

June 1998

**From the Heart**—Home-educating in difficult times.

At the conclusion of the school year, many parents evaluate their work as a teacher. But what is the measure of learning? Isaiah said, "The Lord hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary." (This cannot be measured by an "achievement test" nor can it be mandated by state law.)

In life, you often go through the test first and then study to figure out what happened. When faced with a year of trials in addition to home education, some parents opt to put the children into public or private school. But if the trials *are* the test, after which follows the opportunity to learn, don't let the trials tempt you to say, "No thank you. I think I'll try a different curriculum." It is easy to throw in the towel when the going gets tough. If the real substance of life is people and relationships and heart attitudes, then when these are tried and tested a wise man wouldn't change schools for one that emphasized diagramming sentences, factoring trinomials, conjugating verbs, crossing fruitflies, and other trivialities.

The last year has been long and difficult for my wife and me and our family. The real trial was the difference in our understanding of trusting God in trials. (My wife went through nursing problems and gall bladder attacks.) Knowing that we can call upon the Lord and ask him to change the circumstances gave us the hope. Faith is believing God in spite of what your eyes see. In some areas, the circumstances do not seem to have changed.

In your own life look back to seasons when you have gone through difficult times. If you had known at the beginning the difficulties before you, you would be sorely tempted to abandon the course. Trying times are not intended to destroy you, but to reveal deficiencies so that they can be rectified, to build you up, to knit you together with family and fellow believers. "The trying of your faith. . . [is] much more precious than of gold which perisheth."<sup>i</sup> Your attitude, priorities, words, and actions in difficult circumstances will do more to educate your children than any textbook.

Knowledge of human nature is more important than knowledge of academic facts. To become an excellent teacher, become a student of human nature. Knowledge of the ways of people will make you a better teacher than will exhausting study of subject matter.

Certainly, knowledge and facts fit together and a good teacher can properly organize the subject material. If knowledge is compared to the parts of an elegant building, the skillful builder must know more than how to link the parts together. Consider constructing the Empire State Building beginning with the antenna, then the roof, etc. to lay horizontally across the earth, and then stand the building upright. Under construction it might look elegant, but it would fall apart when the real test came.

Building depends on a proper foundation on the earth. A school teacher might know all the academic facts, but the foundation upon which to build is the child. If what is taught isn't solidly related to the child, one is building on sand. The foundation for learning is *relationship* to the student. "People teaching their children at home consistently do a good job because they have the time—and the desire—to *know* their children, their

interests, the signs by which they show and express their feelings."<sup>ii</sup> This is where you, the parent, have the overwhelming advantage. "Let us not be weary in well doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."<sup>iii</sup>

If a child has great difficulty grasping knowledge, what is the problem? In the education of children, we often look in the wrong place for answers. We have a window

air conditioner which seems to quit whenever the whim strikes it. Although the symptoms are manifested in the window unit, the problem can be treated in the fusebox. In the child, as in my air conditioner, the problem can be in the supply of power. The hardest part is getting started. If you blow a fuse when little Johnny is a little hard to get started, perhaps you should try a slow-blow fuse. I have heard parents say, "I could never home school, I don't have the patience." Little do they realize that home education is often used by the Lord to teach patience. If you don't have what it takes, recognize that the Lord has what you lack. If you lack, ask him. Good things need time to germinate and patience will bring forth a crop.

"Long hours of boredom and pretended study stunt the intellectual growth of young children . . . . Mind-set is more important than mind content. It is far more important for a child to grow into personal confidence, creativity and vision than to rush into academic excellence."<sup>iv</sup> Educate with bite-size pieces—don't choke the kid. "We should avoid the . . . extreme of a beginner's book so advanced and so severe that it is likely to break the spirit of even mature students in its attempt to cover practically everything."<sup>v</sup> Textbooks do attempt to *cover* everything, and when the child develops a broken spirit, he is labelled with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). In the circles of professional educators, ADD is diagnosed by evaluating the discrepancy between what the student is capable of doing and what the student actually does. But I ask, is ADD the cause of educational problems or the result of modern methods of education? Certainly, every child (and adult as well) has an attention span. If you take a child with a five minute attention span and continually give boring 60 minute lessons, the child's attention span is likely to be shortened. To increase a child's attention span give short lessons, interesting lessons, practical lessons, brief lessons, timely lessons, many lessons, applicable lessons, real lessons, and relevant lessons. Again the parent has the overwhelming advantage.

I have tried to use the appetite mentality to teach many things to my children, exposing them to good things, without forcing them to go through the motions when they do not understand. I have tried to set an example of being a disciple, a learner. Many of the things I want my children to know have sprouted as a crop, but others are as a field without a sprig of growth. I have tried to teach my children some Latin roots of our language along with some rudiments of new testament Greek. The other evening, Elliot, our eleven year old picked up a Greek new testament lying on the couch and asked what the word *kai* meant. I answered that the *ai* sounded as in the English word aisle, and the word meant 'and'. Then I told him it was time for bed. Before he got up in the morning, I realized that I should have praised him profusely. The next morning I told him how pleased I was that he had asked about the meaning of this word. I mentioned that Greek words are easily pronounced knowing only the alphabet and a few points of Greek phonics. Russell (age 14) responded that it should be simple to take a Greek spelling test. I told him that he could probably spell *anthropos*, which he did orally, as I asked what Greek letter would make each sound in the word. When the boys said, "Give us another one," I knew we were on a roll. You will get more mileage by praising the smallest success than by criticizing the greatest failure.

The critical aspect of education is to make your children "aware of the difference between what they know and what they don't"<sup>vi</sup> without being perceived as their judge. The be-sure-and-cover-everything and pass-the-test-and-move-on approach lead the child to think they know when they most likely don't. Mistakes and failures are part of the learning process. Do not catalog and record every mistake your child (or your spouse) makes. To progress, one must continue in spite of mistakes and learn to rectify

them. As a parent, seek to prevent *catastrophic* failures. Do not make an exhibit of work which your child finds embarrassing. To learn, it is necessary to forget about oneself and the possibility of failure, and focus on the subject at hand. Remind children of their successes. Nothing succeeds like success. Tangible success in one area can encourage a child in other areas. A drawing program suggested "teach children the basics . . . prior to the critical stage they reach when they conclude, 'I can't,' and will no longer try."<sup>vii</sup>

Difficult times in home education can be the result of ineffective methods and faulty educational philosophies. Building academics on an unsure foundation is sure to cause difficulties. "A child who has really learned something can use it, and does use it. It is connected with reality in his mind, therefore he can make other connections between it and reality when the chance comes. . . . The notion that if a child repeats a meaningless statement or process enough times it will become meaningful is as absurd as the notion that if a parrot imitates human speech long enough it will know what it is talking about."<sup>viii</sup>

I have repeatedly said that "parents are the experts at education." When I have asked parents, "Who taught your child to speak English and how did you do it?" one parent said that they simply praised the child. Contrast this approach with the school approach of marking all errors with red ink. Another parent had a child with problems with dyslexia and reversals. I had suggested a remedial course including free reading, drawing, and no spelling. The parent reported significant improvement, but suddenly, in high school, the reversals began to recur. When asked if there had been any particular stresses in the child's life, the parent said no. Further questioning revealed that the student was using a typing program on the computer which beeped every time the student made a ~~mistake~~ mistake. This student had fallen back into a failure-conscious mindset which is the opposite of the confident I-can-do-all-things-through-Christ-who-strengthens-me mindset. Being too critical in pointing out errors and problems can cause the very problems and errors you are trying to prevent. Instead of conventional testing, which focuses on what the student does not know, Charlotte Mason suggested an approach called narration, which has the student tell you what they *do know*. Get to know your children to find out what motivates them to learn. Jesus said, "Suffer little children . . . to come unto me. . . . for of such is the kingdom of heaven."<sup>ix</sup>

Are you one of those who are "not really educated, because they lack any vision of what they are trying to do? They tend to be interested only in 'how to' courses, in the 'know how' as contrasted with the 'know why,' in means, not ends; in skills, not principles; in details, not wholes. They commonly lack a clear understanding of the relations within their subject matter and the relations between their own specialty and other knowledge. . . ." Come to the Lord. Learn of Him and teach your children what you know. You have enough education to function in life—if you can teach your children what you know while continually learning more yourself and teaching them to do likewise, you will succeed in the education of your children. Language is the means for communicating knowledge and values. Use words to paint a picture of places, things, and people. Relate those things which a child does not know to things which he does know. Similes, metaphors, analogies, and comparisons can be used to convey new insight by relating things unknown in terms of things known.

Try the "nutshell approach." Teach the basic simplicity of a subject. Phonics, in a nutshell, says that words are composed of letters arranged in syllables. The syllables are made by combining the 26 letters of the alphabet to represent the sounds. Every syllable has one vowel sound and usually, a consonant sound before it and after it. Knowing the letters used to represent the 44 basic sounds in the English language ought

to make reading fairly simple. Trigonometry in a nutshell is the study of the ratio of the lengths of the sides of triangles.

Sometimes it doesn't seem simple because "at some point in his career every aspirant to the status of educated man must decide that he is in charge, that information and facts will only confuse and weary him unless he learns to exclude as well as include, to synthesize as well as analyze, to relate himself to the immediate world that is external to consciousness by responding to it rather than reacting or remaining passive."<sup>x</sup> What happens when the child's mind tries to *exclude* something that you're trying to include?

It is good that young children do not realize that math consists of addition and subtraction, positive numbers and negative numbers, multiplication and division, rational and irrational numbers, fractions, decimals and percents, squares, cubes and square roots, algebra, geometry, trigonometry and calculus. Mastery and application of counting pave the way for later understanding of distinctions such as even and odd numbers. It is enough to see the short stretch of road before you. Too much is overwhelming.

Maturity in education involves discernment—the ability to recognize fine distinctions. (e.g. knowledge of precise definitions.) Consider the "very important difference between 'drill' and 'practice.' *Practice* you do for yourself, to get better at something you want or need to do. *Drill* you do for other people, perhaps so they can check up on you to make sure you know what you are supposed to, perhaps only so they can keep you busy."<sup>xi</sup>

Teach your children to open their eyes, to see the world of God's creation. I'm currently sitting on the front porch, typing this on a laptop computer. Our 18-month-old daughter is squealing with glee at a roly-poly. Teach your children to listen to God's creation. A few minutes ago we even heard a mockingbird include a burglar alarm in his repertoire. Jessica, our sixteen-year-old daughter, noted that portulaca flowers open from bud to full blossom within thirty minutes of being in the sun. We tried to use a mirror to reflect the sun onto some unopened flowers to see if we could watch them open. After about five minutes we gave up, but 20 minutes later the flower had opened completely. We missed it. On this first attempt our attention span was not long enough. I was now more determined than ever. Several days later, I moved the plant into the sun and was able to observe the movement of the petals as the flower opened. I enthusiastically called the children and they watched intently for about 20 minutes. We also used a magnifying lens and noted that the anther opened releasing the pollen as the petals opened. Look around for demonstrations of God's faithfulness in His handiwork. An educated man is not satisfied with what he knows. "The heart of him that hath understanding seeketh knowledge."<sup>xii</sup> Note that the heart is the key to learning. A child who is hungry to learn will almost educate himself. If I do not hurry up and teach phonics and reading to our five-year-old daughter Berakkah, she will be reading and I won't have done anything for which I can take the credit.

Education is more than matching terms with corresponding definitions. Successful education involves establishing permanent relation between new information and the life experiences and knowledge of the child. In establishing these *connections*, parents have a decided advantage in knowing nearly all of the children's experiences. Which student will find it easier to master a subject? The one who learns all the particulars and is left to seek the application or the one who is taught the underlying order using the particulars as examples? Algebra is usually taught by teaching all the particulars—and the student is left wondering, "What is this all about?" Try using waffles to represent  $x^2$  in an algebra problem. For example: Take a square waffle. Count the number of squares

in each direction. Now, consider a larger waffle with one additional row of squares along each dimension. How many more squares would it have? . . . [for you algebra students, this problem graphically demonstrates  $(x+1)(x+1)$  in a way that is easy to swallow.] Arithmetic can also be taught by using consumable manipulatives. Have you seen the *M & M Counting Book*? Consider the appeal of fractions studies using edible manipulatives as pizzas, pies, cakes, etc.

Children learn well by contact and application. "How on earth is a child to learn history by contact? . . . all this diplomatic and political stuff with which we cram children is a very thin view of history. What is really necessary is that we should have an instinctive grasp of the flux [flow and change] of outlook, and of thought, and of aesthetic and racial impulses, which have controlled the troubled history of mankind." Read biographies of those who made history. Learn from their lives. Do not memorize history but then forget the past. Realize how we got into this mess. The important lesson from history is *remember*. "All of political philosophy can be boiled down to a single question, 'How ought we to order our life together?' Responsible citizens are those who care about and for public order including the institutions, mores, traditions and public rituals that define and sustain that order. . . . When citizens are also parents, the political question becomes even more narrowly formulated, 'How should we raise our children?' "xiii

"The idea that children won't learn without outside rewards and penalties. . . usually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we treat children long enough *as if* that were true, they will come to believe it is true. . . . It is the creed of the slave."xiv God showed the Israelites in the wilderness that even though they were free, the bondage of Egypt and its ways was still *in them*. Are you educating your child for bondage or for freedom? "Freedom, if it's freedom simply to do whatever we wish to do at any time, freedom that is unstructured, that is a license, that is without direction, without meaning, without significance, is ultimately a freedom that can't be sustained. This is the freedom in which individuals hand over their liberty to a grand inquisitor and say, 'Take our freedom but feed us' because freedom at that level is not worth having. There is very little enjoyment in it and it does nothing to ennoble or to dignify human life. The only freedom that's worth having is the freedom to reach our highest fulfillment and our highest reality as human beings and that means the freedom for spiritual growth, the freedom for the moral life, the freedom for self-responsibility, the freedom for responsibility for one another. It's that exercise of freedom which is always in reference to a moral order that makes freedom worth having and therefore grounds freedom in any kind of meaningful way."xv Proper freedom requires bondage to the Lord and His ways.

The juvenile snipers in Jonesboro, Arkansas may have had excellent grades; they could have scored in the 99th percentile on achievement tests, but they lacked the more needful thing. Set your priorities on the most important things. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."xvi Train your children in Godly character.

Can you do it by yourself? If you're so smart, how come you didn't think of that? and that and that? Because it comes by revelation. Revelation is when truth is *shown to you*. Many important things in life are so simple that they ought to be obvious. I once thought I was so smart because of all the neat things I had heard and read. I took the children to a gem and mineral show. It included a "gem dig" filled with pea gravel into which crystals and mineral were mixed, then the children were allowed to search for treasures. While Berakkah and Hannah (aged 4 and 5 years respectively) were hunting,

those running the booth dropped choice treasures right in front of them. When the little ones were oblivious, one of the staff would whisper, "look here" or "look there." The smallest children came away with the more treasures than the older. I saw this as a picture of our heavenly Father dropping things before me and even pointing them out by the Holy Spirit when I did not see. Childlike, I am learning to say , "Look what I have found"

There are too many lessons in life to learn them all the hard way. Life is too short to figure everything out for yourself. Wisdom involves learning the value of time. Learn from others. Ask, Seek, Knock, Read, and Study. Seek understanding and seek the company and the counsel of the wise. Ask (and keep on asking)—The reason you ask is because somewhere you heard that there was an answer. (Remember that faith comes by hearing.) Seek (and keep on seeking)—The reason you seek is because those you asked said you should look over here for the answer. Knock (and keep on knocking)—The reason you knock is that something that should be open is closed and locked. Others have made it beyond here. Don't Give up!

Keep the Faith

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- ii Peter 1:7
- ii *How Children Fail*, by John Holt, 1982
- iii Galatians 6:9
- iv "The Reformed School of Alexandria?", by Michael Pearl, (No Greater Joy, Vol. 4 No. 2), Feb/Mar 1998
- v *Latin: An Introductory Course Based on Ancient Authors*, by Frederic M Wheelock, 1963
- vi *How Children Fail*, by John Holt, 1982
- vii *Drawing with Children*, by Mona Brookes, 1986
- viii *How Children Fail*, by John Holt, 1982
- ix Matthew 19:14
- x *The Promise of Wisdom: A Philosophical Theory of Education*, by J. Glenn Gray, 1968
- xi *How Children Fail*, by John Holt, 1982
- xii Proverbs 15:14
- xiii Mars Hill audio tapes Vol. 28, Sept./Oct. 1997
- xiv *How Children Fail*, by John Holt, 1982
- xv Mars Hill audio tapes Vol. 26, March/April 1997
- xvi Matthew 16:33