.**

**“You have such beautiful children. They are so sweet and creative. My daughters told me about Tommy, and I completely agree with them. They said he walked into the room and acted like he had been friends with them his whole life. He enjoys himself so much, and his laughter and enthusiasm are infectious. He is so in love with life, like no nine-year-old we have met before. All your children are that way...”**

## *HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY*

The speaker was Barb's cousin, herself a mother and grandmother. Of course she was going to say nice things about our kids as she departed after visiting for a few days, but her phrase "in love with life" struck a chord for me that day because it expressed the essence of our child-rearing goals. Looking back, it seems that Barb and I instinctively nurtured and protected the unbounded passion for life that was burning in the eyes of each of our children, as it is in all children, on the day they were born. We supported this birth-right when it collided head-on with the defining institutions of our age. Our kids were not born to be bottle-fed, daycared, reared by the boob-tube, or enchained by one-note ideologies found in jailhouse schools.

We have been rewarded for allowing our parental instincts to operate. Without knowing, we were laying the foundations for our children to grow up as best friends to each other and to us—as lights bright with curiosity, creativity, industry, and love. Every moment spent with them is a joy and a privilege. When I look into their eyes, even now that they are grown, it seems that God looks back at me with infinite amusement.

Our homeschool has been operating for either 17 or 23 years, depending on how you look at it. I like to use the greater number because our simple methods of nurturing or teaching did not change as the children reached school age. We raised them with love and patience, very little discouragement, and a huge dose of unsupervised play and activity. Chores and responsibilities, including a small measure of daily book-learning, were added as they grew. We had a television once. We watched it very little and threw it out many years ago.

Barb and I always liked homeschooling, but we have grown to love it. We found out that, for the sake of domestic tranquillity, the process itself has to be enjoyable for the parents as well as children. After committing ourselves to this goal, we made a pleasing discovery: in a more relaxed and happy environment, we all learned more.

Begun with the idea that our children were in for a unique experience, homeschooling has educated Barb and me in so many ways. A huge adventure, it has taken us down fas-

**cinating roads of challenge and inquiry. This is a common theme among homeschooling parents: strap on your seatbelts, Mom and Dad, you're in for the ride of a lifetime.**

**Barb and I have seen the awesome capabilities of children uncorrupted by stupefying institutions. We have wrestled with great questions of education, such as its proper goals and ways and means. We have analyzed schools, their product and propaganda, from every angle, and we have learned something about the stamp they put upon our own opinions and personalities. We have discovered areas of interest which were obscured by the grading/grinding fact-mills of our own school days.**

**In a society which seems to make a concerted effort, for the sake of the grand collective, to alienate children from parents, selves, siblings, and truth itself, homeschooling has allowed our family to thrive together as a traditional community of shared love, ideas, and experience. Our minds and our filial bonds are alive and well, and this has given us a chance for happiness available to a precious few.**

**What follows is an account of our journey. Along the way our children have attended some private and public schools, on a full-time or part-time basis, in a variety of combinations and sequences. I hope our mix-and-match experiences will embolden other parents to make sound educational decisions which may not conform to any preconceived ideas of correctness.**

**I am a proponent of homeschooling, especially for the younger child, but I know many families whose children have prospered in traditional schools. I suspect that all successful schooling relies upon a few simple principles—written in every human heart from the first day—which have been validated over and over again through the ages. It is my hope that this book highlights some of these principles so that families of all stripes can benefit and flourish again in the old way.**

## *A Parent-Teacher Conference*

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,  
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.

—Tolkien

**Our bouncy, golden-haired daughter was so excited about starting first grade. At our first parent-teacher conference, Barb and I expected to hear compliments and heartwarming anecdotes about our bright little angel. We were taken by complete surprise when the teacher informed us that Jenny was struggling with her reading. While we gaped dumbfounded, she confessed that one of the most difficult parts of her job was deflating parents with the news that their children were simply not exceptional. Jenny was, at best, an average reader. She was not an Eagle; she was a Pony. Our job was to learn to enjoy her as a 40-watt bulb rather than a bright light. Was it my imagination, or did this middle-aged matron's sweet smile contain a trace of malice as she related these tidings?**

**I was confused by this assessment of Jenny's reading abilities because it simply didn't fit in with her prior history. She had a love affair with books for her entire childhood. We have a photograph of her at 11 months of age staring earnestly at the contents of an open book. I remember reading to her**

when she was three. I stopped for some reason, but she continued the narration. She knew her stories by heart. Like many other children, Jenny learned to read at home. She was a bookworm, and she was an experienced and passionate reader before she ever started first grade.

The teacher went on to explain that Jenny cried too much at school and that we needed to correct this problem with the appropriate discipline. Barb and I exchanged glances but didn't argue. I think we were already mentally occupied with trying to figure out what to do with our little girl, because there was no way she was going back into a classroom with this lady.

I was curious about the crying. Jenny was such a happy child. I asked her that night what made her sad at school. Expecting to hear about something on the playground, I was surprised by her answer. The listening-hour stories made her sad:

*Once upon a time there was a daddy duck with seven ducklings. They ranged in age down to the youngest (who reminded Jenny of a first grader). The daddy was mean. One day he demanded that all his children learn three tasks, such as running, swimming, and diving. If a duckling was unable to master all of the tasks, he would be banished from the family to live with the chickens. The youngsters struggled under the cruel eye of their father. When it came to diving, the first grader floundered and was sent away to live with the chickens.*

This was the story Jenny related, in her own words, as an example. I heard it told a second time, several years later, by my cousin Nancy, as a sample of objectionable curriculum which had prompted her to begin homeschooling. We were impressed with the coincidence, since our families resided in different states.

Jenny told me she also cried over stories in her readers. They made her sad and frustrated in some way. I went to the school and spent a few hours reviewing the first, second, and third grade readers. As I read, my eyes opened wider

## *HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY*

and wider. I had assumed the purpose of the readers was to stimulate the juvenile imagination and teach reading skills. Instead, I saw material saturated with, to paraphrase another observer's language, "an unadvertised agenda promoting parental alienation, loss of identity and self-confidence, groupism, passivity, and anti-intellectualism." Falling under these headings was a continual barrage of powerful messages, most often communicated indirectly, which would be disturbing and threatening to a child of six.

I once daydreamed through basic psychology classes in medical school which described the behavior-influencing experiments that Pavlov performed on laboratory dogs early in the twentieth century. B. F. Skinner, working at Harvard in the 1940's, expanded upon Pavlov's work and gifted humanity with the science of behaviorism. As I read the stories and poems in Jenny's readers, I was astonished to discover that they were alive, in their own way, with the theories and practices of these dead scientists.

Connected consistently with pleasure, certain attitudes and behaviors were promoted. Connected consistently with pain, other attitudes and behaviors were discouraged. When a child-figure in the stories (a young squirrel, duck, beaver, or the like) split away from his group, for example, he would get rained on, his toes would get cold in the snow, or he would experience some other form of discomfort or torment. The young reader, vicariously, would live through the identical experience and learn the identical lesson in peer-dependence.

Individual initiative was almost always associated with emotional or physical pain. Efforts to overcome setbacks resulted in acceleration of calamity. Consider the example of the little squirrel whose wheel falls off his wagon. When he tries to replace it, the wagon rides with an awkward and embarrassing bump, noticeable to his friends, who then tease him about it. Another attempt to repair the wheel results in an accident, with bruising and bleeding and more humiliation. The cumulative effect of this and similar story lines would discourage initiative and reduce self-confidence in the first grader.

Animal dads, moms, and grandparents were portrayed over and over as mean, stupid, unreliable, bungling, uncaring, impotent or incompetent. Relationships with their children were almost always dysfunctional; communication and reciprocal trust were non-existent. Jenny's heart would be lacerated by stories with these elements. She would feel ashamed of her evolving resentment towards parents or her loss of faith and trust in them. I could see her crying with hurt or frustration. Over the long run, her bonding with Barb and me might be tarnished or eroded, and an element of bitterness or cynicism might creep into her personality.

I borrow the term "anti-intellectualism" to describe another recurrent theme in the readers. Many of the compositions were, essentially, word salad. They lacked intrinsic interest, coherence, or continuity, and they often demonstrated a sort of anti-rationality. The stories and the corresponding questions seemed to require the student to suspend the natural operations of his intellect, such as the desire to make sense out of things or the impulse to be curious. Under this yoke, a student could learn to hate reading or even thought itself. Frustration with anti-intellectualism could provide another explanation for Jenny's tearfulness.

I considered her reading experience with added pressures of grading and comparisons with other children. It seemed as if she faced a nasty dilemma: force herself to read distasteful, unredeeming and alienating material, or disengage and then disappoint parents, teachers and self with poor grades. Once sunny and blue, the skies had turned dark and stormy for our happy little girl whose only offense had been to attend her friendly neighborhood school at the innocent age of six.

I wondered if this Pavlovian reading curriculum accounted for the epidemic of dyslexia and learning disability in schools. What would its long term effects be on the personality of a child? Would he lose confidence in adults and institutions which required him to focus his attention day after day upon intellectual refuse? Could the demands of such a curriculum, under the psychological pressure of grading, create withdrawn and resentful children, alienated from themselves, their parents, society, books, and ideas?

## *HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY*

I was reminded of the inexplicable plight of our neighbors. The father was an accountant and the mother was a homemaker. They were nice people, and so were their children. The two teenagers were bright but got poor grades and hated school. They hung out with the crowd and participated in the sorts of self-destructive behaviors that are commonplace today. I asked these young people why they would behave in ways which would injure themselves and cause pain for their loved ones. They smiled quizzically and professed not to know. Maybe the ideas that moved them truly were subconscious. I wondered if they were victims of the obscure behaviorism that I found, and that others have found before and since, in public school readers.

We had noticed some perplexing changes in Jenny's behavior since she started in first grade. For one thing, she had stopped reading her favorite books and stories at home. Although she still begged us to read these to her, she explained that she was not supposed to read them herself, according to her understanding from school, because they contained big words and content in advance of her abilities. There were other changes which, taken one at a time, had seemed relatively harmless. We reconsidered them in light of the information stemming from our first parent-teacher conference.

In our state at that time, compulsory education began at the age of eight. Jenny was not obliged by law to attend school. With our various concerns, we pulled her out of school while we tried to figure out what to do.

## *School at Home*

It was great to have Jenny at home again. She returned to her happy place in the family as if school had never happened. She continued to play in the afternoons with her closest friends. Barb kept her involved with group piano lessons and with swimming and dance lessons. Younger siblings Adrian and Jocelyn were rough and ready for play at a moment's notice.

Things went so smoothly that we felt no urgency to return our daughter to a school setting. Barb picked up a few workbooks in arithmetic and grammar so that Jenny wouldn't fall too far behind her classmates. We looked into the private schools in our community and none looked real attractive. At some point, Barb surprised me with a proposal to tutor Jenny herself. I was thrilled. The idea of Jenny reading without limitation and progressing academically at her own rate was very appealing. Without knowing it at the time, we took the first small step on our homeschooling odyssey.

Surprisingly, it took a few weeks out of school for Jenny's reading to return to normal. Initially, she adhered to the mysterious ethic that she had brought home from first grade;

she refused to read above her “level.” She was capable of reading *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*—she had done it before—but since her two months in school, she would only listen with wide-eyed fascination to our out-loud readings. She looked at us with genuine reproach, as if we should know better, when we suggested that it was permissible for her to read and enjoy the pages herself.

Although time was on our side, the situation bordered on exasperating. Barb finally offered a bribe, a visit to Jenny’s favorite book store and a brand new book of her choice if she would read a Grimm tale all by herself. This did the trick and she was off to the races. I wondered how much reading and intellectual retardation would have been accomplished by a whole grade or two of school attendance. Could Jenny have become another learning-disabled, inarticulate, or special child? Those fates have befallen other bright little angels with trusting parents.

Jenny began to ravish her books again. We accumulated a home library. She loved nursery rhymes; fairy tales by Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson; Drs. Dolittle and Seuss; Shel Silverstein’s *A Light in the Attic* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends*; the Nancy Drew mysteries; Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House* series; *Anne of Green Gables* and *Heidi*; Louisa May Alcott’s classics, *Little Men*, *Little Women*, *Jo’s Boys*, etc.; *Arabian Nights*; Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories*, *The Jungle Book*, and *Riki Tikki Tavi*; *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*; *The Wind in the Willows*; *A Little Princess*, *The Secret Garden*, and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*; *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Tom Sawyer*; *Mary Poppins*, *Raggedy Ann*, and *Caddie Woodlawn*; *The Uncle Remus Stories*, and many other books. I can’t remember which of these she read at age six or seven or eight, but she read them all sooner or later.

Her favorites she read over and over again. We found used volumes of *Journeys Through Bookland*, anthologies by Charles H. Sylvester with a 1909 copyright. Volume One begins with nursery rhymes and fairy tales. “Jack and the Beanstalk,” “Cinderella,” “Beauty and the Beast” and many

more are wonderfully told. Volume Two continues with "Rumpelstilzkin," "Bluebeard," "Tom the Water Baby," etc. Volume Three included *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson*. Jenny read so much from these old books that she began to speak in an archaic mode of English.

We did not complicate Jenny's reading with exercises or testing. We were just thrilled to see her enjoying books again. Many of the things she read were new to me. I became fascinated with children's literature. The talented authors were able to captivate the adult and juvenile mind at the same time. It struck me that classics are not so-designated by committees of certified intellectuals, but survive over the generations on account of their irresistible appeal.

Free to explore a variety of literature, Jenny began to use many new words and phrases in her conversations. This was a welcome development, but I shuddered to imagine what might have been. When reviewing her school readers, I had noticed an impoverished vocabulary in the text, and I brought the subject up with her teacher. I was nearly floored as she calmly explained and rationalized the policy of the school district to limit a student's vocabulary growth to 500 new words per grade level. At this rate, the graduating high school senior would fall short of an adult vocabulary by only 10 or 20 thousand words!

Our public schools, self-proclaimed guardians against censorship, had been protecting Jenny from the dangers of new and interesting words and the ideas that go with them. With this philosophy, mountain meadows and sandy beaches are no place for children. Perilous diversity might be encountered among the wild flowers or sea shells.

Dumbed-down readers do more damage, obviously, than just limiting vocabulary. They stunt the growth of the child's mind at a time in life when the learning curve is nearly vertical. This is ground, it might be argued, that just can't be made up. Given the nature of the intellect to seek out the interesting and the fascinating, dumbed-down readers further injure growing children by discouraging the reading activity itself. I know some very bright adults who hate to read. Are they products of the system?

## *HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY*

In her school at home, progress in grammar and spelling seemed to proceed in proportion to Jenny's reading. She learned from workbooks, but her reading memory also contributed to her grammatical skills. We have seen this same effect work to the disadvantage of other children, when they were exposed to incorrect spelling or punctuation. There was a trend in the 80's (it may be ongoing) to have children pick correctly-spelled words from a list of misspellings. I suspect those misspellings remain etched in their minds.

Another counter-productive program, DISTAR, was used in elementary schools in three states where we have lived. It featured incorrect capitalization, punctuation, and spelling, often in big bold print. Sentences began without capitals. Periods were thrown randomly into statements. In words such as "game" or "lane," the "e" was printed in tiny font, nearly invisible, or left off words entirely. When I am out and about in the world, I meet people who spell and punctuate as if they were excellent students of DISTAR. I am glad that Jenny and our other children have read from books printed in traditional English.

Reading has its greatest value, you might agree, as another window into the world of thought and imagination. As in the field of flowers, a child's discoveries in books depend upon what he searches for, what grabs his fancy, and what fascinates him. The seeds of ideas from books grow into elaborate intellectual systems in fertile individual minds. Barb and I felt the lively imagination of the authors in our home library gave Jenny a chance to be enthralled with literature and a chance for her brain to flourish.

She read gleefully during her first-grade year in school at home. She was the happy and bouncy child she had always been. Crying was not a problem. She belonged to no reading group. She was not a Pony, a Turtle, or an Eagle. She didn't worry about reading faster or with more comprehension than other children. She felt no guilt over big words or complex stories as she greedily explored enchanting literature from ages present and past.

## *The Forest Through the Trees*

**In the spring of 1981, toward the end of Jenny's first homeschooling year, our family moved a few miles onto some mountain acreage. We inhabited a cinder-block basement covered with tar paper, and I went to work building a log home on top of it.**

**The nearest elementary school was ten miles away. It was small, with maybe 10 students per grade level. We spoke to the second-grade teacher about the possibility of Jenny attending school the following year under special conditions. We proposed that she read from books of her choice, that she not be tested for comprehension, and that she be challenged as far as possible in math and other subjects. The teacher was a good sport. She went along with our suggestions and had some good ones of her own.**

**The place had the feel of a one-room schoolhouse. Jenny spent half of her time in the library, where the librarian, a spry little octogenarian with a twinkle in her eye, supplied her with books and watered the plants with the same nurturing spirit. Second grade was fun for Jenny. She had an active social life, and we were happy with her progress on all fronts.**

## *HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY*

For the following year, we tried to make a similar arrangement. The third grade teacher resisted. She told us that she had been teaching for twenty five years, had met parents like us, and knew how to deal with them. The management of her class was none of our business. Like the other students, Jenny would work out of third-grade readers and math texts.

Barb and I were unable to see the benefits in retarding our daughter's academic progress. She had flourished under a philosophy of challenge and stimulation. We just couldn't bring ourselves to send her back into a regressive learning environment. Since the teacher was immune to our best arguments, we removed Jenny from public school for the second time. The nearest private school was some thirty miles away. We planned again on school at home.

A legal flap occurred when the superintendent of the local school district refused to sanction our homeschool. He made some ridiculous written arguments, filled with non sequiturs and misspellings, on behalf of public school attendance based upon socialization. We wondered why his junior high school had such a problem with drugs and pregnancies if his schools were such great factories for socialization. Were we to believe that juvenile gangs were composed of children who gather together for a little mayhem after tedious days of homeschooling?

Some of the local teachers were our friends, and they helped us weigh the superintendent's opinions in light of his reputation in the community. What kind of a man was he, that we should trust his judgment over our own? As it turned out, he had feet of clay, and his leadership did not merit a blind following.

Although we thought homeschool was best, the question of legality cast a threatening shadow over our household. Someone referred us to Ray and Dorothy Moore, who had begun their remarkable efforts to make homeschooling legal and respectable nationwide. Then in Michigan, they assured us over the telephone that rea-

sonable people were homeschooling with great success. My brother, an attorney, ghosted our response to the superintendent based upon the Moores' recommendations. The state withdrew its objections, and we began another year of school at home. Thanks to the Moores, we were able to homeschool in an environment free of intimidation.

Jenny's social life did suffer during her third-grade year. There were no playmates for her on the mountain. Her nearest friends lived ten miles away, and the quality of her relationships was affected by time, distance, and the circumstances of her homeschooling. Barb traveled impressive distances in an effort to maintain Jenny's friendships and to keep her involved in dancing and swimming. Were a similar predicament to occur today, we might find a solution requiring less sacrifice. As it was, Jenny and the family paid a significant price to sustain her academic growth.

On the plus side, life in the mountains was a great adventure. We had five children in the household, and six-year-old Adrian joined Jenny in homeschooling. His presence enriched Jenny's experience, and social deprivation was not a problem for him. A family with three boys lived across the fields. Along with four-year-old Jocelyn, Adrian and the neighbor boys roamed the mountains from dawn to dusk. Jenny joined these explorers on occasion.

The woods and meadows provided infinite fascination. Wild animals abounded: deer, elk, grouse, pheasants, pileated woodpeckers, blue jays, hawks, owls, coyotes, porcupines, squirrels, chipmunks, etc. In our homeschool, the outdoors—with its sights, sounds, smells and seasons—was a curriculum in itself.

Every fall the elk would migrate through our back yard on their way down to the lowlands. There were black bears in the forest, but they generally stayed away from people. On one trip through the woods, the kids thought they spotted a bear. They got pretty excited. Another morning, I noticed some cougar tracks in the snow at the back door. Short steps led up to the door, and bounding steps

away. We never saw a live cougar, although some people hunted them.

Our neighbors had interesting barnyard animals, including huge, dinosaur-like draft horses, a mule or two, pigs, ducks, geese, and a donkey. We had our own varieties of domestic creatures, many of which roamed free. While Barb may have appreciated the aesthetics of liberation, some of the practices of these animals tempered her enthusiasm. The chickens ate her flowers. The goats ingested everything on the property without discrimination. All the animals had uncontrollable scatological inclinations.

A high point for Honey, our queen goat, occurred one day when she took a couple of trial runs and then butted her reflected image in the basement window, shattering glass upon our family. I remember making a futile attempt, from the other side of the window, to deter her by waving my arms and yelling. If she saw me at all, it was in the form of a bull fighter taunting her with a red scarf. She charged her nemesis, smote the impostor, burst the glass, and trotted off triumphantly. At least no one was injured.

We bought a day-old calf from the neighbors one snowy evening. I carried her across the fields upon my back. She emptied her bladder and bowels during transport. I returned to the farm as a frozen consortium of calf urine, cow pie, newborn calf and me. The kids enjoyed the experience more than I did.

Mudspots was Adrian's calf, and he bottle-fed her every day. He imprinted, solely and exclusively according to the laws of that phenomena, as her mother. Years later he could fetch her from anywhere in the forest or fields by rattling his milk bucket or calling. This was neither my first nor last experience with imprinting. Did you know that human babies can imprint with inanimate objects? I see children, more and more, who completely ignore parental guidance, despite the presence of an imploring parent just a few feet or inches away. I wonder if these children have imprinted and bonded with the household TV.

**Mudspots turned out to be the lead cow in our pasture. The other cows would follow her anywhere. Without playing cowboy, Adrian could move the herd where he wished. We all learned a lesson, outside of school, in the use of the carrot versus the stick.**

**Jenny and Adrian approached homeschool differently. She spent a lot of her time reading. Adrian spent most of his time outdoors. Before the neighbors got out of school, he liked to climb trees and build things. With the upstairs under construction, wood and nails were always available. Adrian read some after the sun went down, but he was usually as occupied with his manufacturing projects as Jenny was with her books. They met for an hour or so each day when Barb conducted their homeschool classes. These consisted mostly of workbook exercises in arithmetic and grammar.**

**These painless sessions were observed by the younger children. I'm sure they demanded that Barb give them some material to work on, so they could feel like big kids. She would oblige with age-appropriate phonics sheets or simple writing or art projects. Free to disengage at any time, probably even welcome to do so from Barb's point of view, they still learned a lot over the years. When their turn came for mandatory academics at the age of seven or so, we found that they were already literate.**

**Our young students thrived in our homeschool in the mountains. While they were proficient in reading, writing, and arithmetic, we could see that they were healthy in ways that can't be measured by academic performance. Along with the other children, they burned with curiosity, and they explored respective areas of interest with such passion and energy. They were as spirited as any of the animals in the woods or birds in the sky. In terms of the overall development of our children, homeschooling had given us a glimpse of the forest through the trees. As we enjoyed it more and more, it was becoming a hard habit to break.**

## *Charles Dickens, Lightweight*

Jenny spent fourth grade in her little rural school. She was challenged in math and given the run of the library. Reading series were not part of her curriculum. There were about 10 children in her class, so her individualized treatment was not too taxing for her teacher. Jenny enjoyed her school year. Her only substantial complaint related to the long bus trips up and down the mountain.

Adrian homeschooled again that year, despite friendly pressure from the second-grade teacher to enroll him in her class. "A" enjoyed himself at home so much it would have been a shame to change anything. He amused himself with projects and play with his sisters. He and Jocelyn played with the neighbor boys when they came home from school.

Adrian's years on the mountain were a rehearsal for his later interest in mechanical engineering. Book learning was minimal, amounting to maybe an hour a day. There was a lot of time left over for building and tinkering. He used all available material (there was plenty of junk in the area) for his creations.

Barb and I relearned the old lesson that life itself is educational. We gave Adrian loads of free time to learn from his

own explorations. He developed the ability to amuse himself. This invaluable quality—which is becoming a rarity in a society inundated with passive entertainment—should serve him well for a lifetime.

There was plenty of work to be done on the mountain, but most of it seemed like fun to Adrian. The chickens and goats were full of monkey business and created farm crises which required innovative solutions. Fences needed mending, as the cows liked to break through the weak spots and wander away. An old outhouse had to be transformed into a chicken coup. Tree forts had to be built, according to Adrian's reckoning. These were the sorts of projects which could be done by an eight-year-old with a hammer, nails, and a saw. Appearances were not important to us, so Adrian was free to tackle his chores in his own way and change approaches when needed, according to the ancient formula of trial and error. He loved work on this kind of basis. He would get so involved that we often had to search for him at mealtimes and after sundown.

He and Jocelyn spent much of their free time with two imaginary friends, Heidi and Beari, who lived in the back of the old pickup truck. The kids would charge into the house at various times during the day and provide us with updates on their adventures with these constant companions, believing that Barb and I shared in their fantasy. We played along instinctively, honored to be included in their world. It was fun to see their unbridled excitement and imagination.

It seems as if every one of our children has passed through a fantasy phase of childhood which lasts until age 7 or 8. I wonder if these uninhibited years represent an essential developmental stage in children. Perhaps they lay a foundation for adult initiative, creativity, industry, or even self-esteem or contentment.

Jenny homeschooled again for fifth grade. Together with Barb, she audited an English Lit class on Charles Dickens at the local college, which happened to be our alma mater. She did all the reading and attended class. The other college students were very nice about having group discussions with a 10-year-old. The professor, who had younger versions of Barb

and Matt in his classes a generation before, was a prince to participate in this arrangement.

Taking advantage of homeschool freedom, Jenny and Barb loved getting out of the house several days a week and attending an interesting class held on a beautiful college campus. The eternal challenge for homeschoolers is to provide an environment for children and parents which is exciting and stimulating. I credit Barb for her imagination and boldness in making an effort to enrich our homeschool through means which were not the least bit conventional. Our family continues to enjoy the fruits of her experiment today.

While Jenny found collegians very interesting, she found Dickens fascinating. She read six books for the course: *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, and *Little Dorrit*. I managed to pick up a complete set of Dickens' works, used, at a book store in Portland. Jenny read each of his novels and short stories at least two or three times that year.

I had to read these books that were so interesting to my family. In the past, I had found literature to be tolerable, amusing, or even exciting. Dickens was different. He was electrifying. Jenny tells me I became very aggressive about sharing time with our lone copy of *David Copperfield*. We alternated two-hour segments, often with fireworks at the changeovers. She was intrigued that I was such a zealot. She won't allow me to forget that, prior to the commencement of her course and despite a minimum acquaintance with his work, I had pronounced Dickens a lightweight.

Like Jenny, I ended up reading every Dickens novel that year. They were all electrifying. It occurred to me that, in my wayward youth, I may have stepped over other jewels in the field of classic literature, mistaking them for bits of broken glass or common rocks. I set out to read books by Tolkien, Tolstoy, Thackeray, Dostoevsky, et al. My hypothesis was proven true. I had been a fool.

When we first moved to the mountains, we searched for the prized but elusive morel mushrooms. We couldn't find any and began to wonder if the species really existed. When

we finally spotted one, it seemed as if the mushrooms were everywhere. I made another belated discovery in the mountains relating to the world of literature: treasures abound, if you know where to look and what to look for.

My relationship with Jenny took an exciting turn. She had noticed the new-found intensity of my reading and knew I had discovered the magic. I used to kid her with questions such as “what is so interesting about that book you are reading?” She always responded with a quizzical gaze. It was kind and patient but touched with a hint of sadness, as if she held out hope that I could discover the answer to that question myself someday. Now the shadow between us was gone. We shared a passion for the enchantment in literature and began fervent discussions about our books which continue still.

Jenny had witnessed her father discover and become inspired by the truth, beauty and something more in classic literature. In our homeschool, she saw that education happens to people of all ages and that it can take place at any time or place. It must be beneficial for children to watch parents emerge from sometimes awkward moments of ignorance and to see that life goes on just fine, or even better than before.

The Dickens adventure has impacted our family in ways we never imagined. A Dickens theme was the subject of Jenny’s honors thesis in college. His books (and ideas) have become the cornerstone of our homeschool. We expect them to be popular with future generations as well. For me, they formed a bridge into the world of literature and into the hearts of my loved ones.

Barb’s auditing of a college class with her ten-year-old daughter began as an unconventional educational experiment, but it was an enterprise which had a good chance for success because it was based upon life-enhancing instincts for stimulation and adventure. The results have been marvelous and lead us to a familiar conclusion about homeschool: it is educational for parents and children alike.

## *No Telly on the Mountain*

One thing we did not do in the mountains was watch television. We didn't have to exercise a lot of self discipline to minimize our viewing time. It went to zero, because we couldn't get a channel. Years later, when our family returned to civilization, I threw our only television, a black and white model with a 12-inch screen, into a dumpster. The night was dark and stormy, or it should have been if it wasn't. Several of our children and a few neighbor kids witnessed this exorcism, which I heartily recommend for all families.

People ask how we manage to keep children out of our hair without television, as if children are fundamentally incompatible with parents and each other, and as if television is a lifesaver in its role as a baby-sitter. This is another example of the wonderful irony of modern life. As the root cause of much of the dysfunctional behavior in their children, television should be regarded by parents as anything but a friend.

To begin with, despite assurances to the contrary, plenty of evidence links habitual television viewing to Attention-Deficit-Disorder, that modern and widespread impediment to the

**educability of children. With a large segment of society using television as a baby-sitter, humans have unwittingly duplicated disastrous experiments on other animal species in which infants are raised in isolation from parents or by inorganic surrogates. The results of these experiments have ominous implications for people. Birds will cluster about a mobile inorganic object as adults, ignoring their biological mother, if imprinted as chicks. Puppy dog isolates demonstrate "overactivity, distractibility, ....inferiority to pet-reared and colony-reared dogs in problem solving....., and inability to be socialized thereafter." (Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry; Freedman, Kaplan, Sadick, 1975)**

**I am sorry to say that children are now deserted by parents to be raised by television sets and have been since the Sixties, when television programming expanded to include daytime hours during weekdays. The results are predictably horrific. Kids are like other animals. ADD children, estimated to represent up to 20% of the school-age population, manifest the distractibility, hyperactivity and other features of puppy-dog isolates, as well as a bonding and imitative predilection for television over their own species. They mimic the frenetic nature of the programming, and their attention spans correspond to the intervals between scene changes on the television screen.**

**The experts tell us that ADD has always been with us and does not result from environmental or social factors. I don't believe them. I made a trip to the medical school library and found that the ADD syndrome, by any of its names, started appearing in psychiatric textbooks in the Sixties. This time frame corresponds to my own observations. I have clear recollections of my classmates from elementary school in the '50s. I attended 12 grades with many of them. I know more than a few like brothers and sisters. I see some on a regular basis. None has ADD. None had it then, none has it now. People who claim that ADD has been with us through the ages are playing with semantics. It is the recent epidemic of this devastating syndrome, not the possible incidence of isolated cases in the past, which demands explanation. On this subject the facts are clear: ADD arrived en masse in society**

when parents abandoned their children to daycare and habitual television viewing.

Believe the Wizard at National Institute of Mental Health if you will, but I think it is time to hop off the yellow brick road and do a little thinking for ourselves. Television may be a seductive option as a baby-sitter in a culture which provides little help for young mothers, but there hasn't been a falser friend to humanity since the Serpent slithered in the Garden of Eden.

By reducing their ability to engage in meaningful interaction with the world around them, ADD contributes to the alienation of children from their parents, siblings, selves, and society. In light of this impressive morbidity, the relationship between habitual television viewing and ADD deserves further investigation by objective researchers. Don't hold your breath for this to happen. Consider, instead, a few items from a long list of other injuries to children which result from the television habit.

At the very least, viewing delays the maturation of children. A six-year-old who has spent 28 hours a week in front of the television since his infancy has the life experience of a three-year-old before the age of television. It is likely that cumulative neurological distortions amount to much more than simple retardation of coordination, intellectuality, or socialization. Essentially, television replaces family life, traditional human communities, and the natural world as a template for existence, as effectively as if our children were raised in the alien lands of *The Martian Chronicles*.

For optimal neurological development in children, we know that there are stages which need to be reached at the proper time and in the proper sequence. The wandering eye, to borrow an example, cannot be trained to see after five or six years of age. At that point the window of opportunity is lost. It is reasonable to ask whether certain neurological achievements related to motor or sensory function, coordination, or intellect are denied to children who have been glued to the tube in infancy.

I remember my own children during their crawling and toddling periods. They had to taste, smell, handle and ma-

nipulate every item they could get their hands on. During their day-long explorations, the sensory, motor, and conceptual components of their nervous systems were used on a continuous basis. Clearly, the mesmerized infant misses out on great quantities of these more natural neurologic challenges. There is little input from certain senses during television viewing, while the input from other senses such as vision and hearing is grossly distorted. The television experience is artificially narrow and controlling. Compare it to a real-life activity such as a walk in the woods, in which sights, sounds, and smells come from every angle, and a person can choose to investigate or explore areas of individual interest.

For all intents and purposes, television requires of its patrons a near vegetative state. Motor activity is minimized, as is the requirement to develop coordination. Physical activity is reduced, the sedentary lifestyle is habituated, and caloric equations are modified. Is it any wonder that obesity is epidemic in the television culture?

Throughout history, infants have ideated in response to sensory-perceptual experiences, in response to their own interests and adventures, and in response to the inborn dictates of their genes. In the natural world, the individual infant might be seen as the determining agent in the development of his own cerebral cortex. Compare this to the passivity of television viewing, in which the child's consciousness slavishly follows the programming. Real-life experience engenders curious, creative, and busy children who learn to interact and cooperate with others in order to make their lives more interesting. Habitual television viewing develops lazy, bored, impatient, and self-indulgent creatures who expect to be constantly stimulated through the expenditure of minimum effort, such as pushing buttons on remotes.

There is a significant antisocial element to television viewing, despite the fact that it is often done in groups. Meaningful social interaction, cooperation, or genuine regard for others is minimal in this setting. Consider the half-hearted or token conversations that take place in a room where people are distracted by television. It was an awareness of stonewall-

ing my own young son while watching football on TV which led to the dumpster episode. While viewing seemingly innocent sporting events, with or without him, I was cheating us both out of the depth and intimacy of a precious relationship.

Now that households have multiple sets, families don't have to agree on programming. Individuals just retire to different rooms to watch their own shows. Brothers and sisters and husbands and wives now have the ability and perhaps inclination to live worlds apart under the same roof.

Can society's love affair with television account for the explosion of drug use in our culture? The availability of drugs doesn't explain the epidemic, since cocaine and opium were legal and inexpensive for great periods of our history while used by tiny fractions of the population. Today, a frightening percentage of citizens choose drugs over life. If we trace the lives of contemporary users back to childhood, would we find juveniles who were supersaturated with television?

By depriving individuals of real-life experience, television weakens identity and true self-esteem. It habituates children to unreality, and it provides them with unending doses of over-stimulation at no personal cost of labor or sacrifice. It supplies immediate gratification without requiring effort or interaction with others. People are spoiled by this electronic box to a degree never seen before in history. They make perfect subjects for recruitment into the drug culture, which offers a virtually identical package of experience through easy pharmaceutical pathways to titillation, fantasy, or oblivion. I see the impact of television upon the psychology of children as the ultimate cause of the drug cancer which threatens our civilization.

Television steals a critical ingredient from childhood, free time. Kids need time to play, to be curious and pursue interests, to build things and take them apart, and to interact with other children and adults and learn lifetime social skills. They need to develop the ability to cultivate free time with activity and industry.

Television robs children of the experiences they need to become human. It bleaches the life and vitality out of indi-

**viduals and communities and leaves in their place clusters of soulless, heartless, and mindless zombies. I strongly recommend the no-TV option. It has worked for our six children. They are friendly, enthusiastic, creative, energetic and industrious people with a passion for living. I am convinced that these traits survived largely because the kids participated to a negligible extent in the defining institution of our age.**

## *Farm-School, Dad-School*

During Jenny's fifth-grade year we moved a few miles to a small farm in the valley, a little closer to civilization. Adrian and Jocelyn continued to homeschool along with Jenny. Emma and Julia, full of monkey business, enriched the social climate in our homeschool.

We accumulated more cows. The big kids helped with the chores. They managed the chickens and the egg gathering. Working together, they moved irrigation pipes. Their efforts always began with precise, military coordination and then degenerated into anarchy and gigantic water fights. The cows joined in the sport, crashing around wildly and kicking up their heels as if a hornet's nest had ruptured. I wondered what the neighbors thought.

The kids bottle-fed calves we bought together at the auction yard, including our baby bull. They fed the cows out of the barn in winter time and made secret tunnels in the haystacks. Two Canadian geese landed on our pond and made our place their home. We learned to call them in from the corners of the property by using imitated goose sounds and then rewarding them with food.

Adrian and Jocelyn were in a big hurry to explore new territory. They found friends from the neighboring farms. The gang of them ranged over the valley, united by a fear of soap. Jenny's predominant activity, when she wasn't working or dancing, was reading. In the evenings, she played the obligatory group games, such as "over-the-border" and "piggy-goes-to-jail," which were organized by Adrian and involved brothers, sisters, neighbor kids, and even dads and moms. I worried sometimes that Jenny read too much, or that the others didn't read enough, but I met resistance when attempting to modify their habits. In the end, I went along with Barb's idea to let things be. All of the kids were happy and well-educated. Why make changes?

The girls loved their after-school ballet classes and the friends they met there. They tolerated the relative drudgery of homeschool in anticipation of these dance sessions. Over the years our kids devised homeschool strategies revolving around the idea that the day actually begins in mid-afternoon, when other kids get out of school. Hours previous to that were managed in the most tolerable way possible, considering that Mom and Dad had a few requirements.

Life was arranged on HST (homeschool-savings-time), a system whose practitioners arose late and retired late. By finishing breakfast at 10 in the morning, our cowboys and cowgirls had only a few hours to kill until the real action began. Chores until eleven, an hour of book-learning, and then lunch moved the clock to one or so. It was easy for the kids to occupy a couple hours of free time in the early afternoon. They usually practiced piano after lunch. Homeschool days like these were painless, and we noticed little rebellion or discontent.

Barb and I had some second thoughts about HST, as you might imagine, but the children were getting what we wanted, and they were getting some important things their school-aged counterparts lacked. They accumulated math and literacy skills at an unbridled rate, and they developed a "can do" attitude through work responsibilities and self-initiated projects. The polar opposites of passive, institutional creatures, they filled their lives with excitement through their own doings.

## *HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY*

We took advantage, back then in 1984, of the increasing numbers in the homeschooling community, the formation of support groups, and the opportunities for daytime activities with other adults and school-age children. The kids had fun, and it was reassuring for parents to get positive feedback on our common enterprise. We all felt we were doing the right thing, but we didn't have a certain knowledge of that fact. It was exciting to participate and trade liberally in a free market of educational ideas.

Homeschooling has never become an establishment-sanctioned enterprise. It has remained unseen or ignored by the Department of Knowledge. Consequently, there are no experts to impede progress or render the subject tedious or incomprehensible. Support groups enable homeschoolers to discuss and communicate theories and practices related to nurture and education. This is a viable intellectual environment and compares favorably to the conceptual dead-zone created by moribund school bureaucracies.

While adults trade stories of successes and failures, children play together at homeschool gatherings. I'm sure they give vent, in a healthy process, to their own feelings and attitudes with questions like, "don't your parents let you go to school either?"

After Christmas, I offered to be the official hometeacher in our house. Barb, pregnant with our sixth child, gave me the green light. She may have used the expression, "Go for it, baby." Coming off night shifts in the emergency room, I was able to get together with my homeschoolers for an hour or two at least three or four mornings a week.

We continued to work out of the Calvert School curriculum, a course of independent study which has been used by overseas military personnel and others for many years. Earlier in the fall, we had paid for the books and an instructional manual but had passed on the additional fees which would have covered testing and certification. With good results up to that point, we had no reason to change our no-testing policy. Certification had never been a problem. Jenny had always been welcomed back into public schools with age-mate cohorts.

After a few years of unfettered homeschooling, Jenny and Adrian worked on material which was a couple of grade levels ahead of their schooled age-mates. Ignoring about half of the Calvert material, including the readers, we proceeded through the math, spelling, and grammar workbooks, lesson by lesson.

Some of the history books and biographies were quite engaging, to me as well as the kids. We read these together but didn't do the corresponding exercises or tests. I counted on the fact that children remember things that are interesting to them. *A Child's History of the World* is very entertaining and colorful. I still use it as a reference, as a means to appear educated in certain company, and to keep up with my kids' knowledge of history.

We did a smattering of science, but the bulk of the science curriculum was farm life itself and the interesting books and magazines we left lying around the house. *National Geographic* and the *Golden Books* on flowers, trees, insects, fishes, etc. were well-used by the kids over the years. *Zoobooks* have come on the scene since those days, but are at the very top of the list when it comes to stimulating material. Judging by their worn conditions, books on dinosaurs and sharks and whales were popular.

Barb and I have always loved the *Calvert Spellers*. A list of twelve words and a vocabulary segment is given in each daily lesson. "Only six spelling rules are sufficiently consistent to produce profitable results if taught to a child of nine or ten," states the *Calvert Speller*. We appreciated this succinct philosophy, agreeing that it is counterproductive to make spelling burdensome by imposing a great quantity of spelling rules on children.

The vocabulary segments in the spellers are great:

*Streets stretch out in front of you. It is natural that they should be called streets, for the Latin word "stratus" meant "stretched out" or "extended." Don't let it surprise you that the sound "a" in "stratus" changed to the sound "e" in "street." Over hundreds of years, the sounds of vowels as*

## HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY

***they pass from lips to ears often change, and so do the sounds of consonants.***

The *Calvert Spellers* introduce children (and parents) to etymology and to people of yore. This makes language more meaningful and comprehensible, if not downright interesting.

The mind hungers to make sense out of existence from the day it is born. The search is mediated through inborn faculties such as curiosity and interest. In our homeschool, we have always tried to use books, such as the *Calvert Spellers*, which cater to these qualities of human intelligence.

## *Mr. P. and the Livestock Auction*

Children are not vessels to be filled but fires to be lit.

—author unknown

For sixth through eighth grade, Jenny attended a private school in our area. Adrian and Jocelyn homeschooled during this period, but Adrian went to Jenny's school in fifth grade, his first year out of the home. He chose to return home for the sixth grade, maybe because it demanded less of his time.

Homeschooling gave him a chance to finish his chores, book work, and music lessons by noon or so, and then he was a free man. He spent a lot of his time out and about with Jocelyn. They had favorite spots, such as the barn, haystack, and various trees. Year-long aquatic studies took place in the creek and the pond. They tormented the cows, all in sport, and the cows returned the favor.

Barb got involved in a loosely structured schooling cooperative involving close friends and friends of friends. Meeting once a week, five to ten mothers and their children would go on field trips together or do interesting projects for a few hours. The youngsters ranged in age from thirteen on down. Some of the moms had older kids in school and just brought their preschoolers. Others brought their homeschoolers. The cooperative was fun for everyone and served as a bridge between homeschooling and conventional families. At least

a couple of families turned to homeschooling after their participation in this group.

In the informal, friendly, picnic-like atmosphere, mothers took turns managing the curriculum. Activities included pumpkin-carving, insect-gathering, art projects, visits to the local dairy, etc. The sessions gave the moms, some of whom had several small children, a pleasant break from routine, while the kids enjoyed new company and adventures. When asked recently what she had enjoyed most about homeschool, Jocelyn named two things: her freedom, and her memories of these gatherings.

Adrian's fifth-grade experience was largely defined by his teacher, who was also the principal of his small, private school. Mr. P. was a nice person in real life, but he was strict, severe, and a bit unimaginative in the classroom. He seemed committed to this line as a matter of philosophy, seeing no reason to make school interesting or engaging. His job was to fill student-vessels with facts. Their job was to be filled. The possibility that his program conflicted with something fundamental in the nature of children never occurred to him.

His approach spawned loads of misbehavior, proving his premise that children need to be treated strictly and severely. Adrian had to suppress a good deal of his buoyancy and natural curiosity. Barb, who taught Spanish a few mornings a week at this school, noticed an undercurrent of discontent in Adrian's classroom. With the prospect of having Mr. P. again for his sixth grade teacher, Adrian chose to homeschool. He had made some nice friends in fifth grade. In homeschool, he could keep these friends without having to sit in class all day long, silent and motionless.

Jenny had a very different experience. Her teacher was an enthusiastic young lady who made class fun and interesting. With only ten or twelve students in her grade, Jenny found herself on the girls sports teams for volleyball, basketball and softball. In the beginning, she played so the school had enough bodies to field teams in these sports. She ended up a zealot. Few of the kids were major talents, but all felt appreciated for their contributions, as they did in other school activities.

It seemed as if every student in Jenny's class, sometime during the year, got a chance to play the major part in a school production. In the music concerts and theatricals, for instance, everyone took his turn in the spotlight. It was fun to see each individual child grow and develop in response to his special challenges.

Many parents have seen a similar atmosphere, so conducive to student participation and involvement, reproduced at other small schools. Considering the benefits of smallness, we are left to wonder why public schools always get bigger. When explanations are offered, we are told that bigger schools cost less. How can this be true when private schools such as Jenny's can operate so economically? Besides, dysfunctional graduates of large schools add huge costs to their communities, when all factors are considered. Large schools simply can't effect, in a constructive way, universal or even wide scale participation in activities with the attendant growth and maturation of young people. They seem to produce a contrary effect: immaturity and self-doubt in anonymous souls who drift in crowds of non-participants.

Jocelyn had no self-doubt, wasn't anonymous, and she never drifted. This was a child who lived her first 9 years, for all intents and purposes, in the wild. Barb and I used to call her "Borneo queen." She could be found, if one could find her, anywhere on the farm (or in the countryside): rafting on the pond, playing in the haystack, or catching crawdads in the creek. One day I came home and she was at the top of our sycamore tree. Brown-haired, green-eyed Jocelyn had her trademark pigtails, and they streamed in the wind (over years that passed too quickly) as she rode with Dad in the old blue pickup truck. She helped cut the firewood, stack the hay, and move the irrigation pipe. She helped at the feed store and the hardware store. She helped with all the work.

We brought home a day-old bull calf from the auction. Jocelyn and I fed him from our nipple-bucket. A friendly and sporting calf, he bonded to us and was our buddy. He loved to push on me, testing his strength, with his large head. He grew so quickly that I had to stop the pushing game. During his childhood, before he weighed more than 1200 pounds or

## *HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY*

so, I could distract him by yelling suddenly or making some wild gestures. He would prance away in sport, reciprocating my enthusiasm. He grew more, and I noticed the ground shook and he made thundering sounds when retreating from my imitation of a gesticulating scarecrow.

One day, at a couple of years of age, he didn't run away. Without trying to hurt me, he pushed me through a section of our rickety corral. He wanted to play more, but I didn't have the time. When fully grown, at 2000 pounds or so, he would surprise me sometimes from behind, nudging me with his massive head, or he would wander into the softball games that our kids played in the pasture. Friendly bulls can be dangerous, I am told, but our bull never hurt a fly. Grown up, he mirrored, as humans do, the treatment that he had received as an infant.

For fourth grade, Jocelyn decided that she wanted to go to public school with her friends. The teacher was due for retirement after 30 years in public education. He agreed to challenge her in math and reading, as kids used to be challenged when he first began teaching. It wasn't an easy decision to send Jocelyn to school, but we relented. She enjoyed her school year, she tells me as I write, and she was pretty bouncy at the time.

I missed Jo Jo's company that year on family outings to the livestock auction. Our merry band of homeschoolers showed up at these monthly affairs along with the local ranchers and ranch hands. We saw cowgirls and cowboys, and everyone watched each other while we were supposed to be evaluating the livestock. Tobacco juice flew everywhere, and Mr. Levi was done real proud because most folks wore his pants. We previewed the animals by visiting pens which held pigs, goats, sheep, cows, calves, horses and bulls. Sometimes we saw more exotic species, such as llamas. The kids petted the younger or smaller animals.

When the bidders gathered indoors, the drama increased as people took their stadium seats. Colorful characters could be seen in any direction, some with wrinkled-leather faces which seemed to have few moving parts. Over the loud-speaker, the auctioneer's intimidating voice reverberated like

**a machine gun around the auditorium. He started with the smaller critters, proceeding to the larger and more threatening animals and finally to the awesome and fearsome bulls.**

**The attendants dodged behind their protective barriers to escape the wrath of irritated cattle, narrowly evading the hooves and horns as they ushered them in and out of the auction arena. If you so much as scratched your head, the auctioneer screamed "SOLD!" and pointed at you as the crowd stared in unison. You felt for a moment that the police were going to haul you away for a felony. It wasn't that bad; you just had to pay for the cow.**

## *Learning to Read*

***We live in an age when the simplest enterprises have a tendency to become over-analyzed and then fall into the eager hands of experts. This can be dangerous. Experts invent foreign vocabularies and languages, purportedly to increase their understanding. In actuality, these serve to insulate them from the masses and protect their dominions and their jobs, on the well established principle that if someone cannot understand what you are talking about, it is impossible for him to criticize your logic.***

**Although I can't recall the source of these thoughts, I agree with them completely. They certainly apply to the subject of reading instruction, in which modern-day parents are invited, despite mind-boggling failures by institutional authorities over the last 40 years, to regard themselves as confused trespassers in a domain of experts.**

**Teaching children to read is not difficult if the quagmire of expert ideology is avoided. A short letter appearing in our local newspaper gives some historical perspective to the subject:**

*“Many of us who learned our elementary reading before the early 1950’s must be very perplexed over the continuous reading problems of the past 45 years or so. The vast majority of us before the early ‘50’s learned to read well without being subjected to ongoing reading theories that are peculiar to the past 45 years. How did we get along so well? That ‘ancient’ system, without question, worked. This begets the question: What was broken and what needed fixing?”*

Homeschoolers using this ancient system, phonics, achieve nearly universal success in teaching their children to read. In our house, we take advantage of the fact that kids are exceedingly curious about the world around them. As they grow, they take an increasing interest in the written language which is on display in neon signs, billboards, books, magazines, Sunday comics, etc. They see parents and siblings reading and want to copy their behavior. When we read them material which they find fascinating, their desire to solve the reading puzzle intensifies. At this point it would be very difficult to prevent them from learning to read, unless we withheld from them the key to the secret code, which is phonics.

English is a phonetic language, and one learns to read it by learning the sounds that letters make and voicing them in the sequence in which they are printed. We give our toddlers alphabet blocks and alphabet books with charming illustrations. Sitting on the laps of Mom and Dad, they explore the pages of these books, unaware that the phonetic foundation for their reading future is being laid.

After they master letter sounds, we teach our kids to sound-out words. “Mmm...ah...mm, Mom.” We use simple workbooks and hands-on phonics instruction during out-loud reading sessions. We post colorful, magnetic letters on the refrigerator. I sense a feeling of power and pride in youngsters when they first learn to manipulate these letters to form words. Refrigerator-phonics sessions have the advantage of occurring in the natural flow of life. Some mothers aren’t above offering a cookie to a toddler to stimulate his interest. Spelling his name (and words such as “cat”

and “dog”) on the fridge was a rite of passage for each of our children.

We avoid phonics workbooks which are confusing or have ambiguous illustrations. When a student is asked to identify the first letter in the name of a pictured object, one would expect that object to be easily identifiable. In phonics books, cats can't look like rats. It is a bad sign when a five- or six-year-old is found staring at his phonics workbook from an inch above the table, pulling his hair and crying in frustration. Material should be simple and straightforward, or we are probably teaching the wrong lessons to our kids.

After some elementary phonics instruction, motivated children learn to read quickly. Motivation is high in our house where there is no TV, where we read with our kids for mutual enjoyment, where they have access to interesting books and magazines, and where parents or older siblings are observed to find amusement in their reading activities. Each of our children learned to read—as they learned to swim or ride a bicycle—when a combination of preparation and desire propelled them to success. Magic moments like these are gateway experiences which open up new worlds for exploration.

With adequate phonics preparation, the vast majority of children learn to read, as they do in the homeschooling community and as they did at the beginning of the twentieth century. Educators don't need to understand the sequential brain functions involved in reading. Molecular biologists don't need to comprehend the cellular chemistry. Parents don't need to be bamboozled with mystifying theories. As birds are born to fly, so are children born to read.

Like other parents, Barb and I try to keep interesting children's books and magazines around the house. The genius of nursery rhymes lies in their simultaneous appeal to both children and adults. Children love the wit, humor, imagination, and rolling rhythms. Adults love these things and the kernels of wisdom, too. Everyone loves clever illustrations. If nursery rhymes or other children's literature were dull to parents or kids, read-aloud sessions would involve unnecessary negatives, so we choose material which is universally attractive.

Dr. Seuss is usually in the middle of our domestic picture when our children learn to read. Kids love the combination of silliness and tongue-twisting torture in phrases such as “tweedle beetle battles in tweedle beetle bottles.” Some of their pleasure derives from witnessing Dad or Mom fly off the track and crash when racing faster and faster through these lines. I remember times when Dr. Seuss accidents have rendered parents and children helpless with laughter, strewn about the living room, ready for the funny farm. By the time our kids could read Dr. Seuss books, they usually had them memorized from previous out-loud readings. Maybe this helped with their confidence in sounding-out words.

Shel Silverstein’s poems in *A Light in the Attic* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* have an appeal to adults and children which certainly ranks with nursery rhymes and Dr. Seuss stories. Among my favorite Silverstein poems are “The Bendable, Foldable Man,” and “Backward Bill.”

If you can find a person of any age who can resist the *Tintin* stories by Herge, I would like to meet him. These picture-books portray fascinating characters and cultures as the juvenile reporter travels all over the world in his sophisticated and entertaining adventures. Several of our kids have learned to read while buried in pages of *Tintin*. They seemed to be captivated by the illustrations long before they could read.

I noticed that my nephew Henry was riveted to *Tintin in Tibet* the other day. For half an hour he didn’t notice my presence in the room. I predict this is a child who will read in no time, when he learns the sounds that letters make and the technique of sounding-out words. Like other devotees, he will become an encyclopedic reference on *Tintin*. In the process he will acquire a large vocabulary and the ability to read just about anything. This progress could result from Henry reading other material that is interesting, but it could very well be hindered by alienating material found in school readers.

In our ultra-modern times, the great majority of children labeled as dyslexic or learning-disabled have the potential to be capable or even excellent readers. These kids need

phonics instruction, and they need to be exposed to the irresistible, illustrated material found in Shel Silverstein's books, *Tintin* stories, or collections of *Garfield*, *The Far Side*, and *Calvin and Hobbes*. Wise parents leave these treasures in the family room and around the house. It is difficult to find poor juvenile readers in homes filled with such works because children, attracted to the art, have great incentive to read the corresponding captions and copy.

I hear sometimes from parents that their children read poorly but have no trouble with the Sunday comics. Are the kids terrible readers or are they reading terrible material? These households need an infusion of interesting books and magazines. They also need to eliminate sources of instant and effortless entertainment such as television and video games. Reading would improve dramatically, and I suspect family life would take a turn for the better.

Adrian, now a college senior, told me recently he was going to visit a new book store in San Francisco which only sells *Tintin* books. Like his brothers and sisters, Adrian stockpiles favorite books with the intent of having them available for his future family. This is evidence of his passion for literature, and it is this love, over and above the mechanical ability to read, that most parents desire for their children.

In our home, we have reached our reading objectives through an approach which involved simple instruction in phonics, easy access to a diversity of interesting material, and an environment free of coercion, boredom, testing, or other discouraging influences.

## *School in the City*

In the fall of 1988, we moved to Barb's home town, Salt Lake City. Jenny enrolled in junior high as a ninth-grader, Adrian as a seventh-grader. Jocelyn attended public school as a fifth-grader. The younger children homeschooled.

It was an exciting year for Jenny. She had excellent teachers in several subjects, including Spanish, English, and math. She benefited from accelerated classes which were offered to students with appropriate levels of interest and ability. I detected no obnoxious aura of elitism or exclusivity.

In contrast, the "gifted" programs in elementary schools have always offended me. Like so many apples, children are processed off the assembly line and thrown into one of two barrels, gifted or not-gifted. Surely, this can't be good for kids. Besides being divisive and inappropriately spoiling or discouraging, gifted programs, because they are based upon a false premise, are a fraud. We all know the real truth: life is a gift, and all children are gifted with unique aptitudes and abilities. Schools should follow the example of the great majority of parents, who encourage each of their children to find special areas of talent or interest without threatening or berating the others.

Adrian's seventh-grade year was his first in public school. For the first several weeks, he was moderately unsettled as he experienced all the newness in a large junior high. In particular, it took him a few weeks, as it has with our other children, to adjust to high-powered math classes. Afraid of alienating them to math or homeschool, we never pressed for increasingly accurate calculations at accelerating speeds. Jenny was notorious for her unhurried homeschool math lessons, but we resisted the temptation to turn up the heat. When she and the others performed well in school math, we were relieved to know that our relaxed approach hadn't hurt.

One painless addition game I have played with our kids is a rigged form of blackjack. "Hit. Stand. Hit. Hit. Busted!" Sometimes our family room sounds like a casino. The kids start with ten chips and bet on every hand. They play against me, the dealer. If they accumulate twenty chips the game is over, and I pay them a quarter. They don't pay me if they lose their chips, so this game is popular. The kids learn to add their cards quickly under these conditions. I usually find a way to lose after 15 or twenty minutes by using nefarious methods such as peeking at the cards or dealing off the bottom of the deck.

"Twenty four" is a copyrighted game in which the participants stare at a colorful card in the middle of the table which has a number between 1 and 9 printed in each of four corners. The idea is to add, subtract, multiply or divide the numbers in a sequence which yields a total of 24. There are about thirty cards altogether, with differing degrees of difficulty to accommodate the maturity levels of participating players. This is a fun game for kids and parents. We have played it many times without getting bored.

I am sure that many other non-alienating methods have been discovered by homeschoolers and other educators to produce crackerjack student-calculators. These days, I imagine some computer math games are being used as effective learning tools.

Jocelyn's fifth-grade year was difficult. She felt that school attendance would help her blend into the new community. We knew that public school couldn't compete academically

with our homeschool, but we thought her foundation in literacy couldn't be substantially threatened by a year in school. I think we underestimated the danger of a retarded curriculum. Her math was second-grade level. The obligatory readers were laden with correct attitudes and were lacking in vocabulary or interest. She considered the time she spent in class to be a waste.

It was unforgivable to have her in such an environment, and I feel guilty to this day that we didn't make a change at the time. We looked at her options for the sixth grade and considered skipping it altogether. Adrian had enjoyed his first year in junior high and had encountered several inspirational teachers. Maybe Jocelyn would have a similar experience. We were confident that she would be socially comfortable because she was accustomed to having older friends from her dance classes.

Skipping sixth grade required approval from her grade-school principal. He advised against our plan. He may have had unstated objections, but he expressed concerns that Jocelyn would be overmatched by the academics. I wondered privately how he thought another year at his school would help her, since half of his graduating sixth graders couldn't read, write, spell, or do simple arithmetic with any facility.

While we considered his recommendations, Barb and I have always believed that parents are in the best position to evaluate their children because they have access to the most information. To our watchful eyes, Jocelyn had been a firecracker since the day she was born. She played card games such as pitch when she was two or three years old. She loved jigsaw puzzles at that age and kept up with the older kids. She learned to play bridge when she was ten and remembered all the tricks and cards. She was good at math and was widely read.

How could this principal underestimate her abilities or those of his other students? Why didn't he recognize the dangers of a dull and dumbing curriculum, such as blighted intellectual development, alienation, and a loss of respect for an adult society which requires children to endure drudgery or regressive education? We sided in favor of our instincts

## HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY

that it was best for children to be stimulated, challenged, and happy. We sent Jocelyn to junior high. She reverted to her old self, bursting at the seams with energy and enthusiasm, and has remained in this condition ever since.

Our little redhead Emma wanted to try school for the first time at the third grade level, after homeschooling previously. She lasted until Thanksgiving. We had noticed some signs that she was stressing. There was compulsive behavior before bedtime, and some nervous and extended dressing rituals in the mornings before school. We mentioned to her one day that school attendance was her choice, and that if she preferred to homeschool, it was fine with us. We were a little surprised that she elected to withdraw.

Her confident and energetic personality was restored without a shadow after a few days back in homeschool. Bedtime, which has always been too late in our house, became a simple affair again, and Emma fell asleep before she hit the sheets. Mornings returned to normal. Begun with a quiet period when the youngsters rub the sleep from their eyes and fill their tanks with waffles and syrup, they invariably progressed to pandemonium. Julia and Tom were wildly excited to have Emma back, and the group of them resumed their day long adventures, with Emma madly leading the way, as if school had never happened.

I asked Barb if she knew, at the time, Emma's reasons for returning to homeschool. She recalled that Emma was frustrated with the reading-comprehension questions and with the cliques on the playground. Emma herself remembers crying in her bedroom at night over the stories and questions in her readers. She doesn't remember what it was about them that made her cry. It was probably her fault for being overly sensitive or easily frustrated, she says now. (And her hair is not red, and keep her out of the stupid book.)

It is hard not to appreciate the similarity between Emma's third-grade experience and Jenny's first grade experience from years ago. Back then, noticing a consistent association of pleasure or pain with certain behaviors of the childlike characters in stories, I discovered an obscure agenda in public-school readers. Given the vicarious nature of the read-

ing experience, the thoughts and actions of young students were certain to be influenced. Loss of identity, passivity, conformity, parental alienation, and anti-intellectualism were some of the major themes found in Jenny's stories, when looked at from the perspective of the behaviorist. I suspect Emma's experience with sadness and frustration related to similar content. Although I didn't review her readers at the time, I have seen many over the years and have yet to find any that are clean.

We have friends who sent a beautiful daughter (like Jocelyn or Emma) to the first grade. They noticed signs of conflict, but concluded it was the child's problem, perhaps recalling their own difficulties with school. After a year or two or three, the child under-performed and the parents were recruited to accept the idea of a learning disability. Enlightened parents, they were told, accept this label without protest or struggle, making it easier on their child. They forgot, I guess, how impressed they were, in the old days, with her remarkable aptitudes.....

Woe parents who take this fork in the road, who violate their sacred trust and sacrifice the hearts and minds of their children to the self-serving flim-flammery of the educational bureaucracy. Happiness lies in the other direction. If a bright-eyed and vivacious youngster is sent to school and fails to thrive, the conclusion must be reached that the institution, not the child, is flawed. Despite a strong pull of conventional opinion to the contrary, parents must remove that child to a constructive environment such as homeschool or an acceptable private school.

## *Grading and Testing*

**Are the cumulative effects of testing, scoring, and grading—those time-honored practices of institutional schools—detrimental to children? Parents have pondered this question, and many have answered in the affirmative, as long as schools have been around. Testing and related processes would seem to have an unwanted impact in two major ways. Focusing on the negative, they assault the confidence and vitality of children. Additionally, they render comparisons between students, relentlessly and repeatedly, and this creates a preoccupation with hierarchy which carries over into adulthood.**

**While comparisons occur often in the flow of daily life, children are inclined to keep them in healthy perspective. Kids might have a neighborhood foot race to see who is fastest, but they won't repeat the experiment ad nauseam. Boredom would result, or someone's feelings would get hurt, making recruitment for the next activity more difficult.**

**To avoid fostering discouragement and discontent, parents learn early on not to compare their children and never to compare them out loud. When a teacher, a mother surro-**

gate, faces a class of 35 six-year-olds who are each equally deserving of her thin slices of love and attention, could the comparing process suddenly become productive? Or is it more likely to engender seeds of resentment and meanness which carry over-onto the playground and beyond?

Grading and testing, as processes which repeatedly identify, publicize, and emphasize natural differences between children, are injurious to all concerned. Consider a hypothetical math class. Johnny consistently tests best and becomes haughty. Susan is not as good, and she develops resentment towards Johnny. Tim is the worst. He feels stupid, less than perfect, or not good enough. Susan and Tim become jealous of Johnny for getting more approval and attention from the teacher. Their discontent is appropriate. They hardly deserve less affection or approval just because people are born as individuals with different aptitudes and abilities. This fact of life should be cause for celebration, not an excuse to habitually berate 95% of schoolchildren.

If you think about it, top students are also injured by daily grading-judgments. With no special effort on his part, a child might excel in academics. Tested repeatedly, he will get the idea that he is better than the other kids. He may pay the price for years to come for such foolishness. He might think the world owes him—as a kind of birthright—adulation, celebrity, or money. Worse yet, he might forsake his true interests and passions for the sake of the secondary approval inherent in the grading process.

“To thine own self be true” is a principle sacrificed at the altar of the grading convention, and I wonder what price is paid in human happiness. It has occurred to me that mid-life crisis is a disease stemming from institutional schooling, in which a belated recognition is made that work ought to be meaningful beyond the hollow rewards offered by status or hierarchy.

It is difficult to say who is hurt more by grading, the top and the bottom students, whose progress in life is impeded by their labels, or the students in the middle, who are branded with a lifelong envy and jealousy of those they perceive to be higher up on the ladder. What will they do to get ahead?

**Will they be satisfied when they get there? Will they or others be injured in the quest?**

**Apart from generating unwanted effects from their comparison functions, conventional testing and scoring injures children simply by accentuating the negative. Our Jenny, like other children, had thin skin at age six. Even in the homeschool environment, the language of the red pen—"wrong, error, mistake"—wounded her confidence. On top of this, she seemed to receive the hurtful message that her parents judged her to fall a few percentage points short, on the average, of being just right.**

**Despite its universal use in the educational world, the red pen had to be reconsidered in light of its unwanted effects upon our daughter. It didn't pass the test. We threw it out of our homeschool, then and forever, and returned to the philosophy of affirmation which we had employed in pre-school years.**

**Mistakes and setbacks were no longer highlighted at the top of a page or recorded in a grading book where they would be seen as deficiencies. Instead, they were regarded as a natural part of the process of living, as challenges to overcome on the way to completing a job. Assignments were considered finished when the do-overs were done. At that point, Jenny was praised as a good girl, pure and simple. With the red pen out of the picture, she learned that where there's a will there's a way, and she learned that her parents supported her 100%.**

**Have other parents noticed, as I have, that there is actually more taunting, teasing and meanness at school than there is on neighborhood playgrounds, or that children become happier and nicer during summer vacations? Schools need to recognize that their very own grading and testing procedures, which injure students with ridiculous ideas that their brains don't measure up, are a major source of unhappiness. Regardless of intentions, grading is in practice a less than subtle form of public humiliation, and the resultant bad feelings resonate through society for generations.**

**Education's longstanding obsession with hierarchy helps explain currents in my own personality along with distur-**

tions in behavior I see in my community. I am astonished by adults who are preoccupied with petty comparisons between their houses and their neighbors' houses, their cars and their neighbors' cars, their kids and their neighbors' kids. I see parents worrying over the outcomes of basketball games between six-year-olds. I see a society in which whole armies of men, women, and children replace life with an unending sequence of hollow triumphs, often experienced vicariously through identification with characters in soap operas or sporting events.

Compare this behavior to that of homeschooled children. These kids, some of whom have grown up, don't worry about winning. They aren't consumed with putting down or rising above their peers. Instead, they seem to enjoy doing things and making things. Society benefits from the fruits of their labors. It benefits from their inventions, from their art and music, from their scientific discoveries, and from their happy and stable characters.

Homeschoolers are so fortunate to be liberated from the corrupting influences of grading and testing. They are free to enjoy life and learning for its own sake and to have a chance to achieve some true happiness in their lives. On the other hand, people who live for hierarchy, a legacy from their school days, may be bound, like the mythological Sisyphus in Hades, to strive for narrow and unsatisfying objectives which, upon attainment, leave them back where they started.

## *Emma's Educational Choices*

**Our comfort level with homeschooling grew every day. The early returns had come in, and they were exciting. Homeschool worked academically, and it worked in more important ways. Jenny and Adrian had violated the normal course of human growth and development. They had failed to pupate into unmanageable teenage monsters. Instead, they had developed into solid citizens and lively characters. They were fun to be around, and it seemed as if everybody loved them.**

**The atmosphere in our homeschool relaxed as the years went on. Barb and I became more confident teachers as we gained experience, and our younger kids could see that homeschooling hadn't ruined their older siblings. They admired them and were willing to participate in the educational experiment which had produced them.**

**School at home was stress-free for Emma. She had plenty of time for music, art, and dancing. She was happy. Her elfin spirit and energy were boundless. She had a rich experience with the wild munchkins, Julia and Tommy. Withdrawing from third grade, after her brief experience in public school, had been her choice, and I think she knew it had been the right choice.**

For fourth grade, Emma wanted to try out her wings at the small, private school where Barb taught Spanish part-time. The place had the feel of an overgrown homeschool. There were about 60 kids in the elementary grades. Emma's class combined fourth and fifth grades. The teacher was nice, and class size was manageable with 12 or 13 students. There was a philosophy to challenge the kids and keep school fun. Reading was emphasized, but readers weren't used. Students selected books from the classroom and school library, many of which were children's classics.

A deliberate and successful effort was made to recognize each child as a unique and important person. Somehow this school managed to build kids up instead of tear them down. I noticed that the children worked outside the classroom and were given meaningful responsibilities such as maintenance of the facilities and the playground. Each was treated with genuine respect, was depended upon, and seemed to grow and mature in order to perform the jobs assigned to him. Students worked at their own pace with individualized curricula. Group testing and comparisons between children were not part of the program. It was fun to watch kids regain the self-confidence in this school that they had apparently lost in the grinding public institutions.

Emma was happy. She showed no agitation before school or frenetic, wind-down period after school. I would describe her mental state as that of child spending a holiday with her favorite cousins. The other students displayed similar contentment. I saw no evidence of cliques and little if any taunting or teasing. It was hard to believe that nearly all of these students were emigrants from public schools, and that many had a history of maladaptation.

I conclude that the meanness we see on the playgrounds of public schools is something brought there by the institutions, not the kids. Perhaps it comes from the humiliations and put-downs inherent in testing and scoring practices, the alienating influence of the reading curriculum, and the general level of misery experienced by an imprisoned pediatric population tortured with dullness, dumbness, and tedium.

## HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY

Combined classes saved Emma's private school money in teachers' salaries, but I could see where the students benefited also. Such classes, when small and user-friendly, give children a non-threatening vision of their future. Working alongside older students, children see that academic frustrations or challenges are surmountable and that future grades aren't so difficult. This arrangement makes for less anxiety, less intimidation, less passivity, and more confidence. Maybe those old one-room school houses weren't such a bad idea.

We liked the broad range of social interactions which were encouraged at Emma's private school. Students associated with adults and with friends and acquaintances from all grades. Group activities, such as plays and musical productions, were designed to involve all of the children and teachers (as well as some brave parents and grandparents).

Homeschoolers are accustomed to associating with groups of people of different ages and generations. Within our family—or when getting together with other families—adults, teenagers, younger children, and toddlers often participate together in activities involving work or play.

I like the education that takes place in this context, independent of any agenda, where everyone learns from and about each other. Children get a chance to model after the traits they admire in older and more mature individuals, and people of all ages get practice in amateur psychology. A teenager might comment on the personality of a little sister or he might identify some behavior as a characteristic of a certain age. One of the little people might tell Mom or Dad that big brother always has to have the ball. Mom might share her observations with kids, Dad, or other parents.

Such interactions and analysis, reminiscent of those which took place at family gatherings in my own youth, may be critical to the development of individuals into functional and tolerant members of a stable society. The social structure at Emma's private school provided a medium for this kind of growth.

Society in public schools is usually organized very differently. Large numbers of age-mate cohorts are mixed with

the rare adult who plays the unnatural role of omniscient dictator, commandant, or prison guard. With the invention of junior high and middle schools, separation of students of different ages is assured. This brand of enforced, artificial segregation makes claims that public schools are training grounds for diversity and tolerance a little ridiculous.

I remember the perverse effects of age-grouping from my own childhood. To a large extent, I lost the company of my brothers when we attended elementary school. Students from different grades never mixed on the playground. When I ran into a brother at recess we separated wordlessly, avoiding offense to our respective peers. My friends behaved similarly. Our age segregation extended to after-school hours, into summer vacations, and through twelve grades of public education.

I have come to believe that the rigid age-grouping in schools retards maturation and modeling and sews the seeds for unwanted distortions in society at large. Echoes of social fractionation follow children through life and explain the generation-gap mentality which is so prevalent in modern times. The wisdom and leadership of our elders is then lost to us. While this may be a welcome feature in the totalitarian state, it is a dubious development in our Western world.

Emma chose to homeschool again in fifth grade. Barb had included a few little cousins, along with Julia and Tom, making this option more attractive. There was no homework, and Emma had plenty of time for piano, ballet, and her pet projects. She wasn't worried about her social life because she had made good friends from dancing and her private school.

Cousin-school was held at our house about four mornings a week. Classes started around nine o'clock and finished around noon. Most of the kids were second-grade age or younger. A lot of cutting, pasting, artwork, and back yard tree-climbing and jump-roping took place in cousin-school. When they were lucky, Emma and Julia managed to squeeze an hour of workbook time into these mornings of bedlam. Cousin-school was filled with giggles, fun, and gooey messes.

## *HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY*

Late in her fifth-grade year, Emma decided that she wanted to skip sixth grade. She devised a strategy to enroll in her private school (in May) as a sixth grader. The school was cooperative, especially since fifth and sixth grades were combined into one class. This maneuver enabled Emma to painlessly attend junior high the following year. Barb liked the plan, and I was happy with any process which eliminated a year of institutional schooling from Emma's young life.

Emma made a number of schooling choices over the years. Her background may have given her the confidence to act as an educational consumer and act as if schools were in competition for her patronage. While conventionally-schooled children spend their formative years learning to welcome domination from institutions, homeschooled youngsters reverse the relationship. Developing a strain of individualism, they expect to be served and respected by institutions.

## *Keep Homeschool Fun*

**I had a visit from my urban-dwelling sister a couple of years ago. She brought her three children, all under the age of six. Sally seemed to be suffering from depression. She certainly had the hallmark symptoms of that pervasive malady. She lacked energy and was bothered by sleep disturbances. Irritable and moody, she had noticed a diminished ability to concentrate and remember.**

**I saw Sally again recently with her husband and children. There were no traces of depression, and she wasn't on Prozac. Two of her children had reached school age, and she had a life again. It is a fact in our fragmented culture that mothers of young children are prone to depression because they get little help and less sympathy. Homeschools headed by distressed mothers are of dubious value, so it makes sense to be on guard for depression and to take steps to prevent it.**

**We have good friends from Eritrea, a country in the northern highlands of Ethiopia. There, a newborn's aunts move into mother's house on the day of birth and handle the domestic chores for a full two months. Mom is free to enjoy her**

**baby. This is a culture which recognizes the importance of keeping mothers happy and giving children a good start in life. In contrast, our culture often devalues mothers and motherhood, adding to the inherent challenges of raising infants and toddlers. Misguided homeschooling in this setting can increase the burden, particularly when homeschool translates into homebound. I have seen a cycle of isolation and depression develop insidiously in homeschools begun with the highest hopes and expectations.**

**All mothers need to make a special effort to avoid the suffocation which can result from the daily grind of child care and its unrelenting demand for self-denial. A change of scenery, for the sake of mental health, is good for moms and their children. Relatives and friends can be a great help. I know adult sisters, for example, who rotate their young children between households on an almost daily basis. These moms get some free time to restore their sanity and recharge their batteries.**

**Homeschooling mothers may have an increased susceptibility to depression, leading to negative effects upon their children, for the ironic reason that they see themselves as a more dedicated brand of mother. Honest and healthy impulses to get a break from their kids can be thwarted by a misguided but powerful voice of guilt, which insists that really good mothers shouldn't want to get away. This is a dangerous confusion. The first responsibility of a mother is to maintain her zeal for living, because this is the fountain of enthusiasm and energy that will define the lifelong perspectives and personalities of her children.**

**I asked Barb how she maintained her mental outlook in the old days, when she was swamped with six children in the house. It was a struggle. She pointed out that a society composed of children does not answer all of a mother's needs for communication. She found stimulation in interests, such as art and Spanish, which threw her in with other adults. She developed friendships with other mothers. They took turns with child care and got needed vacations. She appreciated the times when she was alone in her own house and could regain a sense of control over her own turf. You can imagine**

that the kids had no objection to these arrangements. They made new friends and saw new sights.

Barb thinks that husbands are vital to the mental health of homeschooling moms, and that moral support is more than half the battle. My regular excursions with the kids were pure pleasure for me, and they gave her welcome breaks from routine. In the winter, sledding was great fun. During warmer seasons, golfing was a riot. While my friend Pete and I hacked our way around the links, the kids would pile into his cart and take turns driving. Sometimes they hit things, such as trees. Pete and I were smart enough to stay out of the vehicle, but we worried about our clubs. I always thought the children would grow up to become golfing enthusiasts because of their tender memories of life with Dad on those beautiful courses. As fate would have it, Barb and I didn't produce any avid golfers, but we raised some kids who love to drive.

For moms who avoid the isolation/depression pitfall, homeschooling offers some built-in happiness factors. For one thing, there is a clustering phenomena among kids which is educational and also provides a natural form of baby-sitting. In addition, older children are fun to have around, and they add intellectual and social dimensions to the household. It is healthy for siblings of diverse ages—toddler to adolescent—to play together happily. This is a kind of socialization which leads, over the course of time, to lifelong allegiances and friendships. This is a welcome development in an age when family loyalties are diminishing to the vanishing point.

Short of frank depression, many homeschooling parents, sooner or later, encounter burnout. I don't know if *burnout* has found its way into the dictionary, but I believe it is a modern-day euphemism for an unwillingness to continue a job or activity which is fundamentally unrewarding or unfulfilling, or which leads to sustained unhappiness. Our homeschool may have drifted towards burnout in years past, but we finally stopped doing things in the name of education that made us miserable. When homeschooling became consistently fun for Barb and the kids, happiness broke out, and the educational dividends bordered on amazing.

Barb lamented one day that Tommy may graduate from homeschool in a couple of years and that her rewarding career as a hometeacher might have to come to an end. I reminded her that various sons and daughters are counting on her to school the grandchildren. We were both relieved because we are having too much fun to quit. Homeschooling was always enjoyable, but now it is a downright riot. The last trace of a shadow disappeared when we discarded the ridiculous idea that there is a gigantic world of knowledge which needs to be force-fed to each of our children in grade-level increments. We were freed to regard homeschooling as a wonderful opportunity rather than an impossible obligation.

Now, we simply teach the three R's for about an hour a day. For another hour or less, Barb often attempts to make some adventure—in literature, history, nature or science—interesting to herself and her homeschoolers. Science and nature become areas of fascination when creative methods and materials are utilized. The great outdoors is probably the ultimate learning lab. Field trips are wonderful. For days at home, resources such as *National Geographic* and *ZooBooks* seem to inspire the children to further interests.

For the study of history or geography, Barb might read aloud from an intriguing biography or a quasi-historical book such as *Johnny Tremain*. She has brought to life the expeditions of the great explorers, the adventures of Marco Polo, the sinking of the Titanic, and a host of other contemporary and historical happenings. She has a knack for finding books with particularly interesting copy, illustrations, or photographs. She avoids practices, such as the use of textbooks or testing, which take the fun out of educational adventures.

It has been reassuring to find out that our relaxed approach to homeschooling works. Our kids have done well on college entrance exams, but these tests, along with other standardized tests, have become increasingly subjective. For a better assessment of literacy, I trust my personal observations. Living with the children, I see what they read, and we talk about our respective experiences. From our conversations, I can see that they are astute and articulate. They enjoy

turning the tables and concerning themselves with my education. They give me helpful suggestions, correct me at every turn, and hope that I make progress.

Until we settled on the keep-it-interesting philosophy, Barb and I waded through our share of homeschooling conflicts. We found academic oppression of a qualitative or quantitative nature to be counterproductive. When our teaching was uninspiring or confusing, or when we demanded too much time from our students, we met with resistance. The kids fidgeted, daydreamed, interrupted, or filibustered. We made adjustments or paid the price.

Apart from moment-to-moment dissatisfaction with homeschool academics, some of our children have undergone distinct periods, lasting for weeks or months, of homeschool unhappiness. Although the signs of discontent were confusing or subtle at times, the remedy always struck a consistent note: enlarge the boundaries of the child's experience. When we recognized homeschool as too confining and involved the child in a larger world—of people, places, work, and activities—his discontent vanished.

We have learned that last year's homeschool won't fit this year's child. For all the physical and mental growth experienced by children, there is a corresponding growth of boldness, confidence, and spirit of adventure or exploration. Nature expects maturing youngsters to wander farther from the nest and challenge their developing capabilities. In our house, failure to keep up with demands to expand their universe resulted in moping children. Parental unhappiness followed.

We enlarge horizons through cooperative activities with other homeschoolers, work experiences, after-school sports and activities, travel and field trips, and through musical concerts, theater, ballet, etc. Part-time participation in institutional schools, private or public, has also been productive. Our 11-year-old Tommy takes a science class several days a week at the local public school. This experience, which may be valuable in its own right, also satisfies his curiosity about the schools where his friends spend so much time. We have gained credibility with all of our children by making efforts

## *HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY*

**to address their predictable interest in institutional schools and what happens there.**

**When homeschooling is fun, it works, and parents and children develop a fondness for the process. It is then more likely to be repeated in subsequent generations, assuring continued growth of the movement and its enduring contributions to individuals, families, and communities.**

## *Sex Education in Utopia*

When we decided to homeschool our six-year-old Jenny in 1980, Barb searched for materials to prepare for adventures into uncharted waters. Through our local school district, she obtained the Office of Education curriculum guides. Reading through these and other documents, which outlined goals and objectives for respective grades, I remember a couple of eye-opening features. Oregon and Washington managed sex education from an identical blueprint, and they had sex-ed guidelines for the younger grades, including first grade.

I was surprised that sex was taught to first graders. Where was the need? Whatever happened to the latency period, formerly valued by psychologists as an important building block on the road to sanity? Is it good for children to have adult issues forced upon them? Before they can read or write, should they be required to worry over global warming, overpopulation, or their sexual identity?

The problem with sex-ed debates is that respective parties use the same words to speak about different things. On the one hand, we have parents understanding *sex education* as a straight-forward branch of health education. After the respira-

tory, digestive, and nervous systems, comes the reproductive system. Few object to the study of reproductive anatomy and physiology by age-appropriate children. Then there is **SEX EDUCATION**. This is the agenda of sexual and homosexual promotion and indoctrination, pervasive in the media and public schools, which masquerades as its innocent cousin.

**SEX EDUCATION**, like most of the public school curriculum, has a political function. I learned this from a college course I took many years ago on Plato's *Republic*. Plato, according to my professor, recognized that the totalitarian nature of his State would conflict with the instincts of its citizens for freedom. Borrowing from history, he recommended various methods to control the populace, including the promotion of sexual and homosexual behavior.

Sexual preoccupation among the citizenry serves the State in a couple of ways. Political frustrations may be expressed in the sexual arena, minimizing the threat of revolution or civic disruption. Additionally, family loyalties, those traditional barriers to State domination, are weakened. Although Greek civilization and Plato himself turned to ashes rather rapidly after he wrote *The Republic*, it is a testimony to his influence that some of his directives survive today as **SEX EDUCATION** in our own public schools.

I reviewed Francis Cornford's translation of *The Republic* (it was Jenny's copy from college, lying around the house) to see if my memory was accurate, or if I was making things up again. I was not prepared for the astonishing passages in the book which explain, like nothing else I have read, the totality of today's public education curriculum.

In his book, Plato speaks to Rulers of future Republics through the device of a resurrected Socrates, who describes the proposed organization of the State for the several classes of citizens. Rulers are advised to manipulate, through carefully crafted deceptions, the Guardians (controllers and protectors of the state and its subjects) in order to effect a number of measures for the perpetuation of the commonwealth. These include indoctrination, the forcing of men and women to play identical roles in society, abolition of the family and private property, economic socialism, free love,

homosexuality, abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia. Incidentally, while Plato endorses homosexuality in *The Republic*, his attitudes on the subject are more explicit in his *Symposium on Love*, where sex between men and boys is promoted as moral and exalted.

Selected quotes from *The Republic* are listed below. See if you agree that Plato appears to be running our own country, and most of the civilized world, from his grave.

***Our Rulers...will have to give their subjects a considerable dose of imposition and deception for their good.... And again, no one but the Rulers must know how all this is being effected; otherwise our herd of Guardians may become rebellious....***

***We undertook to put these men (Guardians) in the position of watch-dogs guarding a flock... should the females guard the flock and hunt with the males and take a share in all they do, or should they be kept within doors as fit for no more than bearing and feeding their puppies, while all the hard work of looking after the flock is left to the males?...***

***Then, if we are to set women to the same tasks as men, we must teach them the same things. They must have the same...training for mind and body and also be taught the art of war, and they must receive the same treatment....***

***No one man and no one woman are to set up house together privately: wives are to be held in common by all; so too are the children, and no parent is to know his own child, nor any child his parent....***

***As soon as children are born, they will be taken in charge by officers appointed for the purpose, ... to be reared in the care of nurses living apart in a different quarter of the city...taking precautions that no mother shall know (recognize) her own child....***

## HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY

***...They were not to have houses or lands or any property of their own...only so will they keep to their true character....They will not rend the community asunder by each applying that word 'mine' to different things and dragging off whatever he can get for himself into a private home, where he will have his separate family, forming a centre of exclusive joys and sorrows. Rather they will all, so far as may be, feel together and aim at the same ends, because they are convinced that all their interests are identical....***

***Here, then, are some more evils which must not elude the vigilance of our Guardians and find their way into the commonwealth: riches and poverty....***

***As soon, however, as the men and the women have passed the age prescribed for producing children, we shall leave them free to form a connexion with whom they will...; and all this only after we have exhorted them to see that no child, if any be conceived, shall be brought to light, or if they cannot prevent its birth, to dispose of it on the understanding that no such child can be reared....***

***Then you will establish in your state physicians and judges such as we have described. They will look after those citizens whose bodies and souls are constitutionally sound. The physically unsound they will leave to die; and they will actually put to death those who are incurably corrupt....***

**Hmmm. While Plato's vision finds no greater respect than in our own age, today's anointed have borrowed from other sources of inspiration, such as Machiavelli and Marx, in order to manage contemporary society. All these notables concur that lying is an indispensable tool for the procurement and maintenance of political control. The highest art of lying has been achieved in the invention of Newspeak. By giving old words new and ambiguous meanings, leadership**

gets what it wants by confusing people. Civilian resistance to policy is minimized, and political energy is saved.

Nowhere is the Department of Mystification more effective than in the sex-ed debate, in which *sex education* is used as a cover for *SEX EDUCATION*. Parents are lost in the fog, leaving public schools and other institutions free to promote sexual and homosexual activity as a lifetime preoccupation. Sexual obsession provides an outlet for political frustrations and helps atomize families, dual functions which allow the State to function as family for us all. By these and other means, on the drawing board at least, Utopia may be preserved into perpetuity.

Seen in this light, elements of the sex-ed curriculum begin to make sense. "When you grow up, do you want to be a boy or a girl?," a question posed to first graders across the country, becomes a rational point of departure in a sequence of education designed to transform innocent youngsters, by degrees, into adult creatures who are largely defined by sexual or homosexual impulses.

Parents wishing this future for their children need only put them on the school bus in the morning and provide a television for evening and weekend viewing. Parents who aren't ready for Utopia might consider homeschool, where real sex education, as the study of reproductive anatomy and physiology, is a subject in human biology which poses no special difficulties. About all that is needed is a library card or a few reference books.

## *The Big Kids Go to High School*

**Jenny, Adrian, and Jocelyn attended our local high school. They took AP classes, enjoyed a range of school activities, and made friends. Their experiences challenged them to grow and mature. Yearbook, for instance, required the development of people skills and organizational skills. Fun was mandatory also.**

**I think Adrian was the first to be kidnapped from his bedroom and taken to an all-night bowling alley, at three in the morning, by enthusiastic members of the yearbook staff. According to a time-honored rite of initiation, seniors call parents the evening before, requesting that the front door be left unlocked for the early morning raid. Barb had forgotten to warn me. I thought we were being burglarized.**

**The yearbook committee found other excuses for group activities and excursions. They met at local restaurants for meetings. They camped in the mountains. They went skiing. They had overnights and swimming parties.**

**Dance invitations generated spirited adventures for our whole family. "KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK." It seemed as if someone was trying to break down the front door at 11 o'clock one evening. Several of us responded and found a large**

pumpkin sitting on our porch. There were no humans in sight, but we heard a car motoring off into the distance. We moved the pumpkin onto the kitchen table and removed its hat. The inside was filled with yellow, squishy, seedy, pumpkin goo. One of our eight Sherlockians finally found the tiny wad of rolled-up paper embedded in the muck. Therein, the cryptic message, "I'd be mushy if you went to the dance with me," was followed by a familiar name.

Invitations required answers, in the form of late-night visitations to homes in unfamiliar neighborhoods. Before our kids reached driving age, and sometimes after, Barb and I were recruited to pilot the get-away vehicles. This was fun, but it could be nerve-racking when the set-up took more than a few minutes.

One evening, at a time when reasonable people were in bed sleeping, I found myself parked in front of some stranger's house, a hundred feet up the road from a targeted home. At that place, one of my adolescents and young Tommy were creating some grand puzzle designed to fascinate whichever Poirot happened to stumble out of his front door into the darkness in response to a doorbell rung by phantoms.

The plot involved, among other things, the laying of a long line of kite string. It got tangled, and our agents were delayed. I had often wondered if people really appreciated strangers parking and loitering in front of their houses late at night. I soon found out. A noiseless beacon of light, directed obnoxiously into my eyes, approached me cautiously from the residence adjacent to my car.

"It won't be necessary to continue shining that flashlight in my eyes. You haven't caught yourself a master criminal," I said with some irritation. The light clicked off. After a time, my vision returned. I could see an adult male standing in his yard, fully regaled in his Mormon underwear and keeping his distance a few feet from the passenger side of my vehicle, fixing me with a baleful stare.

I made a half-hearted attempt to explain the local high school social customs. He feigned ignorance and showed no sympathy. There followed an escalating exchange of

unpleasantries. I felt entitled to park on a public street. He saw me as a trespasser. I could see his side but wouldn't admit it. The kids returned and asked us to quiet down so they could finish their job without being discovered. Gasoline thrown on a fire would have been less inflammatory. Reflecting on our high adventures, we all had a good laugh on our way home.

Our own doorbell rang one evening. A grim-faced policeman asked to speak to one Jocelyn James as colorful lights flashed alarmingly from his police car in the background. Jocelyn was a good girl, but she was so fun-loving. I could only imagine what stunt she had pulled to draw attention from law-enforcement at this hour. I recalled that she and her friends had crashed the pool at Snowbird lodge. Maybe the paying guests had objected. I retrieved her from her room in the basement. The officer served her with a subpoena to appear with his son at the upcoming dance.

Adrian answered one invitation in a borrowed gorilla costume. He rang a doorbell one starry night. A young lady recoiled in terror from the menacing primate as she was handed an encrypted banana. I'm glad the boys had the right address.

Jenny and the others stayed very busy in high school. The three of them held part-time jobs and took part in a number of school-based activities. Adrian played for three years in the band. He and Jocelyn worked on the homecoming committee. Jocelyn became a cheerleader. Jenny and Jocelyn were in dance club at school and continued their ballet studies out of school. It seemed to me that between activities, work, studies, and social life, the kids averaged only four or five hours of sleep nightly. Barb and I tried to slow them down. It was an exercise in futility.

Perpetual motion may have been the rule for our teenagers, but they were happy and productive, and they brought home friends who were birds of a feather—likable, interesting, and full of monkey business. Some elements of high-school society ran in the fast lane, but our kids weren't interested in that. They associated with crazies who were drug- and alcohol-free.

**Our high school had some talented teachers and excellent AP classes in many subjects. Unlike many schools of today, and mine of 30 years ago, it was a place where students were actually admired by others for academic commitment. We saw no gang activity, and there was a large social strata composed of kids who didn't drink or use drugs. In areas of academics, school activities, and social functions, our kids took advantage of the opportunities which were available. All things considered, we were pleased to send our children to this school.**

**From what I read and hear, there are many high schools which are unsafe or have poor teachers, unacceptable curricula, or a negative learning environment. Had our local school been undesirable, we would have found alternatives.**

**Homeschoolers in our city have generated a variety of creative approaches to adolescent schooling. Some kids simply go to institutions of higher education, such as the university. I have a friend whose fifteen-year-old who will receive a degree in photography next year from a local community college. Other kids attend high school part-time, taking a few attractive classes—math, physics, orchestra, or what not—and relying on home study for other subjects. Most homeschooled teenagers hold full- or part-time jobs or apprenticeships. There is no mystery to this; most parents place a high value on the learning that takes place in the working world.**

**Many kinds of successful mix-and-match programs have been put together by homeschooling families. Conventional high school is just one option among many.**

## *The Myth of the Teenage Monster*

I spoke to an experienced pharmacist over lunch one day. Our conversation turned to a familiar subject, the widespread disintegration of mental health in our patients. While I spend entire office-days ministering to depressed and stressed-out adults and adolescents, he spends his days filling prescriptions for these suffering souls.

I proposed the hypothesis that if antidepressant pills, such as Prozac, became unavailable to the American public overnight, half the people in this country wouldn't bother to get out of bed in the morning. Nodding agreement, he confirmed that unbelievable quantities of antidepressants are prescribed today.

We observed that medication usage for other stress-related diseases seemed to be rising astronomically. If Tagamet and Zantac were taken off the market, we speculated somewhat dramatically that 50 million people might keel over with bleeding ulcers. A case was made that our civilization would actually disintegrate if the pill factories stopped production. Finishing lunch and returning to work, we wondered, as a couple of old skeptics, whether this might not be such a bad development.

I have been struck by the fact that depressed mothers and fathers frequently identify their teenagers as the predominant cause of ongoing emotional conflict in their lives. These parents worry themselves to death over the self-destructive behaviors of their children, and they seem to fight with them continually. Most doctors and psychologists would agree that adolescent dysfunction is pervasive in our culture, and that it is taking a high toll on the mental health of parents. The question remains: what is cause and what is effect?

Popular wisdom holds that teen alienation is a stage of normal human development, and that society must learn how to live with it. When hormones surge through the veins of adolescents, they pupate into rude and uncivil creatures—or even drug-taking, sexually precocious, parent-hating, defiant, self-destructive monsters. It follows that their tormented parents are driven to depression as part of the natural flow of life.

This view does a great disservice, because it prevents parents from understanding the root causes of alienation and from protecting their children and themselves from this unhappy fate. Any grandmother can tell us the real truth: children subjected to misguided practices of child-rearing are damaged long before they reach adolescence; when they grow into loud and large teenagers their problems simply become impossible to ignore.

Join me in a review of the how-not-to-do-it manufacture of the alienated teen. The process begins, before that child is born or even conceived, in an ideological climate which treats marriage as a bourgeois nuisance, motherhood as a second-rate occupation, and conception as the unwanted by-product of the religious pursuit of self-gratification.

Throughout the pregnancy, fear-mongering doctors contribute to the erosion of maternal-fetal bonding. Instead of joyful anticipation of the miracle of childbirth, mother experiences the anxious knowledge of our age, that baby is really the product of the high-tech wizardry of medical science, and things can go wrong. Vague but expensive ultrasound reports, along with the results of more elaborate testing, add to the general level of apprehension. This translates into a

form of pain for mom. She resents this pain, which is unfortunately connected to the existence of her fetus. By the time of childbirth, mother has developed ambiguous emotions—hidden from herself and everyone else through a taxing expenditure of psychological energy—towards her baby.

Into this precarious context march the baby-formula people, sanctioned by Medicine and subsidized by Big Brother, who offer to free mom from the burden of nursing and preserve her youthful figure. These friends are silent on the subject of prolactin, a baby-bonding hormone produced in the brains of breast-feeding women, whose psychopharmaceutical effect is to convert mothering from a tedious exercise in self-denial into a sublime and magical labor of love. Without this critical information, mother decides to bottle-feed her baby. Like other first steps onto one of the many roads to Hell, this one is taken without fanfare or trepidation.

Lacking prolactin, maternal bonds are weakened, and mom is more susceptible to other seductions which further divide her from her baby, such as a chimeric return to the pre-maternal state of mind, or phony glamorizations of fulfillment in the workforce. The workforce alternative is facilitated by day-care subsidies and the conclusions of government-funded research which, trumpeted by gushing media, offer assurances that day care is actually good for kids. Really.

As the months and years go on, television helps keep our toddler out of parents' hair (and parents out of toddler's hair). Junior is turning out to be something of a difficult child, almost hard to be around. In order to keep him occupied, more television viewing is encouraged. Providing a distraction from some nagging but indefinable anxieties, the tube also becomes increasingly attractive to mom and dad.

The next steps toward complete filial alienation are easy. Our hypothetical parents are only too happy to send their unruly child, afflicted by now with that mysterious disease ADD, to the crowded human cattle yards we call schools. There, he is taught the three R's: reproduction, racism, and radical environmentalism. As a bonus, he is dumbed down, and his curious inner self dries up like a plant without water.

The alienating nature of the curriculum is lost on the parents, who wonder only if the schools could feed their kids breakfast, lunch, dinner, and Ritalin, and if school hours could be extended to include overnights, holidays, and summers.

At this point or before, parents experience a growing emptiness or dissatisfaction in their lives. Television, movies, books, magazines, newspapers, and experts understand this discontent. They offer more help: try new sexual partners, new toys and hobbies, new pills, new drugs, or a big-screen TV.

When the child reaches adolescence, his ruination becomes inescapably obvious to a household which rarely, I'm sorry to say, includes both biological parents. The idea that teen alienation is just a fact of nature is now eagerly embraced, because it would seem to relieve mom and dad of responsibility. But the subconscious is an irrepressible truth teller; parents suffer without mercy in the daytime, and they don't sleep well at night. State-licensed physicians stand at the ready to provide pills for a chemical imbalance. The chemical imbalance exists, but it is effect, not cause. The real explanation for parental depression is the sickening comprehension that their child, nearly grown, has been irreparably damaged by their own stupidity and neglect. Bottle-feeding, day care, television, and mind-shrinking, soul-crushing schools have had their day. It is time to pay the piper.

This worst-case scenario can be easily avoided. Learn from homeschoolers, who have run an experiment on the other end of the spectrum for the last 20 years or so. They act as parents to their own children—spending time with them, nurturing them, raising them the old-fashioned way. Teenagers from these families are shockingly abnormal. Hormones and all, they are friendly, polite, confident, curious, energetic, bold, hard-working, and responsible.

As our own children reached adolescence, they became louder, larger, and more powerful, and they insisted on independence. They expected and deserved to be treated as near-equals in the household. Preferring reasoned requests and negotiations, they objected to orders and commands,

as we would object to their commanding us. The fact of their physical and mental maturation required us to break old parenting habits. Household politics shifted from dictatorial to democratic. Through it all, our teenagers bore no resemblance to monsters. They simply changed in the ways that kids must change in order to survive on their own and make their way in the world. We were proud of their growth and independence, and they knew it.

The homeschool experiment confirmed for us the great truth found in novels by authors such as Alcott, Dickens and Tolstoy. It confirmed what was written in our parent-hearts from the first day, what shouted to be heard above the din of television and media and cackling experts: children are best raised by loving parents.

On the other hand, surrogate parenting by inanimate objects and mass institutions appears to universalize human misery. The architects of our Brave New World need to go back to the drawing board. There has been a small but crucial miscalculation. The filial bond seems to be a necessary condition for the emotional survival of human beings. When it is destroyed or perverted, Hell breaks loose. Mothers, fathers, kids and communities are scattered to the winds. I see these broken people in my office. Pills can keep them going to school and work, but they can't heal the sickness in their souls.

## *The Socialization of Julia and Tom*

In 1991, Jenny started her senior year in high school. She took all her classes in the morning and returned home at noon, allowing Barb to teach Spanish a few afternoons a week. Our little kids were thrilled with this arrangement. They loved their big sister, and they could get away with more shenanigans without Mom or Dad at home. For her part, Jenny enjoyed spending some special time with them in the year before she was due to leave for college.

Julia, our fifth child, was eight years old, a contrarian, and something of a force. Her trademark as a youngster was her irrepressible energy and glee. A proud blonde, she enjoyed marching around the house and broadcasting her intention to bleach her hair if it ever darkened, expecting Mom or Dad to fall over dead from shock every time we heard this heretical news. Since her early days, Julia has exhibited intense curiosity, an unbounded lust for adventure, a paralyzing sense of humor, and a gift for mischief. Barb reminds me that she also has a very sensitive side and stands up for justice, fair play, and the underdog.

There was never a question of sending this little package of lightning-in-a-bottle to be throttled in elementary school,

but Julia was in a big hurry to see what was going on in the world. She had an understandable desire to attend school with her neighborhood friends. Our challenge, as it has been with the other children, was to distract her from this objective without diminishing her enthusiasm for life or disturbing her relationship with us.

We tried to make homeschool more attractive. Two or three cousins were invited to attend, along with Emma and Tom. The academics suffered a little, with Barb's attention divided in more directions, but the kids had a rollicking good time. In the ever-popular group projects, children of different ages laughed and giggled and cooperated. We felt this was good practice for the adult world, in which people of diverse backgrounds and ages are often called upon to work together.

Julia used her early afternoon time for piano practice, personal projects, or play with siblings. Always gregarious, she found her neighborhood friends when school let out. In late afternoons, she attended two-hour ballet classes. These provided more social experience, and she made more friends. Barb and I could see, and Julia knew herself, that she had a robust social life. We were all able to continue homeschooling through the years with confidence that she wasn't being deprived or isolated.

Julia attended institutional school for the first time in sixth grade. One day a teacher wrote out a word, "alot," on the chalkboard. Julia pointed out the proper spelling, "a lot." The teacher contested. When no dictionary could be found to resolve the disagreement, our daughter retrieved one from another classroom. Her teacher conceded but failed to correct the spelling on the chalkboard. Julia didn't think it was right to leave the misspelling on display, so she pressed the point until the correction was made. Without being there I can't promise this operation was performed artfully, but I have seen the blonde in action before, and she is generally quite considerate of the feelings of others. I would like to think her willingness to stand up for principle is in some degree a measure of that peculiar blend of socialization that many children receive from homeschool.

An event which occurred in an eighth grade English class provided another example of Julia's autonomous personality. She suggested, in a discussion of Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken," that the trip through the woods could be likened to a journey through life. The teacher took the remarkable position that the poem could accommodate only a literal interpretation. Not convinced, our daughter questioned us on the subject at dinner. We supported her, of course, but it was particularly pleasing to see evidence of her continuing determination to think independently.

Barb schooled Tommy and his friend Jason the year that Julia attended sixth grade. They adventured with Columbus, Magellan, Marco Polo, the Vikings, and other historical figures. I enjoyed reading the library books they brought home. Some of these were so beautifully illustrated that I felt like jumping into the sailing vessels on the various oceans pictured.

Tommy and Jason chronicled their journeys with pictures posted on the walls and ceiling of our school room. They manufactured items related to their studies, such as swords and shields, and left them strewn about our house and yard. Artifacts changed when the time machine traveled to different places and periods in history.

Bows and arrows were manufactured in great quantities. Tommy still makes arrows from wooden dowels bought at the local hardware store. He adds "feathers" by placing opposing rectangular strips of duct tape across the arrow-bases, and then trimming and curling. He makes crossbows from two-by-fours and wood screws. Using rubber bands for bowstrings, he launches arrows into the stratosphere. He insists that I report that his record flight for an arrow, shared with Adrian, is 400 feet. All the boys in our neighborhood now have crossbows. They gather together in our yard for target practice.

As a result of their adventures in history, Tommy and Jason became embarrassing founts of knowledge. Such is the nature of human memory. It seems that information gathered by excited or stimulated minds is preferentially retained. This principle agrees with the observation that the most well-

remembered events of our lives are connected to triumph, terror, or other high-adrenaline situations.

Tom continues to love interesting material on weather, geology, stars and planets, and other natural phenomena. He is an expert on whales and porpoises, birds around the world, subduction zones, and the migration of continents. Without directed areas of study or tests upon his knowledge, his education in science has proceeded dramatically. We would be fools to try to teach the subject.

People have suggested that one of the socializing effects of homeschooling is leadership. In subtle ways, our children seem fit this pattern. Tommy's behavior provides an example. Some of his friends are several years older than him, but I see them sit in a quiet circle in our backyard as he teaches them how to make their own arrows and crossbows.

Since it is not likely that every homeschooled child is an alpha male or female, we must look for other explanations of homeschool leadership. I wonder if it is a relative quality that shows up because conventional children are less confident and more passive.

When we adopted a kitten to spare him from the animal shelter, he was three or four weeks of age. We were told that his removal from his mother was premature and would leave scars upon his psyche. Sure enough, he still nurses on his blanket as an adult cat. Undoubtedly, human children are also injured by premature separation, and one of the consequences is a loss of confidence.

Many mothers in the fifties stood weeping on their porches as their little first graders boarded busses for the first weeks of school. Their emotions testified that their children were too young to be leaving the home for extended periods each day. Ultra-modern society, of course, divides children from their mothers long before first grade. With the liberal use of day care and television, many children are virtually abandoned in infancy. In these cases, loss of confidence does not begin to describe the negative psychological impact.

Elementary schools contribute their own child-shrinking influences. Enduring long days of adult-directed activities, kids are further dominated by the dictatorial measures re-

quired to manage large classrooms, by unending sequences of instructions in workbooks, and by a passivity curriculum in the readers. School-induced passivity adds to the effects of premature separation, combining to render conventional children much more likely to follow than to lead their homeschooled counterparts. In this way, by default almost, one of the socializing consequences of homeschooling appears to be the generation of leadership qualities.

While leadership is a positive effect, other characteristics of homeschool socialization can be negative. Man is a social animal, and all children rightfully seek individual and group experiences with other children. Since conventional kids are unavailable for play during the school day, homeschoolers can suffer from isolation. This unwanted development may be remedied by facing up to the problem and using a little creativity.

As Tom's siblings graduated from homeschool, we made a special effort to expand his social life. Sports became a medium for group interaction and a place where he could make new friends, but the road was bumpy at times.

Baseball was easy. Tommy has loved the game since he began playing Tee-ball at age four or five. We encountered surprising problems with basketball. For eight-year-olds, the game itself was new to almost everyone, but the other kids knew each other and were used to crowded gymnasiums. In the beginning, Tom was uncomfortable. He spent minutes nervously adjusting his uniform and combing his hair before practice and games. I didn't know what was going through his mind but wasn't too surprised when he talked of quitting. We weren't sure what to do. It's hard not to go along with sincere requests by your children that sound reasonable. On the other hand, I suspected his outlook reflected a relative immaturity. Maybe participation was exactly what he needed.

We asked him to hang in there for the whole season, explaining that there was a good chance he would come to enjoy basketball. As the season proceeded, he began to look forward to the games and practices and eventually became an enthusiast. The pre-game stressing disappeared. Tom

made friends from the team who are still bosom buddies. Nowadays basketball seasons can't come soon enough.

After seeing him enjoy baseball and basketball, I thought soccer would be fun for Tom. We signed him up at age nine. The game and the surroundings were new to him, while the other children knew each other from school and had played soccer for a few years. When he showed signs of nervousness before practices and games, I asked him if he enjoyed soccer. He explained it wasn't a sport he liked as much as the others, and he wouldn't mind quitting.

Again, we were tempted to go along with his wishes, but upon consideration we felt it wasn't the sport itself that made him uncomfortable. He loved rough play with his brother and neighborhood friends, but he seemed to see himself as not fitting in with groups of age-mate school children—from whom he was separated, as a homeschooler, on a daily basis—on the soccer field. I was helping with the team and knew for a fact that most of the kids on it were perfectly nice. We asked Tom to persevere, reminding him of the rewards from his basketball experience. By mid-season he was a rabid player, gleefully crashing into teammates at practices and into opponents at games. The greater the collision, the more the fun. His nervousness disappeared.

Today, at 12, Tom has a fun-filled and active social life. He is mellow in group situations which would make me nervous. Although not a Boy Scout, he loves expeditions with scouting troops when invited by friends. The other day, I dropped him off to a science class which he attends, three days a week, at a public school. He skipped to the school entrance from the car, whistling happily, in his sweats, with his T-shirt hanging out.

I am inclined to think that Barb and I stumbled onto the right decisions a few years ago when Tom showed some acclimation stresses around congregations of school children. At the time, we came close to withdrawing him from the very experiences he needed for maturation. If I had it to do over again, I might save us all a little trouble by enlisting him in group activities at an earlier age. Six, the age when most kids begin to attend day-long school, sounds about right.

## *From ADD to AAA*

When Barb decided to homeschool eleven-year-old Jason along with our nine-year-old Tommy, I had mixed feelings. Julia was entering school, and Jason's presence would make the year more interesting for Tom. On the other hand, Jason had a learning disability, ADD, and something of a rebellious streak. I wondered how much progress he would make in our homeschool. His parents might be disappointed, and I hoped this wouldn't damage our friendship.

Jason was bright, but he couldn't perform elementary functions in math or grammar. He was disruptive and couldn't stay focused in the classroom, and he was involved in more than his share of disputes on the playground. It was difficult to envision an academic turnaround in his future. I think his parents saw Barb as a last resort to rescue him from the learning-disabled rubble heap.

I thought their hopes were unrealistic. I knew Jason well enough to know he fit the criteria for the ADD diagnosis. His parents had resisted the advice of doctors and teachers to medicate the boy with Ritalin. Their position agreed with my own instincts and sympathies, but a Ritalin-free ADD child,

according to conventional wisdom, was going to be difficult to manage and virtually unteachable. From my perspective, Barb was in for a major battle which had little chance for success.

She took a different view. She knew Jason had some problems, but she liked him and would have nothing to do with any labels which implied he was defective or uneducable. She thought she could help him and was determined to do so.

The stage was set for an interesting year. I looked forward to the opportunity to observe an ADD child in a prolonged educational setting. Maybe I could find some answers to some of my own questions about this poorly understood syndrome. At the very least, working with a struggling student would give Barb and me a broader perspective on what the homeschool experience had to offer.

Jason's family liked to take extended trips, often to foreign countries. He was usually left at home, because his private school frowned upon extended absences. Barb had a contrary philosophy. Like any good homeschooler, she endorsed travel as highly educational. During his year with her, Jason visited India and Puerto Rico, among other places. The family had fun preparing for their junkets by learning about the history, geography, culture, and language of the places they were visiting. Jason benefited from the additional time spent with his parents. For this year at least, his attention deficit may have been converted to an attention surplus.

When Jason was in town, he attended our homeschool for about four hours a day, four days a week. Lunch, snacks, and play periods with Tom occupied an hour or so of his daily time with us. Workbook activity took up another hour, by my estimate. The rest of his schooling was divided between various activities whose common theme was fun.

Barb read to the boys from books they enjoyed, such as *Johnny Tremain* or *Treasure Island*, or she gave them time for independent reading. On many occasions, the three of them cooked up science or history projects involving field trips or visits to the library or craft stores. On one famous

project, they manufactured giant paper-mache insects. Monster bugs dangle from their bedroom ceilings to this day.

Items acquired on travels or adventures spiced up the curriculum or motivated whole new lines of inquiry. Barb followed the boys' interests as much as possible. In the presence of this teacher who respected his inner voices of curiosity, Jason began to develop pride in his real self, the one with a burning desire to explore and make sense of the world around him, the one which had been criticized and nearly extinguished in the environment of institutional schooling. Both boys pleased their teacher and themselves with aggressive investigations into unique areas of individual interest.

This was a welcome development, but Jason's progress was hampered by immaturity and a severe case of performance anxiety. When asked a simple question, he changed the subject, begged the question, or literally jumped from his seat and began racing around the room in order to avoid the spotlight. It was apparent that he was disappointed and impatient with his poor academic performance and that he also sensed the frustration of his teachers. Anxieties related to anticipation of failure or criticism seemed to hinder him more than actual inability.

ADD formed another roadblock to Jason's education, but there was a particular feature of his behavior which suggested the possibility that progress could be made. While his attention often lapsed during workbook exercises or while listening to Barb, I noticed that his disengagements seemed voluntary and calculated. His face displayed an unmistakable expression of disinterest at such times, like the face of someone daydreaming in the presence of a war story they have heard many times before. Something in these observations encouraged me, and I finally put my finger upon it: if Jason had simply been habitually bored to death in school by dull material or talking-head adults who never listened to him, then his ADD could well be comprehensible and curable. Boredom is not so mysterious, and it can be overcome by a stimulating environment.

Barb may have appreciated my theories, but her approach to Jason's schooling was practical and consistent from the

beginning. As she had with her own children, she attempted to make his experience non-threatening, emotionally-rewarding, interesting, and exciting. She refused to be offended by his immaturity or mental walkabouts. With the unerring instincts of a born nurturer, she was patient and loving. She required book work but was careful to administer tolerable doses, mixing in play periods and interesting activities. Through steady support of words and deeds, she attempted to convince Jason that she wasn't there to find fault with him, judge or grade him, compare him with others, make him feel foolish or stupid, or torture him with unending drudgery.

Along the way, she discovered weak spots in specific areas of math, grammar, spelling, and punctuation which, like a broken fuel pump or a ruptured radiator hose, had brought his engine of literacy to a dramatic stop. On the other hand, she found some academic functions which he had mastered. By working on selected repairs, Barb hoped to get Jason's academic motor running. Aware of her Irish determination, I wasn't prepared to bet against her.

In ballet classes, students don't move up in levels until they learn certain fundamentals. There are no exceptions, because more sophisticated dancing is impossible without expertise in basic positions and movements. So it goes with subjects such as arithmetic. To multiply, one must first be able to add. Barb replaced the popular *modus operandi*—teaching, testing, and moving on—with an old-fashioned commitment to stepwise progress. Without the use of new-fangled educational theories, she simply focused upon a few elemental functions in Jason's calculator until they were fixed.

Through perseverance and patience, he learned addition, subtraction, borrowing, and carrying. He learned his times tables, and this time he learned them right. Slowly but surely, he became proficient in multiplication and division. This was progress, and Jason noticed. He learned that failure was not the real endpoint of human activity, that this impostor could be surmounted by work and determination. Freed from failure, he was freed from its bundle of distracting emotions, such as frustration, hurt, and anxiety. Jason began to ap-

proach tasks with unimpeded intelligence, and this enhanced his performance. I saw a new look in his eyes. It was a look of confidence.

There was no stopping the boy now. He had discovered a formula for success. By tackling his problems one piece at a time, working with resolve, and cooperating with his teacher, Jason could overcome his impossible frustrations and confusions. Using his formula, he systematically added skills to his growing collection. He began to progress with an almost ruthless efficiency, as if he could now focus his remarkable aptitudes and energies, formerly employed on behalf of chaos, into a laser beam directed onto the task at hand.

Barb was honest with the boys about their studies. She didn't pretend that multiplication tables were thrilling, but she got completely excited about Viking explorations to America or the history of mining in Park City. Her approach mirrored the reality of living, a process which involves routine work mixed with interludes of stimulation and adventure.

Jason saw his teacher enjoying real life. He saw a lady willing to face up to the hard jobs of her daily grind, such as teaching him arithmetic, who also insisted upon a healthy dose of daily pleasures, such as her explorations and adventures into areas of fascination. Barb was a good role model for Jason, and he followed her lead by working hard on academic chores and then following his own interests with a passion.

After nine months in our homeschool, Jason had made his clearest progress in the area of emotional stability. His social interactions with adults and other children reflected a new found happiness and confidence. His hardened and self-protective demeanor vanished. He became a teddy bear around Barb. He was a changed boy around young Tommy. Playground taunts and put-downs disappeared completely, replaced by acts of kindness, patience, and obvious affection.

Academic progress was harder to evaluate. While Barb's learning environment had clearly, in his dad's words, "reinstilled a sense of wonder and excitement" in Jason's life, we all held our breath when he reentered his private school

the following year. I was shocked when this learning-disabled, ADD child got straight "A's" and became the top student in his class. A couple of years later he continues to perform at the highest level. Tommy tells me that his parents proudly post his papers on the walls of their house, with A-pluses marked at the tops along with embarrassing compliments from teachers.

Jason's metamorphosis into a happy child and a top student suggests that there is hope for ADD and learning-disabled children in the homeschool environment. His is not the only tale of such a transformation. The phenomena is taking place across the land. When children who carry labels certifying their ineducability are removed to the homeschool setting, wonderful things are happening.

In Jason's case, Barb treated him as a developing person with his own unique and interwoven strengths and weaknesses of character and education. She ignored labels, informing me (in so many words) that they are counterproductive to the process of building little people because they reduce the awesome complexity of individual personalities to an absurd and fraudulent simplicity, and they divert adult attention from the warm, beating hearts of children to the unfeeling abstractions of syndromes.

I remember watching Barb interact with our own children when they were just toddlers. First and foremost, she was physically present in their environment. When they helped her work in the garden or shop for groceries, she made them feel appreciated and important. She never blighted their creative impulses by criticizing or expropriating their projects. Rather, she nourished them with love in its various manifestations, such as patience, kindness, respect, and encouragement.

Although we changed the academic agenda as our children grew, homeschooling for us has always boiled down to nurturing. During his year with Barb, I think that nurturing—loving, by its other name—was the key which unlocked Jason's potential for happiness and productivity.

## *Piano Lessons with a Boa Constrictor*

Music has a major presence in our house, as it does in other homeschools. Barb is addicted to classical, but she loves opera most of all. When we live near civilization, she takes advantage of a special deal for school children in which they can see the opera on dress-rehearsal evenings for nominal fees. Under the banner of the James School, she hauls some of our kids and their friends to the various productions. These are popular outings.

We purchase our share of tapes and CD's. Not an hour goes by without the volume going up to hear someone's favorite music. *The Beatles* seem to have universal appeal, but Tchaikovsky is king. I can't remember a year when we didn't have a daughter or two dancing in the Nutcracker. We hear the music for this ballet continuously from October into January. The girls turn into dancing fairies when it plays, so we never tire of it.

Barb has found various biographical books and monographs written about classical composers. These are intriguing to me, and I know the kids enjoy them. In reading about the lives of composers, I get a picture of the times

they lived in and some of the personalities they dealt with, such as the monarchs of Europe. From this vantage point, history comes alive.

When adventuring with classical composers or other historical figures, our homeschoolers relive history. The exciting and memorable quality of their experience contrasts with the dullness of life in the classrooms of my memory, where disconnected factoids were dictated to students from soporific textbooks written by mortal men and women but presented as if they were chiseled in stone by deities. Homeschooling has literally introduced me to history, a subject I never met in school, because the most vital and interesting part, the story, was left out.

Jenny started in a Yamaha keyboard program at four or five years of age. In this no-pressure course, she attended a day a week for an hour or so. Each student sat at a keyboard with a parent or grandparent while the teacher provided entertaining instruction. The kids gathered together in the middle of the room for group exercises. The music was fun, and we all made new friends during these sessions, which functioned for us almost as a homeschool support group. The interaction with conventional families was healthy and good for community relations.

Barb and I enjoyed Yamaha classes with each of our kids. Over time, it was inevitable that we absorbed many of the signature riffs. We hummed them in the shower. They played in our dreams. "Do, do, so, so, la, la, so....fa, fa, mi, mi, re, re, do." We could probably teach the course.

Another experience with musical instruction didn't work out so well. I had purchased a pint-sized violin from a pawn shop. Emma's teacher was a divorced mother of young children. Lessons were interrupted when her kids strayed into the room or when she yelled at them for some reason. Although she tried to be polite, her distressed mental state was pervasive. After a few months, Emma wanted to quit, and we went along with her wishes. Under different circumstances or another teacher, it is possible that she would have prospered. As it was, we had paid for a course in *Alienating Your Child From the Violin*.

In contrast, Emma continues today to take lessons from a warm and fuzzy piano teacher. Paul's love and respect for music and children is genuine and comes through in his lessons. He uses music books which feature popular and attractive melodies. Even Tom has been converted to a piano enthusiast. This is no small accomplishment because Tom used to prefer a trip to the dentist over a piano lesson. These days the younger kids practice without prodding, playing Paul's songs for fun.

Our three oldest toiled under a different teacher many years ago. Betty used instructional books filled with forgettable compositions. Happy workers never whistled these tunes, and Jenny and the older kids never played them in their spare time.

Betty was a respected piano teacher in her community. Her house and person were dust-free. She sold Avon products, and her fingernails were items of envy. She was a perfectionist. Although she seemed to hold genuine regard for her students, she was unable to suppress her manifest disappointment when they missed notes on the keyboard.

This attitude may have contributed to an unusual degree of tension at recitals. The atmosphere at public executions would be relaxed in comparison. I got the feeling that some of the children, as they approached the piano for their turns in the spotlight, would have willingly traded places with condemned prisoners.

Betty was a complex character. On the one hand, she was generous and friendly. On the other hand, she owned a boa constrictor and fed it live hamsters. She told us sadly that this was a dietary necessity, and we believed her. I felt like she was the victim in having to feed the little fur balls to the snake.

I had the opportunity, on occasion, to sit-in on piano lessons at Betty's house. I enjoyed these serene moments away from a frantic medical practice. Relaxing in the background, it was fun to observe the teacher working with her pupils on the beautiful ebony grand piano. No one paid any attention to me. I may as well have been another piece of furniture in the spacious home.

In the midst of one lesson, lost in a reverie, I noticed the big snake for the first time. Watching one of my children intently from just a few feet behind the piano bench, it lurked in a glass cage that looked like a large aquarium. The lid was off the cage. Betty liked to give her pet a chance to roam about the house. She was modern. Hers was a free-range boa.

Betty had a habit of leaving her students alone at the piano while she gossiped on the phone in the kitchen. I worked up the nerve to ask her one day if she thought her boa might attempt to make a lunch out of one of my kids. She told me the lid was left off only after the snake was fed. After a hamster or two, she assured me laughingly, her pet had no appetite for piano students. Did she tell me, besides, she would hear gurgling noises?

Our older kids quit piano after a few years under Betty's tutelage, but they still love music. Jocelyn took up the flute. Adrian plays the sax and the guitar. He enjoyed high school band, and he loves his college band. He likes the camaraderie and travel. During stays at motels around the country, band members rearrange the lettering on advertising marquee in the wee morning hours. While they might retire to "Three days and two nights for \$79," patrons awaken to bizarre messages sprung from the lively minds of sleepless college students. Probably, no one reads them. This might be for the best.

The band puts out a CD for loyalists every few years. They completed one recently. Adrian is a section leader. He has eight new alto saxes who have never played a note. I asked him how the quality of music could survive this infusion of novices. Did he ever consider turning away unqualified musicians? "Absolutely not. We're not about music, Dad. We're the band."

Apart from the band, music forms a massive part of our human environment. In its production or appreciation, it can be enjoyed in so many ways. It is the only universal human language, providing a medium for communication with our fellows and our very souls. Familiarity with its auditory and written components may enable a richer experience. These

**may be some of the reasons why many parents place music instruction right up there in the educational hierarchy along with the three R's.**

## *Homeschoolers in College*

Jenny loved college. She made 10 or 20 best friends from her freshman dorm. She made another 10 or 20 best friends during the six months she spent in programs at Oxford and Florence, Italy. Barb and I spent a few days on the campus during her senior year. I met her friends. They were all so genuine, gracious, and interesting. Wherever I walked with Jenny, we were hailed by her comrades.

Jenny lived in a whirlwind of constant motion. She acted in a play written by a friend; she danced in a ballet staged by a student company she had helped to found; she had parties and balls on her schedule; and she had classes to attend and papers to write, including her honors thesis on some Charles Dickens subject. I hadn't seen her so happy since she was five years old.

I stayed in Adrian's sophomore dorm room during that same visit. The price was right, and it seemed like a fun proposition. As we talked on the Thursday evening of my arrival, his eight or ten best friends, guys and gals, dropped by our room in succession. Like Jenny's friends, they were very engaging people. I was a little puzzled that they would spend so much time with me until I realized that we weren't strang-

ers. I knew them, as they knew me, from Adrian's descriptions, anecdotes, and photographs. He had arranged for us to spend some time together.

He sent me off to play late-evening doubles with his tennis buddies. After a classic match, we returned to the dorm around midnight. Ten musketeers—I was an honorary member by now—commandeered the lounge and took turns playing ping-pong. I asked Adrian if he needed to study. He mentioned that he had a couple of midterm exams in the morning. Was he prepared? No. He would study later. But it was later now. "Don't worry, Dad, I've got it covered."

His friends winked and reassured (?) me that Adrian never studied. We had a good time until about three in the morning. Adrian returned a tired father to his dorm room. He was going out with his friends for a pizza run. He told me to relax. He was going to hit the books later.

When I awakened the next morning, he was already off to class. I caught up with him around noon. His midterms had gone well. After his cafeteria work, we went to his Ultimate Frisbee practice. I watched for a while, and then talked to Jocelyn, who was working out with the girls' team. Adrian had a band rehearsal later that afternoon, and he had some plans for his Friday night. He was looking forward to the weekend so he could have some real fun without being encumbered by his studies.

Adrian became a resident assistant his junior year. The compensation helped pay for his schooling, but he would have done the job for free. He loved to orchestrate games and activities for the freshmen men and women. It was a role similar to the ones he played in the remote neighborhoods of his youth and during his high school years. I'm sure he also enjoyed the chance to make new friends and acquaintances among the younger students.

His senior year is due to begin as I write. He confesses he is just a little melancholy over the prospect of living in French House this year, in virtual isolation, with just 30 or 40 other students. He had so much fun in the dorms during his first three years at college. We both concluded that his fears are probably groundless. Considering the friends he has accu-

mulated and his involvement in Ultimate and band, it is not likely that his social life will suffer.

This past summer, between her sophomore and junior year, Jocelyn worked as a staffer, along with about 60 other students, at Stanford's summer camp near Lake Tahoe. An abbreviated version of our family visited for a couple of days and had a great time. During the daytime, the staffers had their various jobs. They worked on the hiking team, or at the boat dock, the ski dock, the kitchen, etc. At night, when the parents and the teeny-weeny-boppers retired to their cabins, the staffers lived their second lives.

Emma, Tommy, and I went to a bread-making gig, which seemed more like a kitchen raid. While throwing weird items into my dough—pickles, anchovies, peppers—I had a chance to talk to Jocelyn's friends from camp. They were lively and energetic. They were so polite and solicitous and sincere. I'd be proud to call any one of them a son or a daughter.

Jocelyn tried to kill off Barb and me during our stay. She took us hiking to the higher elevations. We would step off the trail, plant ourselves on tree-stumps or rocks, gasp for air, and pretend to appreciate the view. "Why are you stopping here where there is no view?" she would ask. Conserving energy and oxygen, we wouldn't reply. It was easier to plaster doddering smiles on our faces and feign deafness or senility.

In order to begin a six-week backpacking expedition in the Hawaiian islands, Jocelyn left summer camp a few days early. For this junket she was to receive 13 hours of credit towards her human biology major.

Calling from a pay phone after three weeks, she excitedly told me about her most recent adventure. Twenty students set out with the professor-guide on a hike to a remote part of the island of Hawaii. They started by zigzagging their way up some cliffs. It was steep and scary. Seven of the girls arrived at the top of the cliffs along with Jocelyn. They wanted to go on without waiting for the trailers. Jocelyn thought they were taking the wrong path and told them so. They went anyway. When the professor arrived, he and the remaining hikers took the correct trail (in the other direction). It was overgrown.

They hacked their way ten miles to their destination, which Jocelyn described as the most fantastic and remote wonderland.

She was hugely disappointed that they spent only one day in paradise. Two days had been planned, but the lost hikers never showed up. Jocelyn's group returned to base camp. The seven, broken up into smaller groups, straggled in over the next twenty-four hours. They all had tales to tell. Some had stumbled upon pot-growing Vietnam war veterans who lived in the wild interior of the island.

Jocelyn jabbered on without inhibition about her Hawaiian adventures in the voice of her youth. It was a voice of earnestness and uncontainable enthusiasm that was so familiar to me. It was the voice she had used as a child in the woods when we cut up firewood with the chain saw and loaded it on the pick-up truck. It was the voice which had so much to say when we had watched our cows give birth and their newborn calves struggle to their feet. It was rapid-fire, melodious, intimate, and it held infinite charm for me. Jocelyn was 19 years old and halfway around the world, but this impossibly energetic and curious sprite hadn't changed a bit since the day she was born. Like her brothers and sisters, she hadn't a morsel of alienation from life, self, parents, or community. This is the pot of gold at the end of the homeschooling rainbow. It is why we do it.

## *Artists and Artisans*

The direction in which education starts a man  
will determine his future life.

—Plato

When we visited the campus of Expensive U. on Parents Weekend, selected faculty members gave sample lectures to groups of parents. Barb and I went to one by an Art History teacher who is a favorite of our children. She made a fascinating presentation on themes in the works of certain Greek potter/painters of the sixth century, BC. The professor began her talk with a series of admiring comments about potters of the day, mentioning how difficult it is to throw a decent pot or paint on a curved surface. With a slide of a handsome Greek shaping wet clay in the background, she then spoke of the masters, the Michaelangelos of their day, in reverent tones, modulating her voice to a slow and theatrical whisper as she came to the punchline: "OUR OWN SONS AND DAUGHTERS WOULD GROW UP TO BECOME PASSIONATE ARTISTS AND ARTISANS LIKE THIS IF THEY DIDN'T HAVE THEIR CREATIVE ENERGIES EXTINGUISHED BY MODERN-DAY SCHOOLS....." For a moment I thought I was listening to the keynote speaker at a homeschool convention.

When Emma returned to homeschool after a brief experiment with public school in the third grade, she and Julia

decided that the world needed another ABC book. Written and illustrated for little brother and cousins, they worked on this project for months. "A is for Ant. Ants are icky. .. P is for Papa's pink polkadot pajamas...." The book turned out to be completely charming. I hope they publish it some day, but its real value to our family lay in its production. Like a couple of neurotic actresses, the girls zigzagged over the emotional compass as they fought over points of artistic disagreement. Barb and I laughed at their antics. We could see how much fun they were having. At times like this, while witnessing their unbridled joy, imagination, and energy, we knew that homeschooling was right for these children.

Working on their ABC book, the girls were rehearsing for the kind of adult activities which would make their lives interesting and rewarding. Homeschool gives children time for the expression of their creative energies. In the ideal, it is free of discouraging influences, such as the invisible censorship of a peer group which determines that certain enterprises are not correct or regular according to the collective consciousness. Emma and Julia's associates were, to a large extent, the authors and illustrators whose books they read. It was only natural that they modeled after these favorite artists.

Barb reminded me one day to fix the electric garage-door opener, which was acting crazily. When the signal was triggered, the door would begin to close. Then it would freeze halfway down or reverse itself to original position. I could swear the thing opened sometimes as if commanded by Ali Baba. Barb threatened to call the repairman, which caused me to give serious consideration to begin thinking about maybe taking a look at the thing. I had procrastinated out of a fear of failure. What could I possibly do with a high-tech device that used digital circuits, remote control, and some sort of electric eye? I was tempted to unplug it and operate the door mechanically.

The thing began working again over the next few days. I congratulated myself for restraint and patience. Sometimes gizmos just fix themselves. I have seen this happen before. I shared this theory with the wife. I can't explain everything to

Barb because she doesn't have the technical background, but I felt she could appreciate this principle of spontaneous self-correction which applies to certain kinds of widgets. Maybe she wouldn't be in quite such a hurry to flog me over the next domestic malfunction.

To my surprise, she found my theory rather attractive. It was with genuine regret (I'm sure of it) that she divulged to me gently that little Tommy had repaired the garage-door opener. He had lined up the electrical eyes so they looked at each other and then rubbed the grime off the lenses. Adrian and Tommy and Dad have lived through this type of scenario many times over the years. I never interfere with the boys when they are fixing things. They owe me bigtime.

Tommy has been burying himself in *Calvin and Hobbes* recently. Calvin, Hobbes, Susie, Calvin's mother and father, and Moe now grace the doors and hallways of our house in action poses. When I fall asleep at night, the last image I see is Calvin's dad pictured reaching for his young miscreant on my bedroom door. When I brush my teeth, Moe greets me menacingly on the bathroom mirror. A nearly life-sized picture of Calvin's mother tucks Julia in bed at night. Tommy and the younger girls drew these posters. I suppose our household will bear the Calvin theme until it is displaced by some new craze.

Tommy likes to draw, but you will generally find him manufacturing or building something. He goes in cycles. He might focus upon boats one month and cars or planes the next. He mails away for model airplanes made out of a kind of thin cardboard. After some cutting and gluing, the planes fly pretty well. He takes them to the soccer field to try them out, using his stop watch to record the time that they are airborne. Our contribution to his projects is to leave him alone and not give helpful advice.

Adrian decided to major in mechanical engineering at college. He volunteered on the phone one day that "I really like my classes, Dad. I mean it. I even like the assignments." He appreciated the impact of these words, and he paused to let me absorb them because we both knew he had never shown any real interest in high school subjects. I had asked him

then if he found some of his classes to be especially interesting. I wasn't too surprised when he looked at me like I was carrying a dead rat and responded quite sincerely with, "It's school, Dad. The classes aren't supposed to be interesting."

On the other hand, life outside the classroom was always fascinating to Adrian. He was a fanatic builder, like Tommy, for most of his childhood, including his many years as a homeschooler. In his free time, if he wasn't making something, he was tearing something else apart to see how it worked. During his second year in college, Adrian found a field of study which gave him a chance to return to his youthful world of invention. It appears that another artisan has grown from seeds planted in a homeschooled childhood.

Jenny worked on her college thesis with the intensity of a Tommy or an Adrian. The subject of this project was the same Charles Dickens who intrigued her as a youngster. Jenny and I burned up long-distance money like rocket fuel in passionate discussions over fine points in novels such as *Bleak House*. Graduated from college, Jenny can look to a future which holds wonderful uncertainties, but she is still a product of her past. In some capacity, she will always be immersed in literature.

Jocelyn studies human biology in college. After her Hawaiian adventure, she homeschooled brother Tommy for a couple of months while waiting for winter quarter to start. This was a bonding experience for both of them. They formed a mutual admiration society and then took off in the family car on a week-long road trip, traveling to the Grand Canyon and other scenic spots in the Southwest. Barb and I held our breath until they returned home, alive and well, in the middle of a snowstorm. The car survived also.

Jocelyn loves kids. She found out recently that she gets to work with the seven- and eight-year-olds at camp this summer. She was so excited that she called to tell us about her good fortune. Like the professor's Greek potters, Jocelyn has the soul of an artist. I suspect that the raw material of her art will be human clay, in the form of her own children or the children of others. This would be wonderful because

parenting (or teaching) must be the most interesting, rewarding, and important art of all.

We have in our house a favorite illustrated children's story called *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*. I know it was written for my daughters. Each of them studied ballet since the age of six or seven. Some dance students lack the ability to focus and concentrate after being bottled up in school all day long. One gets the feeling that the teacher is just another adult in a long line to be dictating instructions that day. Our homeschooled dancers have a built-in advantage. After days involving a minimum of adult-directed activity, they bring a lot of energy and enthusiasm to their classes and performances.

Jenny and Jocelyn gave their young souls to dance, and they continued to dance in college. The younger girls dance in Ballet West productions and have traveled with the company to places like San Antonio and Minneapolis. Imagination, romance, musicality, dance movements, choreography, artistry in sets and staging, dramatic and theatrical elements—these features, along with their relationships with other dancers and teachers, seem to provide unlimited opportunities for challenge and enjoyment for our dancing princesses.

As a homeschooler, I agree with the professor. Our sons and daughters will grow up to become passionate artists and artisans if they don't have their creative energies extinguished by modern-day schools.

## *Adventures in the Working World*

Tommy started a lawn-mowing business last year. He printed up flyers on the computer and spread them through the neighborhood, attracting several customers. He started out charging \$15 a lawn, paying me \$4 for the use of my mower. The rental fee bothered him, and other members of my family thought it exorbitant. I had some spending money for a short while, but then Tommy bought his own mower for \$169. He was proud of his new equipment and happy to eliminate me from his financial equations. During evening walks, Barb and I noticed him whistling away in neighborhood yards, triumphantly pushing his shiny-green, big-wheel, K-Mart mower.

Emma, having labored like Cinderella in a housecleaning job she inherited from Jocelyn, was jealous of Tom's easy money. She enjoys her current job as a waitress much more. She works at a kind of cafe/deli that specializes in French pastry. At the end of the workday, the staff divides up unsold merchandise and takes it home. Our family dutifully helps to dispose of the food. It is a challenge to stay thin.

Emma and Julia make some money by dancing minor roles for the ballet company. They make five dollars an hour for

rehearsal time, and ten dollars for performances. They would probably dance for free, but the money is nice.

I always enjoy their stories about behind-the-scenes action. Ballet performances are not, it would seem, the smooth productions I had considered them to be. They more closely resemble the operations of a fire station, where calm routine is sporadically punctuated with crisis and response.

One evening in *Sleeping Beauty*, as Julia and a few other costumed creatures danced and slithered around her, a ballerina was left up on a prop. She was to be gracefully removed by a male dancer, dressed as cat, coming on stage.

“Where’s the cat?.....WHERE’S THE (BLEEPING) CAT?” Julia heard some increasingly frantic backstage banter, and then, “He’s already on stage, in another part!” The male dancer had been inadvertently scheduled for simultaneous roles. Someone whispered for the kids to lower the prop to stage level, so the ballerina could exit gracefully, without performing a gymnastic dismount. Communicating through glances, to the music of Tchaikovsky, Julia and her buddies performed their impromptu maneuver. Although thrilled with the adventure, Julia doubted that the innovative choreography quite measured up to the original, but at least the screw-up wasn’t her fault.

One can only imagine what went through the mind of the company director as he sat in the audience—in the midst of corporate moguls, city dignitaries, and ballet supporters—and witnessed the alterations to his precious *Sleeping Beauty*.

Jocelyn has had a number of work experiences. Without a doubt, the challenges and responsibilities have made her a better person and contributed mightily to her education. Between her freshmen and sophomore years at college, she worked one summer as a counselor in a home for adolescent, autistic boys. Every day, she was rotated to the care of a different patient. Some of the boys were easier to manage than others.

One day she came home from work with a bruised and swollen upper lip. Her 15-year-old patient had slugged her. Apparently, he had a habit of doing this to his counselors

and then laughing. The policy of the staff was to modify client behavior by rewarding them with greater or lesser numbers of gummy bears. Gummy-bear theory wasn't working with this kid. I thought slugging him back might have provided a stronger deterrent.

Jocelyn has taught ballet, and she has worked in fast food (bagels, fruit juices). She enjoys academic tutoring and makes pretty good money at it. She has worked at different campus jobs, as have Jenny and Adrian, to help pay her college expenses.

Jenny has always been a hard worker. She started out baby sitting. In high school, she taught ballet, bagged groceries, and worked as a waitress. Barb and I liked to lounge in her coffee shop on weekend mornings and drink the house brew. In the summers of her college years, Jenny worked as a secretary in her uncle's business and as a hostess and waitress. After college, she taught ESL and worked at different jobs as a temp. Like the rest of us, Jenny has received an invaluable education from her experiences in the working world.

Adrian toiled in lawn care during high school. His friend ran the business, and the boys often labored from dawn to dusk. Adrian worked at an athletic camp this past summer, as a resident assistant in his dorm last year, and as a landscaper (with a Spanish-speaking crew) the previous summer.

In the evenings, he and Jocelyn moonlighted at restaurants, working for tips by twisting balloons into the shapes of animals. Answering a want-ad, they paid \$30 apiece to learn this skill. Barb and I thought it was a scam until they regularly earned more for a couple of hours of balloon contouring than they earned in their day jobs.

Adrian spent a couple of summers after high school on his uncle's fishing boats, including a tendering barge, the unforgettable Togiak. Uncle Tom was a colorful character. Although lovable and charming at home, he was transformed into something of a Bligh on the high seas. Tom was quite deaf, but he scorned the use of hearing aids and piloted his boats as if he heard what people were telling him. This made for some interesting adventures. I was on board, several years ago, for Tom's maiden voyage on the Togiak. A fellow inno-

cent, Pete, and I made up the crew. Tom was just getting familiar with the equipment on the old barge, which had seen some fifty years of duty. A number of bilge pumps ran full time to keep it afloat. The wooden hull had been replaced over the years with worms, barnacles, and other fossilized crustaceans. We prayed at bedtime on behalf of the electrical system, hoping the boat wouldn't sink while we slept.

Every evening, sometime after midnight, as the sun nearly set at the end of long tendering days, we weighed anchor. Tom would yell from the wheelhouse to let out, say, 100 feet of anchor chain, based upon his fathometer reading that the ocean floor was 60 feet below. Pete and I worked the hydraulic levers at the stern, and the impressive anchor would crash into the waves and disappear into the inscrutable depths. Then Tom would gun the engines to set the anchor in the sandy clay on the ocean floor.

These were beautiful moments. We were a stone's throw from eerie-blue glaciers, surrounded by majestic snow-capped mountains. Sharing the sky with eagles and hordes of seabirds, the swirling gulls screamed at us. Sea otters and porpoises, and sometimes whales, danced and wiggled through the emerald waves. The clouds tumbled portentously, matching the continuous motion of the ocean surface.

Was it just me, or did others notice that the Togiak floated in unfamiliar locations—out in the sound or up against the shoreline—every morning? Pete and I talked about it. We wondered why the other boats anchored hundreds of feet closer to shore at night. Why did our anchor chain always hang vertically, as if it was dangling freely in the murky water below like some gigantic baitless hook? There was only one possible conclusion to be drawn: our anchoring system had to be flawed.

We attempted to raise the issue with Tom. For a week or so, due to deafness or denial, he wouldn't believe there was a problem. After awakening one morning completely out of sight of land, the question was finally taken up in earnest. Tom thought our difficulties were the fault of his inexperienced crew. Pete and I wondered if Tom was mistaking feet

for fathoms on his depth finder. Were we in 360 feet of water when he thought we floated in 60 feet?

From the stern of the boat, preparing once more to lower the gigantic anchor to some ineffectual position high above the ocean bottom, we made an effort to communicate our hypothesis to the skipper, yelling something like, "ARE YOU SURE YOU AREN'T READING FEET FOR FATHOMS?" Eighty feet away, in the wheelhouse with the window open, Tom heard, "BEAUTIFUL EVENING IN THE LAND OF THE MID-NIGHT SUN, DON'T YOU AGREE?" He laughed heartily and gave us the thumbs up sign.

The situation was hopeless. On this wide ocean, where men and boats were regularly cast about according to the whims of awesome natural forces, Pete and I simply resigned ourselves to fate. On a nightly basis, with the flair of real sailors, we continued to launch the great anchor. This worked for a short time, until Pete started complicating our ritual by displaying absurd expressions and gestures. Then we would laugh until we couldn't breathe, collapse onto the slippery deck, and flop around like big yellow halibut. We were lucky we didn't lose a man overboard to hysterical laughing paralysis. Tom must have thought we had gone out of our minds.

By the time Adrian went to Alaska, Tom's hearing was completely gone. For some reason, he continued to maintain total confidence in his auditory acuity. This paradox added spice to Adrian's adventures, as it had to mine.

There is a moral to this story which has application to public education. As a de facto government monopoly, run from the top down and determined to fulfill its own agenda, the bureaucracy hears no feedback from the crew. No wonder the ship of education runs in circles, lost on the open seas.

## *A Day in Tom-School*

Twelve-year-old Tom likes to read in bed at night. His latest interest is aviation. He checks out books from the library on such subjects as the history of flight, Orville and Wilbur, rockets and jets, and how-to books on building model planes.

Tom spends a lot of his time constructing and flying his planes. His room looks like an aircraft museum. Planes hang from a clothesline like a row of sleeping bats. A large creation with a four-and-a-half foot wingspan hovers above his bed. He made this one from poster board and wooden dowels bought from the local hardware store, where the people know Tom well. When he doesn't bring enough money for the materials he wants to buy, they just lower the price to what he has in his pocket. I hope this doesn't happen often.

The last two weeks at our house have been precarious for occupants. Dirigibles made from helium balloons hang in the air. Some are driven by propellers energized from old camera batteries. Others move along, ghost-like, with the air currents. Double-winged cardboard planes take flight and land, anytime and anywhere. Strange-looking, single-wing planes with a vertical rudder but no tail shoot around the

house, launched from Tom's catapult. An unwary reader of the morning paper might be surprised by a wayward fuselage tearing through an advice column on its way into his coffee cup. Watch where you step because rows of planes built out of Leggos sit menacingly on the floor, waiting for takeoff. Fighter jets, 747's, and biplanes will get their turns for a spin with their creator. Tom flies them around the corners of the house on aerial adventures which include sound effects.

A month ago, he worked with land vehicles, covering the floor with wheeled devices of every conceivable type. In order to mobilize his store-bought or homemade contraptions, Tom used interchangeable motors, rear-mounted propellers, or Tom-power.

He gets so involved with his projects, working sometimes for hours at a time. I love to observe his intensity and concentration. We try not to interfere with the natural flow of his intelligence, which seems to involve sequences of curiosity, investigation, tinkering and building. We offer advice only when he asks, and we are generally not very helpful because we don't know much about the planes, boats, dragsters, trains, bows and arrows, catapults, etc. On the rare occasion that I have something to contribute, I try to be brief. If I give in to controlling tendencies, Tom abandons his projects and takes up other enterprises belonging to him. I can understand this reaction—how would I feel if he commandeered my endeavors?

A typical day in Tom-school began last week with me engaged in morning piano practice on a day off. I had my headphones on and was listening to hate-sports radio when Barb tapped me on the shoulder. She was heading out on an errand. Would I mind doing spelling with Tom? Could I then get him started on his math? "No problem, my dear," I responded, as some maniac vented in my ear about his objections to the play of Charles Barkley while I continued with compulsive arpeggios on the keyboard.

A few minutes later—wearing teddy-bear pajamas and capped with his signature, free-range, golden hair—Tommy entered with his seventh-grade Calvert Speller. He added his

"T" to the initials of his brother's and sisters' (including Jenny's "J" from 11 years ago), signing off on a lesson of 12 words and a vocabulary segment. After he reviewed the words, I took the book and pronounced them in turn while he spelled them. If he was unsure of a spelling, he asked to look. Fine with me. We enjoyed the vocabulary segment together and discussed the meanings of the words. The lesson was painless for both of us and lasted 15 minutes or so.

While I worked on the word processor, he did a math lesson out of his Saxon 87 book. He didn't have any questions for me on this particular day, and he checked his own answers. When Tom has a job assigned to him, whether it is doing math or mowing a lawn, he appreciates maximum autonomy in its execution. Life is more fun for him when he is in control of the task at hand, and Barb and I try to respect this fact of human nature. Doing so leads to happier students and a happier homeschool.

After a half-hour of math, Tom whistled through a piano lesson. He asked me if I wanted to throw him batting practice in the back yard. We lost a few balls in the orchard and switched to pitching. He worked on his knuckle ball, curve, screwie, circle change, overhand two-seamer fastball, and sidearm heater. While he threw, we talked about the team—how our sixth and seventh round draft choices had been playing like twos and threes, and how our cleanup hitter was killing us by pulling his head and striking out so much. After thirty pitches Tommy said, "One more strike and I'm done, Dad."

Around lunch time, I noticed Tom drawing a volcano with colored pens on a 24" by 36" poster board. He explained it was for a science class that he takes at a local school. After an hour or so, he asked me if I had any material on volcanoes that he could take to his class. I suggested he look in his pile of *National Geographic* magazines. A ten-minute search turned up nothing, and Tom was a little disappointed until Barb returned from transporting one of the dancers. She had kept the original newspaper articles on the eruption of Mount St. Helens in the early eighties, including special editions with lots of color pictures of the explosion. Tom was elated.

I took him to his class and retrieved him an hour later when he finished with recess. That afternoon, he may have read from *Lord of the Rings*, worked on one of his projects, helped Barb with some gardening, or mowed a couple of lawns. Maybe he did all of those things. Like other kids his age, he stays pretty busy. When his friends came home from school, he ran off with them. We had a baseball practice after dinner, and then he played night games with his sisters and some neighborhood kids. He often stays up after we retire, reading or working on his planes or other things.

During our day, Barb had spent some time doing routine domestic work, transporting children, reading, gardening, and studying for her conversational Spanish class. I had been absorbed in my piano, word processor, and little-league baseball. Despite an hour or so of academic chores, Tom had crafted another fun-filled homeschooling day. We had gathered together at various times in various combinations, in the most natural and unforced way, for work or play.

Tom-school seems to flow as effortlessly as a lazy river on a summer's day. It revolves around a simple formula which we have used in our homeschool from its inception: keep it fun for all concerned, limit academic chores to an hour or so each day, and don't own a TV. I recommend this recipe to any homeschool because its realization has given us a happy home, family togetherness, literacy, and wonderful children whose love for life flourishes in an age when this commodity is under serious assault.

I found myself preparing recently for a presentation entitled "Keep homeschooling fun." I had procrastinated until the morning of the address. Due to begin speaking in two or three hours, I sat down at the kitchen table to write an outline. Nothing happened. The minutes slipped away, and I became increasingly agitated. My brain would deliver nothing except mocking images of me making a fool out of myself in front of 300 homeschoolers.

Agitation turned to panic. With sweat beading on my forehead, I looked around the room irrationally for a source of inspiration, as if the electrical outlets, the furniture, or the paint on the walls could help me. My eyes came to rest on

our fourteen-year-old, ponytailed, blonde, bubble gum queen with the perfect orthodontics. In my monomania, I hadn't noticed her presence. "Julia," I asked with the urgency of a lunatic, "why should homeschooling be fun?"

Without looking up from her crossword puzzle, she replied, "Because it works that way, and because life is supposed to be fun." Julia's response got me started on my outline that morning, but it also addresses the essence of our experience with Tom-school: it seems to work best when it is fun for all of us.

## *Adam Meets the Walrus and the Carpenter*

'Tis education forms the common mind:  
Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined.

—Alexander Pope

On a recent winter's eve I found my bed occupied, as it often has been over the years, by a good portion of my family. Barb was reading *Through the Looking Glass* (the sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*), a book written by Oxford professor Lewis Carroll over a century ago. Tom rested his head unabashedly on her shoulder, caught up in the nonsense with Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Fourteen-year-old Julia had gravitated into the room and, with the trace of a smile lingering on her face, was falling asleep against Barb's other shoulder. Stuart, family cat, occupied and defended his usual territory on the foot of the bed.

Emma marched from one end of the house to the other, over and over, as she studied her history notes. Engaged in her nightly indoor walk, she swished compulsively by our bedroom door every few seconds, defining the passage of time with her periodicity. She was a living clock, like something out of the book.

Surrounded by her grown-up babies, my wife's eyes danced across the pages as she delighted in the imagination of the author. I wedged into a small opening between the other bodies and reflected that this scene of family to-

getherness and domestic happiness had been made possible by homeschooling. My mind wandered as Tweedledee recited his poem, "The Walrus and the Carpenter," about a couple of sensitive and sympathetic dreamers taking a stroll on the beach.

....The Walrus and the Carpenter  
Were walking close at hand;  
They wept like anything to see  
Such quantities of sand:  
"If this were only cleared away,"  
They said, "it would be grand!"

"If seven maids with seven mops  
Swept it for half a year,  
Do you suppose," the Walrus said,  
"That they could get it clear?"  
"I doubt it," said the Carpenter,  
And shed a bitter tear.

I thought of my friend, Adam. His family might be gathered together at this hour, but not over a book. They would be watching television. More likely, they would be divided among the several sets in his home, including his newest acquisition, a huge big-screen in the family room. He showed it to me the other day, mentioning its expense and some high-tech features, and I got the feeling that I was supposed to be envious.

Although the family loves to rent movies and watch sports, Adam and his wife know that the wasted time and the cumulative effect of racy and violent programming is not good for their children. The downside of television is discussed more than you might imagine, but, in the end, nothing is done. With busy professional lives, these parents aren't home enough to enforce television limitations, and the idea of eliminating TV from the household is too weird to be considered. Viewing is universal in society, after all. Even the most discriminating authorities encourage families, and children especially, to take advantage of the enlightening and educational aspects of TV.

...."O Oysters, come and walk with us!"  
The Walrus did beseech."  
"A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,  
Along the briny beach:  
We cannot do with more than four,  
To give a hand to each."

The eldest Oyster looked at him.  
But never a word he said:  
The eldest Oyster winked his eye,  
And shook his heavy head—  
Meaning to say he did not choose  
To leave the oyster-bed.

Schooling is another sensitive issue with Adam. He can see with his own eyes that his bright children, despite the good grades they receive, get a poor education. Compared to the students of his own generation, they and their friends are inarticulate and surprisingly weak in math and reading. On the other hand, the schools they attend have an excellent reputation, with test scores comparing favorably to those of other schools across the nation. Governors and presidents give them awards and commendations which are reported with great fanfare in the newspapers and on television.

Adam has considered educational alternatives—he has even thought about homeschooling—but he is swayed in the end by his children's preferences and by media attitudes which value public school patronage as something akin to patriotism. Suppressing his misgivings, he adds his voice to the chorus of supporters for (our) public schools.

But four young oysters hurried up,  
All eager for the treat:  
Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,  
Their shoes were clean and neat—  
And this was odd, because, you know,  
They hadn't any feet.

## *HOMESCHOOLING ODYSSEY*

I try to understand Adam's irrational support of television and public education in the face of his own contrary thoughts and observations. The instinct to protect one's children is among the strongest in nature. That this instinct could be overcome by some casual preference for mainstream opinion is not believable. Adam's easy charm must conceal a rigid adherence to convention. I surmise that his mind was formed in his early schooling by a curriculum devoted to the purpose. A fear of being different from his peers was deeply ingrained in his personality. It remains a part of him now, inaccessible to conscious thought, unquestioned and unquestionable by rational processes. It is woven into every cerebral circuit and is the unseen master of his existence. Adam doesn't prefer convention; he is a slave to it.

Four other Oysters followed them,  
And yet another four;  
And thick and fast they came at last,  
And more, and more, and more—  
All hopping through the frothy waves,  
And scrambling to the shore.

The Walrus and the Carpenter  
Walked on a mile or so,  
And then they rested on a rock  
Conveniently low;  
And all the little Oysters stood  
And waited in a row.

It would be common knowledge if public schools were actually harmful to children. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television would trumpet the fact. To the contrary, all agree that public schools help forge the bonds that unite humanity into a kaleidosexual, Prozac-popping, television-worshipping mass of sharing, caring, tolerant, proud-to-be-illiterate diversity.

"The time has come," the Walrus said,  
"To talk of many things:

**Of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax—  
Of cabbages—and kings—  
And why the sea is boiling hot—  
And whether pigs have wings.”**

**It is one thing to be wedded to convention; it is another to be happy in that marriage. More and more, anxious conflicts arise between Adam’s personal observations and the mode of thinking endorsed, it would seem, by the populace. He is relieved and thankful, for a time, when the media allay his agitation by gently reminding him—in the familiar, soothing, and authoritative tones of his old school texts and videos—which of his opinions are shared by people who fall uncomfortably outside the main circle of society. Loaded words such as “extreme” or “moderate” help restore his thinking to the correct mode.**

**“But wait a bit,” the Oysters cried,  
“Before we have our chat;  
For some of us are out of breath,  
And all of us are fat!”  
“No hurry!” said the Carpenter.  
They thanked him much for that.**

**Adam is quite successful in the insurance business and owns his own company. Unlike most of us, he has no financial worries. He has a lovely wife, his kids are healthy, and he attends church regularly. For all this, he ends up in the Emergency Room every couple of years in the midst of a terrible anxiety, convinced that he is afflicted with some lethal condition and that his death is imminent.**

**“A loaf of bread,” the Walrus said,  
“Is what we chiefly need:  
Pepper and vinegar besides  
Are very good indeed—  
Now if you’re ready, Oysters dear,  
We can begin to feed.”**

I have this theory that his paralyzing anxiety attacks occur when currents of terrifying thought erupt from his subconscious after reaching a pressure which cannot be contained. He panics over the idea that his family has been victimized by a gigantic fraud, that the hearts and minds of his loved ones have been ravaged and mutilated while he fell asleep at the watch. Hypnotized by entertainment and sports, he allowed his attention to be diverted from vital questions.

**“But not on us!” the Oysters cried,  
Turning a little blue,  
“After such kindness, that would be  
A dismal thing to do!”  
“The night is fine,” the Walrus said.  
“Do you admire the view?.....**

Adam has been misled and betrayed, as his own parents were in their time. For the sake of a compliant and subject population, his children have been dumbed-down and indoctrinated with ruinous ideas and attitudes by scheming people, mad for power, who pose as the most caring and charitable of Utopians.

**It seems a shame,” the Walrus said,  
“To play them such a trick,  
After we’ve brought them out so far,  
And made them trot so quick!”  
The Carpenter said nothing but  
“The butter’s spread too thick!”**

**“I weep for you,” the Walrus said,  
“I deeply sympathize,”  
With sobs and tears he sorted out  
Those of the largest size,  
Holding his pocket-handkerchief  
Before his streaming eyes.**

**“O Oysters,” said the Carpenter,  
“You’ve had a pleasant run!**

**Shall we be trotting home again?"  
But answer came there none—  
And this was scarcely odd, because  
They'd eaten every one.**

**Unlike the oysters, Adam survives his anxiety attacks. They will continue until he replaces the alien master of his soul, convention, with a respect for truth. Then begins the Odyssey which will liberate his mind, and he will get to know his wife and children, his community, himself, and God.**

## *Afterthoughts—Fix the Plumbing*

Imagine a government monopoly on plumbing. Your plumber is fully certified and completely registered. He is always over-patronized because his services, according to the people's right to decent plumbing, are free to you and everyone else. He is about as consumer-friendly as any career bureaucrat. After all, he doesn't work for you, and you don't sign his paycheck. "Ma'am, I hear you saying your sewage line is plugged and your toilets are overflowing. We have a backlog of work. I can be there in three weeks... I'm not the complaint department, Ma'am... Maybe you should call your congressman and ask him what to do with the effluent."

As we all know, private monopolies merely produce poor quality goods and services at inflated prices. Government monopolies, adding a dose of politicization, take mere inefficiency to the realm of the sublime. Our government plumber, were he by some miracle able to show up and fix the problem, would have to retard drainage to be in line with ethnic, gender, or income guidelines. Perhaps cement would be poured into the pipes in order to slow the flow according to standards set and monitored by the Public Waste Authority.

Now imagine a government monopoly on education. Actually, imagination is not required. “Our-public-schools” function as a government monopoly. Teachers are fully certified and highly registered. They work for bureaucrats towards goals and standards set by government, and the flow of education, as in our sewage paradigm, is slowed or altered to be in line with ethnic, gender, income, and God-only-knows-what other kinds of guidelines.

With the exception of a relative few whose parents can afford private education, and a small but growing number of homeschoolers, the great majority of school-aged children attend public schools. The question on everyone’s lips these days, and a natural one to address when less than 30% of fourth graders can read with proficiency and less than 22% of eighth graders can do simple math, is how to fix public education.

As crucial as it is to find an answer, the question may well be academic because it presumes a fallacy, that the public has any real control over its namesake schools. Despite carefully crafted window dressing—examples such as school boards and the PTA come to mind—public schools are government creations from beginning to end. Like “The Public Transit Authority,” “Social Security,” or “Welfare,” “Our-public-schools” is a bit of newspeak utilized by Rulers to minimize civilian resistance to a dictatorial branch of government. People would be less trusting of government entities if they were given honest names. “The Department of Transportation Tyranny—Pouring Your Money Down Rat Holes,” “Socialist Insecurity,” and “The Department of Dyseugenics” would be less likely to garner the support of the public. “Government Schools for Mandatory Illiteracy and Indoctrination” would fight an uphill battle for patronage. People would worry more about what was being taught in such schools, and for whose benefit.

Our friends from Eritrea emigrated from that country years ago when it was in the middle of a revolution against its communist rulers. I asked them what education was like under the communists. They told me that all children attended school through third grade, but something like 5% were se-

lected to receive additional education to become communist leaders and administrators of the future. It occurred to me then that our system of public education, when deeds were analyzed apart from words, was very similar. The great majority of students graduate from our high schools with the math and reading skills of third graders (of 40 years ago); the small minority of students who escape high school with any real literacy seem to be firmly imbued with a socialistic world view.

Many people find fault with public schools for their failures. I worry more about their successes. I think they do their job of fulfilling their statist mandates only too well. By the time a child attends 12 grades or so, he or she stands an excellent chance of reaching the ideals of government education. Our graduate will favor collectivism over individuality, atheism over religion. He will be illiterate, alienated from self and family, and have the requisite attitudes towards Big Government (it can't be big enough). He will be a rabid environmentalist, cheering every government land grab and violation of property rights. In paradoxical opposition to his own future happiness, he will be an enthusiastic proponent of gender, class, and generational warfare. He will have enlightened attitudes about abortion and euthanasia. In short, due to the successes of public education, our high school graduate, unaware of conceptual alternatives, will work proudly to promote Marxism across the country and around the world.

Since the political requirements of government schools would seem to work contrary to the literacy, happiness or fulfillment of individual students, the first change to be made in education is to remove government from the picture. Parents need to recapture, on a de facto as well as nominal basis, control of their children's schools. This for the sake of the students who attend them, the teachers who teach in them, the bureaucrats who run them, and the society who has to live with their legacy of indoctrination, ignorance, and enslavement.

The school choice movement holds great promise for the liberation of the public mind, but the battle won't be won

easily. Realizing full well that there is no market demand for ignorance or indoctrination, statists oppose real choice in education. They have resorted to tactical methods to defeat the will of the people, introducing a phony brand of school choice as a cover for efforts to actually increase the government stranglehold on education. Using this stalking-horse, they hope to bring all schooling, including homeschooling and private schooling, under the aegis of government regulation and funding.

True choice in education would allow the miracle of the marketplace to operate. Parents would have money to spend on their children, and enterprising educators would greedily compete to create schools to satisfy their customers. Genius, driven away by politicized and bloated bureaucracy, would return to the educational community. Effective educators would be rewarded with patronage. Parents would vote with their pocketbooks on the types of schools and teachers they wanted.

In the current system, bogus educational methods, bankrupt theories, and poor teachers linger interminably on the scene. With real choices available, educational ideas that don't work would disappear as quickly as honest politicians. Ineffective or immoral educators, unable to find patrons willing to spend money on their product, would have to reform or find other careers. The frustrating national debate over public schools would disappear overnight, because people don't waste time criticizing goods or services they don't choose to purchase.

It is possible, in the short run, that statists may successfully establish their phony brand of school choice. In the long run, they are beaten. In a world where ideas precede action, it is only necessary that people get the opportunity to compare the confining darkness of totalitarian education to the liberating brilliance of educational freedom. In our exciting age of information, the people have seen the light, and the referendum has begun.

## Homeschooling Odyssey

"We have sent three children to Stanford, and a fourth is on her way to that university. While academic achievements are gratifying, they represent a drop in the bucket of benefits in store for families who choose to homeschool."

It was the fall of 1980 when six-year-old Jenny entered first grade in a small town in Washington. Like most parents, Matt and Barbara had high hopes that their daughter would thrive in the classroom. At their first parent-teacher conference they learned that Jenny was a weak reader who cried over the stories in her books. They faced these facts but concluded that the school, not their daughter, had failed to measure up. Thus began a homeschooling odyssey through educational seas filled with new delights, doubting acquaintances, occasional storms and sea-monsters (crotchety school administrators), and many new friends and adventures. Early on, the growing family tossed the television overboard, lightening the load and enlarging the view.

Matt reviews their homeschooling years with affection and humor, examining modern institutions and child-rearing practices along the way. Day-care, television, and public schools take turns in the spotlight. An ADD child experiences a remarkable turnaround in Barb's homeschool. The Walrus and the Carpenter make an appearance.

The book tells the story of a homeschooling family who found love and happiness by largely avoiding the defining institutions of our age, and it offers encouragement to others who would try this unconventional approach to education and family life.

Matthew James, a physician, is a native Oregonian.

Cover illustration by Barbara James.

U.S. \$8.95  
Can. \$11.95

