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From the Heart—Lead On

Do you feel that you've been struggling all year in deep water, barely able to keep your head above water and that you need a break for the summer more than the kids do? When in deep water it is usually beneficial to take off your boots and drop all excess baggage. For parents, learning is not nearly as hard as *unlearning* the old ways and methods which must be replaced. The summer can be a good time to consider such things and plan for the future. It takes effort to break out of the rut of the familiar.

Although traditional schools are out for the summer, the responsibility of parents to teach their children continues daily. Even if you don't *try* to teach your children, they will learn. They learn from your example, from your attitude, from your words, or from your silence. The question is, are they learning good things or evil. If you spend your life as a couch potato glued to a television set, your children are learning from you. As noted by its Latin root (*ducere*, meaning to lead), education is all about leading children. The only question is, will they be led in the right direction or will they be led astray. A great hindrance to being led in the right direction is being deceived. Consider how people are led astray or deceived. Here are some examples from my children, who have often been living parables for me.

In previous letters I have mentioned the value of asking questions to provoke your children to think. Who, what, when, where, how, and why. Some of these are more important than others. (Traditional education focuses on the first four.) The goal of relevant questions is to make children ponder, wonder, and consider—to be thought-ful, as opposed to thought-less. In the parable method of teaching, the student is challenged to recognize significant aspects of stories and situations by comparison to things already understood. The connection between causes and consequences is a part of wisdom. Once, I pointed out to one of my children a building whose paint was especially faded on one side and asked what might have caused this. Only after wind, rain, and many other possibilities were considered and excluded was the effect of sunlight recognized. This example shows how easy it is to **overlook the simple and obvious**.

One evening, we were studying light and optics using a laser pointer. In order to visualize the light-path between two mirrors, we produced smoke by placing some newspaper on glowing coals in the barbecue grill. When the laser was turned on, the paper instantly burst into flame. The children jumped back in awe at the "power" of the laser—and **jumped to the wrong conclusion**. The paper had naturally smoldered until it reached the flash point. The laser was turned on at the same instant by sheer coincidence. (The -watt red laser is probably incapable of starting a fire. Concentration of the beam to a pinpoint with a lens produced a temperature increase of about 2^o Fahrenheit in a liquid crystal.) We have done other experiments with the laser by combining it with

mirrors, lenses, prisms, diffraction gratings, fiber optics, etc. We checked out a couple of books from the library to learn the principles of laser operation. More important than what we learned directly about light is what we learned by analogy about Christ who said "I am the light of the world."ⁱ

Jesus also said, "the light of the body is the eye."ⁱⁱ Although science indicates that light hitting an object is reflected *into* the eye, Scripture indicates that a person's attention is much like a beam shining *out*. Your words and instruction can direct a child's attention to the significant things before him. This "discipleship" is built on a foundation of right relationship between you and your child (and can be patterned after your relationship with Christ.) Real education is impossible without proper order to the authority relationship. Without proper parent-child discipline, the spoiled brat who has a fit if he doesn't get his way becomes a smart manipulator.

Personal contact is basic to education, teaching new things in light of things already understood by the student. Education, I contend, must be carried out with primary focus on personal relationship. First of all, people must be considered in light of their relationship and accountability to God. Because life is all about people, effective teaching considers information as an ingredient in the lives of real people. Information learned in biographies, stories, narratives, and anecdotes has a context which personalizes it. A computer or other mechanized teacher can deliver information to a student, but it cannot convey the significance of that information. The primary emphasis must NOT be on names and dates, terms and definitions, facts and theories, or skills and abilities (though this is how most of us were educated.) The *unlearning* of traditional school priorities may be the most difficult aspect of effective teaching at home.

The deception of "look-over-there" can cause you to miss something more important over here. In like manner, duplicating the pattern of a schoolroom can cause you to neglect the most important things in life. As you teach history, science, math, and literature, teach your children what is really significant in life.

Since there isn't enough time in life to do everything, your priorities will determine what gets neglected. Education is primarily about making connections, relating ideas. The remedy for confusion and meaninglessness is order and context. It is a matter of connecting new ideas to that which the student already understands. Spiritual lessons are conveyed by analogy, relating things unseen to those which are seen. The Proverbs and the parables of Jesus teach spiritual truth by this method. Knowledge is useless unless it can be applied, especially to the human heart. More important than teaching all the facts and skills of the schoolroom is the teaching of value and discernment. Discernment includes neglecting those things which are not relevant or significant in context. Teach your children to read with discernment, contrasting those things which are true and real with those that merely sound good. Teach them to choose the best rather than the good, the excellent over the mediocre. Basic principles and skills which can be used and combined are more valuable

than a truckload of stray facts. For example, a basic knowledge of phonics enables a student to read the Scripture.

Much can be learned about any subject from its history. Here is an example from a book about math: "Our studies . . . are going to show us that whenever the culture of a people loses contact with the common life of mankind and becomes exclusively the plaything of a leisure class, it is becoming a priestcraft. It is destined to end, as does all priestcraft, in superstition. . . . To some extent, any sort of education perpetuates traditions which have ceased to be relevant to contemporary conditions. When we understand *why* this and that is no longer relevant, we can save ourselves unnecessary time and effort by taking shortcuts which our forefathers could not foresee."ⁱⁱⁱ The stronghold of educational superstition is overcome through understanding which triumphs over irrational fear. Traditional education must be treated with discernment. "Those who blindly follow traditions and those who blindly throw traditions overboard share at least ignorance in common. One keeps what he does not know, another throws away what he does not know."^{iv} In the education of his children, the Christian should seek the Lord about what to keep, what to discard, and what to reinstate that has been omitted.

The challenge of teaching. I had a good opportunity to teach my sons a relevant lesson about locks as I replaced the one in our front door. With an enthusiastic voice I said, "Boys, look here. Do you want to see how a lock works?" A nod or word of acknowledgment was their unenthusiastic reaction. What was wrong? There couldn't be a more practical, real, relevant opportunity to learn. When plan A didn't work, I didn't give the boys an F. I realized that the lesson hadn't been adequately presented. Instead of giving up, I groped for a better approach. After asking the LORD for help, I challenged them, "Which of you could take this lock assembly apart (including the tumblers and springs) and then reassemble it so that the same key would unlock it? The change was dramatic.

Not all lessons turn out so well. The other night, as the children were getting up from the supper table, I instructed them to be seated, and opened a book to read. They returned in body, but had other plans which didn't include family reading time. I asked one of the children to read a page. The child saw only three sentences on the page and got angry, thinking I was making fun. In response, I got angry at the resistance and flung the small paperback. We got the relationship restored, but the quote had to wait for another day. Consider the quote:

"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love."

You, as parents, are called by God to lead your children; to train them up in the way they should go. Contrast those things which lead astray with the proper perspective on each. Teach your children the differences between reality and appearance. "Take them to places where they will find things worth observing. Charlotte [Mason] wanted children to have beautiful memories of their childhood stored for their old age and thought too many of us have blurry memories due to the fact that we did not slow down and really look at things."^{iv} We recently took our children on a hike to the top of the Chimney Tops trail in the Smokies. The definition of a mountain (a natural raised part of the earth's surface, usually rising more or less abruptly, and larger than a hill) seems trivial in comparison. Experiencing the view from the top of a real mountain is much more breathtaking than any second-hand view such as a photograph. The effort and struggle to attain a real goal contribute to its value.

What will you find along the way? It depends on your course. If the course is entirely routine and repetitive, there is less opportunity for discovery. As our family travelled to various curriculum fairs, we have heard many times, "Are we there yet? or, " How much longer is it going to be? Instead of getting exasperated by such questions, we are learning to use these as teachable moments. I handed my ten-year-old a state map of Tennessee, and told him that we were near Centerville, on highway 48 headed for Tullahoma. Of course, his response was that he couldn't find either of these cities. I began with what was familiar to him and directed him from Memphis, down I-40, past Jackson and the Tennessee river, continuing to direct his attention to our current location. Once, as we were traveling, one of the children asked, "Why do you see dead possums along the road, but never live ones? (We had an interesting discussion about this one.) Travelling down the interstate at 65 mph, one is not likely to see fossils, native animals, or wild plants.

We studied about fruit on the way to the strawberry patch. As I drove, Jessica read about fruit from a biology book. As we encountered scientific terminology we considered the Greek roots of the words. [For example, angiosperm is derived from the Greek *angios* = vessel or container (as in angioplasty – "balloon surgery" on a blood vessel) + *sperma* = seed]. Later, I read Scripture passages containing the word *fruit* to the children and had them listen for specific occurrences of this word. God is looking for branches of His vine which bear spiritual fruit.

In carrying out the parental responsibility of education, the two great commandments must be emphasized, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, with all thy might and with all thy strength" and the second, "Love your neighbor as your self." It is possible to teach these in every facet of life. The first of these is practiced by showing God's wisdom, creativity, faithfulness, and goodness in superintending the universe, history, etc. The second greatest commandment is exercised by personalizing education and relating to your children.

The Road ahead. Traditional education is like control-line flying – the teacher stays stationary and students parade past. Rather than stationing yourself as a school teacher and having your children make their appointed circuits via school-based spiral curriculum, make yourself a fellow learner, a fellow discoverer and explorer. Seek the LORD while he may be found.

Fellow Member of the Flock

Greg Stablein

iJohn 8:12

iiMatthew 6:22

iiiMathematics for the Million: How to Master the Magic of Numbers, by Lancelot Hogben, 1968

iv"A Traditional Wedding," by Douglas Wilson, Credenda Agenda, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1997

vA Charlotte Mason Education: A How-to Manual, by Catherin Levison, 1996