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From the Heart—Reality Check

Where to begin? In the education of their own children, parents are not content for even one to fall through the cracks. Failure in home education cannot be written off as someone else's responsibility. Ten percent failure is not acceptable. You want the best possible education for each one of your children. Home education involves the teaching of *two* generations. Thank God for His grace in giving us a second chance. How shall we, as Christian parents, teach our children? Without a goal, the best you can do is pick a good curriculum and teach it as well as you can. If that doesn't work, you can try another and then another until, frustrated, you give up and put your children back into the classroom in the hope that maybe someone else (or even a videotape) can do this job better—and all the while your heart tells you it shouldn't be this way.

Most home educators are beginners at nearly everything they teach. I wonder how many parents are anxious about teaching their own children because they realize the failure of their own education (even though they may have had good grades). Even those who have been teaching at home for many years find home education a new challenge every day. Few home educators have taught phonics (or algebra) more than a handful of times; and each time to a unique child. How do you prepare for this or any other subject?

Look around. What is wrong with education today? "[W]e have no unifying principle, no definite aim; in fact, no philosophy of education. As a stream can rise no higher than its source, so it is probable that no educational effort can rise above the whole scheme of thought which gives it birth; and perhaps this is the reason of all the . . . failures and disappointments which mark our educational records."ⁱ What source is the education of your children patterned after? Are you satisfied to have your children learn as *you* did? Is your goal to have your children master only the world of textbooks?

Many parents are in such a hurry to get started that they get a grade-level curriculum and begin education just like schools. They never consider that there might be a better way. Before you try to reproduce classroom education in your home (or after you've become frustrated in your attempts to do so), consider the effectiveness of your own education. Nearly everyone learned states and capitals in school. Do you know the capital of Vermont? Several years after completing two years of high-school Spanish, I went to Mexico on a church mission trip and found I was totally unable to communicate in Spanish. I couldn't speak any Spanish and I couldn't understand a word anyone else spoke. Whatever I had learned in Spanish class was nearly 100% ineffective in the long run. What kind of education is this?

The traditional school curriculum often excludes the real world. In the name of grade-level content, classroom education is typically a confused mixture of stuff students already know, punctuated by an incoherent bombardment of new material, all without significant application. It teaches many things that are never going to be used in life (except in that peculiar place called "school"). Traditional education presents a fragmented, snapshot view of life. Little

snippets. No context. Many school books are cold—just the facts. They have no personality, no enthusiasm. The typical spiral curriculum or spiral-review method continually introduces new material, only to return each year and cover it again, adding a bit more each time. Traditional education is always racing on to something new. The student who diligently studies all this stuff gets a good grade; the one who doesn't fails (and may be labeled as learning disabled.) Is this how you taught your children to speak the English language? Was your teaching so ineffective that your children had to spend hours studying to master all the new stuff that you taught at them? Contrast such natural teaching with that of the classroom. How can you avoid making the same mistakes as the artificial world of "school?"

When I began to teach science to my own children, I began to question how college could have convinced me that biology, "the study of living things," was boring. I now realize that everything we had studied was dead—it was either flattened out on a textbook page or pinned down in a dissecting tray. I recently inspected a set of prepared microscope slides and found each specimen to be carefully laid out by a skilled undertaker. You might be impressed if you had never seen the living organisms, but still something was missing. They had no *life*. Similarly, many educational materials seem to have had the life removed. One characteristic of living things is that they respond to stimuli. Is the education of your children affected by the affairs of real life? If not, you should check its temperature, pulse, respiration, and other vital signs. Ask yourself, what can be done to make education *alive*?

Try studying *real* things. Children are born with natural curiosity, the desire or even compulsion to figure out why things are as they are. A good teacher makes learning so natural that it happens spontaneously. I suggest that effective education begins with the familiar and proceeds to related things. Effective education considers complicated things and shows their simple components. Elliott, age 13, recently took apart an old hard-drive from a computer, and was surprised to find it made up of simple things like motors, magnets, switches, etc. Real things are more impressive than technological facsimiles such as videos and photographs. The other night, we looked at Saturn and Jupiter with a small telescope. Even though I have seen incredible photographs of these planets taken by the Voyager spacecraft, the real thing in the eyepiece is stunning. You should hear the expressions of children (and adults) as they see the rings of Saturn or the moons of Jupiter for the first time. The night sky with binoculars or a telescope is so rich that men have spent their lives investigating its splendor. Similarly, the microscope yields awesome details of the terrestrial world. Everywhere you look, God's creation is awesome—if you study the creation itself and not a shallow textbook. Real things give testimony of the handiwork of their creator. The closer you look, the more there is to see. Teach your children to pay attention to details with their ears as well as with their eyes. Do not despise the day of small things. It is not wasteful to spend much time mastering the basics and seeking understanding.

Don't continually teach one new thing after another. One popular educational program claims to teach one facet of a concept before teaching another. This

sounds like an excellent approach. But in practice, one facet of one concept is studied, then another facet of a different concept, then a facet of a third concept, etc. without staying on anything long enough to master or apply what is learned to practical situations. The result is that the student is always kept off balance; he never becomes secure with what he knows or confident enough to apply it.

How do you get your children to desire learning so that they come to you and ask for your help? They are ready to learn when they become dissatisfied with what they know. Let your children see or hear a master or at least one more skilled than themselves. Let them see examples of excellence. Challenge them to excel. Jessica, our oldest daughter, has been taking piano lessons for about three years but, because of her desire to play, we've never had to require her to practice. Motivate your children to learn by setting an example. Let your children see *your* curiosity and hunger for learning.

Approaching new things with childlike freshness requires humility. If you want to become a better teacher, try something new yourself. I'm trying to learn to ride a unicycle; my wife, Linda, is taking piano lessons. By learning something new, you'll learn lessons that will be valuable for teaching your children. For example, how can something that looks so simple when someone else does it, seem so hard? When something is difficult, how do you react? An important part of learning is overcoming the natural aversion to things which are foreign or unfamiliar. Learning requires venturing into unknown territory. It requires leaving one's comfort zone and complacency. Children are born into a strange world—a world filled with overwhelming sights, sounds, odors, and sensations. Yet somehow, they are not overwhelmed and soon learn about all these things, along with language to describe them. Just as everything is foreign to a child, a foreign language is an excellent picture of all learning. In one Spanish lesson at our house, I was overwhelmed by the Spanish words for father, mother, child, brother, sister, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, cousin, aunt, uncle, grandmother, grandfather, etc. There must be a better way, I thought. Traditional education has too much on its agenda. It attempts to cover so much at once that nothing is accomplished well. Any one of the above Spanish words could be learned quite easily were not umpteen others presented simultaneously. How about a simple story about a boy and his grandfather? Every time the grandfather would be called *abuelo*. Even a child could understand that. How simple. In another Spanish lesson we read the genealogy of the *descendientes* of Adam in Genesis chapter five. In this section, the Spanish words told the story of each person that lived, begat, and died, so it was easy to learn these repeated words. Chapter three of Ecclesiastes ("A time to be born and a time to die") was the topic of another lesson. Infinitives were not difficult in this lesson because they were practically the only verb form and they were used in context. The ultimate example of learning in the real world of context and consequences is studying a foreign language in the foreign culture where it is used and applied.

In learning any subject, "foreignness" is a major obstacle. The way to learn something foreign is to lay it down right beside familiar things to show the relationship and to make practical use of the new thing until it becomes second nature, and no longer foreign. In this *immersion* approach, persistence is the

key. Don't give up when it seems too hard, too foreign, too impossible. Often, things that seem impossible can be learned easily after a brief reprieve. Don't give up. Call upon the LORD. Academic subjects are not the most important thing. More important is learning about human character. Once you've mastered character, academics will be easy.

How can you tell whether you are doing a good job as a home educator? Traditional testing in schools typically takes a critical approach which focusses on what the student doesn't know. In contrast, the narration method is positive, having the student tell what he *does* know about a subject. But the real test of education is not a chapter test at the end of the week, or an achievement test at the end of the year. Weekly or chapter testing is like a snapshot or photograph supposedly demonstrating education. A test that *proves* Johnny can spell is like the photograph I saw of a boy on a bicycle who *appeared* to be flying like Superman. Appearances can be deceiving. The real test of education is the passage of time. Has your own education passed this test? How much do you still know two or ten years later? How much of what you know do you really understand?

Evaluate these words of John Ruskin: "The entire object of true education is to make people not merely to do the right things, but enjoy them; not merely industrious, but to love industry; not merely learned, but to love knowledge; not merely pure, but to love purity; not merely just, but to hunger and thirst after justice." This seems like a good description, but fails to mention the source from which all these things come: not merely to know about God, but to "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength."ⁱⁱ To do and love the right things, one must *be* right on the inside.

The calling of a Christian is to *live* the truth. To do this, you must know the truth and know it well enough to apply it. What is truth? Preeminently, truth is Jesus Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ Knowing truth requires casting down vain imaginations—distinguishing those things that are true from those that are not. A disciple's heart cries out to the Lord: Teach me lest I die in this foreign land. Give me understanding of why things are as they are. The world's system does not have the answer. All kinds of schools teach many things, but are their graduates wise? LORD, teach me the things about life that schools omit in their denial of the unseen world. Teach me the hidden and unseen things that really make a difference. True education requires asking the right questions. If you ask for rote memorization, do you expect more than verbatim recital? What will you get if you ask for problem solving? If you ask for critical evaluation and right judgment, what do you expect? What if you ask for knowledge of the Holy One? Knowing the LORD requires applying what He says to real life. The truth cannot be learned by theory only. Knowing the truth requires investigation and application. Students (a.k.a. disciples) must be taught to look more closely and to ask questions. Real life is full of conflict and struggle; between light and darkness, between faith and unbelief, between the truth and deception. Only on television are all conflicts solved in two hours. Teach your children to distinguish what is real from what was once called make-believe. Reading to your children, with

appropriate commentary, is one way of training them to discern truth from error. The truth stands up under scrutiny and cross-examination. What is the rest of the story? Where did it happen? What about the people involved? Why did things happen as they did?

Context is necessary for understanding. A grasp of reality and context is fostered through learning by association. Real education conveys the difference between knowing something and knowing *about* something. Currently, I am drying grapes to make raisins—just for the experience. Certainly, you and I already *know* that raisins are made from grapes. But I want the rest of the story. I want more than just the knowledge. I want to learn the *process*. (And the homemade raisins seem to taste better.) Reality is an excellent teacher. It is the difference between having seen or heard of a few places along the way and actually making the trip yourself. In our culture, we have an abundance of information and knowledge, but little of the glue that holds it together. Today's students may be able to string tidbits of knowledge together in some prescribed order, but are unable to comprehend reality.

Learning is most effective when things are learned in a context relevant to life. Real education depends on your focus. Are you trying to teach a subject, or a child? The first of these perspectives requires knowledge of the subject; the latter requires knowledge of the child. The first of these preempts the child to cover the subject, the other preempts the subject (as necessary) to teach what the child needs to know. Are you teaching history or are you teaching a specific child? Are you teaching science or a unique individual? If you focus on teaching the child, you will automatically teach things as they relate to one another and your studies will naturally be interdisciplinary.

Effective learning recognizes natural associations. Instead of memorizing a multitude of random words and terms, you can strategically arrange them into groups for different lessons; then only a few groups need to be learned. Instead of a word list with assorted spellings of the long "i" sound, the Greg Stablein Spelling System suggests that the *student* make a list of all the words with a particular spelling. Later, if the student doesn't remember how to spell the word *plight*, realizing that it is in the same group as "bright, tight, fight, might, right, sight, light, night, and knight" would show him the proper spelling. Learning by association also applies to human character. A person is known by the company he keeps. "He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed."^{iv} Everyday, your child's character is shaped by his associations (even by the characters in the books he reads).

So, what about socialization? Here are the words of one author applied to home education:

'Well, that's rather strange—this guy must be a religious misfit or an emotional outcast of some sort.' Or, 'maybe he's a part of some cult or flaky fringe group.' Or, 'There must be something wrong with him—if there wasn't, why doesn't he go to a *regular* [school]?' Or, 'This guy certainly must be a rebel of some sort; he's probably unable to submit, else he would be attending a *normal* [school]—you know the kind that meets in a building.'

To the world it may seem there is something wrong with you, but should you live by what others think? Have you ever watched the interactions of school children in this process euphemistically called "socialization?" I am thankful every day that my children do not get this kind of socialization that makes a child part of the group. Or should I say, part of the *herd*? How much of the behavior of age-segregated children is good training for adult life? One parent told how her child did not play appropriately in a school-yard game in which all the boys chased all the girls (because they hated them) and then all the girls would likewise chase the boys. Do you call it "socialization" for children to learn how to fit in with such childish madness? When, in adult life, do people do such things?

What is school "socialization?" It is the process by which children from mixed backgrounds are put together under enough supervision to prevent them from killing one another. It attempts a precarious balance between encouraging positive associations and preventing harmful ones among companions of diverse and sometimes questionable character. Often, schools cannot exclude troublesome characters, so the only option is to keep personal interaction among students to a minimum. Thus, students are kept busy and school relationships are limited to the bits of time between classes. In this "socialization," social relationships are minimized.

Likewise, when freedom of speech is not permitted in school, both wholesome and vile talk are prohibited. How was your character influenced by the sit-down-and-shut-up schooling you received? Children are often silenced for life instead of being trained to say something worthwhile. School socialization might be called "institutionalized immaturity," an immaturity fostered by childish associations and absence of mature role models. School does not usually train children to respond properly or kindly. They are prevented from outright, blatant offenses and fights (in the presence of the teacher), while the *heart*, from which unkind words and actions proceed, is neglected.

Teach your children how to deal with reality: to see life as it is, without being deceived by appearances, and to avoid cynicism, grumbling, and bitterness. We are not to escape from reality, but rather face it; not to live in the world of books, but to learn from the past and from the experiences of others. Is your perception of reality tainted by the illusion of inevitability? Based on the past and the present, the natural tendency is to project what tomorrow will bring. Have you done this with your finances? Your marriage? Your health? Do not be discouraged by what you see today, but realize God's sovereignty. Teach your children to contemplate consequences, to plan for the future, to live wisely today, and to know the LORD who parted the Red Sea and brought down the walls of Jericho. What God says is ultimate reality.

Prepare for the year 2000 by setting your trust and confidence in God and his provision even if the things of man collapse. Recall how he took care of the Israelites in the Desert for 40 years. God has not changed. God's word will still be true even if man's systems collapse. The words of David in the Psalms record God's faithfulness, "I have been young and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread."^v Jesus said, "Seek ye first the

kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things [food, clothing] shall be added unto you."^{vi} Even when it seems impossible, God can provide. The best preparation is to hide God's Word in your heart.

Teach your child to have the heart of a disciple. Convince him of his lack of understanding. The truth is often unpopular or politically incorrect and is not acquired without struggle. How do you reconcile what God says in his Word with what you see with human eyes if the two don't seem to agree? At our house we have had some heated discussions; e.g., should a married man *with* children and a single woman *without* children get the same pay for equal work? (*The Way Home* and *All the Way Home* by Mary Pride have been part of our discussion.) Home education provides many opportunities for learning to discern between truth and deception.

We live in a world of look-alikes and counterfeits. Many of today's children have been brought up on a diet of technological simulations. Is it any wonder that ADD has reached epidemic proportions, or that record numbers of students are dosed with Ritalin? Why does the real world seem dull, dry, shallow, hollow, empty, and boring in comparison to the things which have tickled their imaginations? I suggest it is because they are not trained to seek wisdom or pay attention to details. What is the result of looking closer? It depends on what you look at. Look closely at a video image or a photograph and you will only find the details of conveying an illusion. If you examine a *photograph* of a tree with a magnifying lens to learn more about the tree, you will be disappointed.

Reality means destroying illusions and appearances without becoming disillusioned. Reality requires comprehension of intents and motives. The truth is not always pretty. Men are deceitful and love darkness because their deeds are evil. The world is full of the love of money and self-interest. Teach your children how to hope and pray—not to be anxious for anything, but in everything, with prayer and supplication, to make their requests known to God, to put their hope in God and yet praise Him. Home and family relationships are the natural environment for children to learn about real life. In the education of your children, cultivate peace in your home. The Scripture says, "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength"^{vii} and "God is not the author of confusion [or disorder], but of peace."^{viii} Is this the testimony of home education at your house?

Educating for reality means contentment. The LORD is not pleased if we live in the past or get lost in memories. Nor are we to live in a fantasy or dream world. The LORD has appointed my portion, my situation, my family. "All things work together for good to them that love God."^{ix} Will you believe it? "*This* [today] is the day that the LORD hath made."^x How shall we then live? Will we rejoice and be glad in it?

Walking in the light,

Greg Stablein

iHome Education: Training and Educating Children Under Nine, by Charlotte M. Mason, 1935

iiMark 12:30

iiiJohn 14:6

ivProverbs 13:20

vPsalm 37:25

viMatthew 6:33

viiIsaiah 30:15

viiiI Corinthians 14:33

ixRomans 8:28

xPsalm 118:24