

Breaking the Rules

by Helen Hegener

There's a framed picture on my desk of my daughter Jody and her brother Christopher at the Ferry County Fair last fall, riding into first place in the Sweetheart Race on Jody's horse Claire. Reins flying free, Jody has both hands thrown high in an exuberant victory salute, and Chris has that big old grin that he gets when he's just flat out having a good time. It's become one of my favorite photos of the two of them, and it underscores something I've been thinking about for some time now.

It has to be some breach of safety rules to be riding fast without your hands on the reins. Jody knows it better than we do, having spent several summers as a youth camp counselor and wrangler for friends who run a large horse summer camp for kids. She realizes the dangers, and yet she constantly tests them in her own ways, flirting with what might happen if...

We chide her for it from time to time. She'll ride through the yard with only a halter on her horse, knowing full well that we disapprove, and knowing just as well that our disapproval stems from a concern for her safety, not some arbitrary need to have rules obeyed. We'll mention it, she'll acknowledge our disapproval, and that will be the end of it for a while. She'll bridle her horse for some time to come. But then one day she'll be back with only an Indian-style cotton rope through Claire's mouth. Testing, always testing.

I cherish this quality in her. She knows the rules, such as they are, and she constantly pushes against them, seeking to find some different, somehow better way. I've done that all my life, and, in one way or another, I suspect most homeschoolers have.

I consider it a hopeful sign for our times that so many parents are choosing to homeschool their children. It tells me that the spark of personal decision has not been entirely trampled by government schooling, that we as a people still have the wherewithal to make societally unpopular decisions for ourselves. Whether teaching our own, birthing our own, growing gardens to feed our own, building homes to shelter our own, or working at businesses to support our own, there's still a healthy and growing movement toward self-reliance in this country, and it feels like a very good thing.

It also feels like letting go of the reins and pushing against the rules. One could write an entire book about why this is so (many people already have), but as a society we've been led to believe that our place in the competitive global economy requires a process of education and a dedication to the workforce that homeschooling successfully circumvents. We've effectively said "No thanks, we'll teach our kids to grow their own food and build their own homes so they won't have to spend their lives at some thankless job just to survive."

One of the recurring concerns we hear from new homeschoolers is "How can I be sure my child will grow up able to make a good living?" It's a tough question, because there are so many variables from family to family. This is one of those areas where courage in letting go of the reins is really evident -- it's all so well arranged in school, with aptitude testing, guidance counseling, vocational training classes and so much more. But it's arranged to produce the kind of results President Clinton alluded to in his 1994 State of the Union message when he said that schools should be measured by one high standard, namely: "Are our children learning what they need to know to compete and win in the global economy?"

Is this really what we want for our children? Can it be what they want for themselves? I'll venture to say that most parents probably have more mundane goals for their children. A loving family, a nice home, a comfortable income doing work they enjoy. Is it somehow less than enough to be content with these?

In Ron Miller's book *Educational Freedom for a Democratic Society* (1995, Resource Center for Redesigning Education), Seth Rockmuller and Katharine Houk write of the government's Goals 2000

educational reform package, "It does not appear to be an option for parents or a community as a whole to choose not to have their children strive to be 'first in the world in mathematics and science' or 'prepared ...for productive employment in our nation's modern economy.' The issue is not whether these are admirable goals or loathsome ones; rather the issue is who chooses for a particular family what the goals for its children should be."

The issue is who chooses. In light of this it's even more hopeful that so many parents are deciding to push the rules and assume the responsibility for their children's education. We need to be vigilant in maintaining our freedom to do so, and we need to be willing, like Jody, to let go of the reins every once in a while and test our own limits.

Several weeks ago my sister Sue rode one of our horses up the creek, just pattering around, enjoying the beautiful autumn day. Jody and I walked out to the pasture, stopped to pet the horses, and Jody, seeing her Aunt Sue off in the distance, suddenly decided to join her. Before I could protest she'd swung onto Claire and was off at a gallop, no bridle, no halter, nothing but trust in her horse and her own riding abilities. I was annoyed and awestruck and proud all at the same time at my wildly capable girl and the horse she'd raised and trained herself. I've never had the nerve to ride without a bridle. Secretly, I'm delighted that Jody does.