

## ON BEING A HOMESCHOOLING FATHER

by Robert Sale

I became obsessed with homeschooling two years before I got married, and five years before I had children. A friend suggested it to me, and having been a musician my whole life - working nights with days mostly free - I thought it sounded fascinating and reasonable, and I read anything I could get my hands on about it. Moreover, I was in love with my soon-to-be wife, Sharon, and thought that it made great sense for us to homeschool if we were given the opportunity. She agrees with me about homeschooling, even though it's been pretty much my interest and passion. Indeed, I haven't been so consumed with anything since I began playing drums as a kid. We are presently in our 9th year of homeschooling. Our son, John, is 13, and our daughter, Christine, is 9.

I've played drums professionally since I was 15 and had my career mapped out by the time I was 18. I worked hard and kept focused, and after high school I moved to Los Angeles and was doing well - doors were opening, and I was improving as a player. However, during that time a series of events had been silently and effectively changing my desires and interests, and when I met my wife four years later, I found that I wanted to get married and start a family. But putting career on the back burner flew in the face of all I had been groomed for; a serious musician didn't bother with domestic things until he or she was established and financially stable. Never mind. I came back to San Diego, played locally, and settled into family life. I knew that living in San Diego instead of Los Angeles would cost me as an artist. But I was willing to pay, for my interests lay elsewhere.

After our second child was born and our oldest was ready to begin school, we thought it would be a good idea for Sharon to quit her job to be home. I took a job (my first "day job") at a mortgage company and worked 9:00 to 5:00, Monday through Friday. I also played drums professionally Thursday through Sunday nights. We ordered a kindergarten program from Calvert and dove in. But after two years I was laid off; meanwhile, her former boss had been pleading for her to return. He offered her three times the amount of money I could command at my day job, as well as full insurance coverage for our family, a 401(k) retirement plan, and flexible scheduling to accommodate my out-of-town work. We accepted, I came home, she returned to work, and we haven't looked back.

When Sharon went back to work, John was beginning second grade. He was reading, 'riting, and 'rithmeticking well, and Christine was starting preschool. For the first few years we mostly stuck with Calvert's program, which features classical liberal arts along the line of E. D. Hirsch's "core curriculum." As I gained confidence and comfort with homeschooling, I began to streamline and personalize each child's curriculum. For the past few years we have been emphasizing a core of Latin, Greek, and math, with other subjects based around these. History has been casual walks through ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, etc., using various books found around the house. For science we use store-bought labs, chemistry sets, microscopes, etc. Most exciting has been the literature we've read. The kids pick what they desire to read, and at times I'll hand them something that I think is crucial.

Our day typically begins with a reading from the Bible and a few chapters read out loud from a great book. (Recently we've been reading Anne Frank, and I continually have to stop to hide my face because I get choked up! It's ridiculous.) Our "school day" lasts for a few hours, but if the spirit hits us we'll skip it altogether and head for the beach, zoo, mall, library, or bookstores. I often have to set my drums up in the

afternoon for a gig that night, and I'll bring the kids along with me. If I'm hired to play during the day, they may join me; in the past, if circumstances wouldn't permit, I'd hire a sitter. John is now at the age where they're able to stay home alone for a few hours.

Homeschooling's flexible scheduling allows children to pursue their interests at their leisure. A few years ago John went to Africa with his grandmother for two weeks, and we didn't worry about him missing school - southern Africa was his school. Both kids take daily drama classes, and Christine takes a gymnastics class once a week.

We were well into homeschooling when I read for the first time Josef Pieper's *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. This book reassured me that we were doing the right thing, for the right reason. Pieper says that real learning and culture is dependent upon leisure, which in turn is dependent upon cultus - or divine worship. The Greek word for leisure is the origin for the Latin *scola*, and the English school. Our homeschooling days give us time for the unhurried contemplation that is the basis of liberal learning.

A few words are at hand to explain what it's like being the rare homeschooling father. It's hard. Being the lone dad at, say, the park can at times feel strange. Nor is it easy for me to strike up conversations with homeschooling moms whom I don't know. I mean, in my mind as I approach I imagine them sizing me up, wondering, "Why isn't this guy at work?" Once or twice, early on, I made the attempt, and the results were hilarious and terribly uncomfortable.

One instance comes to mind and deserves telling, though in this case my presumptions proved to be true. When my son was 7, we paid a visit to our neighborhood homeschool support group at their monthly "park day." When we arrived I received a few nods, yet nothing was done to make me feel welcome. I understood, for I felt just as uncomfortable as they did. Indeed, I felt as if I were crashing a slumber party. Nevertheless, we stuck around until something sent me reeling. A half hour into the gathering, one of the fathers arrived during his lunch break. I thought, "Cool, he's come to hang out!" He got out of his truck, the women gathered around him, and he began making announcements from a bullhorn. He mentioned things curricular, political, theological, and finished by leading the group in a prayer. Then he left! That was it? Why hadn't any of those capable women made the announcements and led the prayer? Why hadn't he stuck around and visited? Was his capacity as a father no more than that of authority and announcements?

The condescending nod and wink from that husband and the acquiescence of the wives was discouraging, and it was clear that I was out of place, and that this group was not for us. So we pressed on and had little contact with other homeschoolers until a few years later when we were introduced to a whole other type of support group -- one that I hope is common.

Making friends is not a problem for my children. Our doors are open constantly; the neighborhood kids are either at our house, or our kids are at their homes. But as my daughter got older, she craved friendships beyond the kids in the neighborhood, who were available only after school and homework. Some days she wouldn't see them at all, and it broke our hearts to see her so alone. It's easy for our son to be by himself, but our daughter is different. We prayed that she would find more friends, short of having to go to school for them.

Our answer came one year ago when we enrolled the kids in a drama class tailored for homeschoolers. In it they made new friends who immediately invited us to a weekly park day, and though I was reluctant to go, my kids insisted. Leave it to children to break down cultural walls. The homeschooling moms at the park were welcoming, friendly, and not at all bothered by having a homeschooling dad present. Moreover, their children were self-organizing, friendly, and happy. I thought we'd entered Utopia.

We've been meeting with this same group for a year, and I'm honored and proud to consider them my friends. Our kids spend time at their homes, and their kids spend time at ours. All the women are intelligent, bright, serious, tenacious, and capable (not a surprise, really, when you consider that bucking the 150 year old compulsory public education behemoth is no small affair). Some are conservative, some are liberal, some a bit of both; some religious, some not religious; all are highly opinionated. The diversity and respect is breathtaking, but like a delicate plant the group requires nurturing. And like Sunday dinner, you learn to choose your topics for discussion prudently, and you mind your manners. At times I feel out of place, but my discomfort is of my own making. A few of the husbands come by as well, not to make announcements, but to just hang out!

Though the homeschooling dad may be a rare bird, homeschooling itself is common. Many parents - who presently educate perhaps two million children - simply want to avoid what Charles Adams referred to as "those huge, mechanical, educational machines, or mills, as they might more properly be called."

A vast universe of homeschooling material is available, most of it superb. And there are as many methods as there are homeschoolers! Most religions and philosophies have tailored the more popular methods to their needs. There are, to name just a few, the Charlotte Mason Method, Classical Christian Education, Distance Learning, Unschooling, and Montessori. The list of local, national, and international homeschool support organizations is staggering for its length and diversity.

Two resources were indispensable to us when we began: Mary Pride's Big Book of Home Learning, and Helen and Mark Hegener's truly inclusive homeschooling journal, Home Education Magazine. In her books, Mrs. Pride lists and comments upon hundreds of homeschool products, methods, curriculum providers, colleges, and apprenticeships. The Hegener's Home Education Magazine is the finest general homeschooling magazine. In it you can find articles from Christians, atheists, single parents, and Mormons. The magazine also carries an excellent column by Larry and Susan Kaseman, "Taking Charge," which tackles legal and legislative issues, providing a libertarian (small "l") civics lesson in the process.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention other vital and important writers who've influenced me: the wonderful Grace Llewellyn, the humane Jacques Barzun, the encouraging Cafi Cohen, and the liberating John Taylor Gatto. I have shelves of books on learning, teaching, and education, but these are whom I return to most.

I grew up in a liberal family and never questioned the goodness of compulsory public education. But now I have serious qualms about state schooling monopolies. I agree with the critic who argues that "in a free society, government has no more place in education than it has in religion."

Fundamentally, our choice to homeschool was a religious decision, though we have the same concern as all

parents: happiness for our children. We want them to be civilized and humane, filled with wonder every day, and with love for the world.

By homeschooling, we have not disconnected from society and community, but are reveling in the greatest part of our life in community: loving those closest to us. And my experience as a homeschooling dad has confirmed what I've always suspected: homeschooling is the hope of the world, and more than ever there is a welcome and necessary place for fathers.

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