

Liz McCloskey

## Dropping Out

### THE REWARDS OF HOMESCHOOLING

A dozen years ago, I wrote my last column for *Commonweal*, "A Feminist Homemaker Confesses: Taking the Irony out of Housework." Though someone else gave it the clever title, the sentiment lay close to my heart. At the time I was struggling with what it meant for me—a Yale Divinity School graduate schooled in feminist theology and keenly aware of gender inequality—to let my career lapse in order to become a full-time parent to my young children. Some years later I made another, similar choice, putting a doctorate on hold and giving both my sons a year of homeschooling. Each spent his sixth-grade year at home, one after the other, while I took a two-year leave of absence from my doctoral program at the Catholic University of America.

Reading a *Commonweal* blog post on homeschooling last fall brought me back to this decision. The conversation touched on gender identity and vocation, with some participants wondering whether women who choose homeschooling may be bound unconsciously by sexist cultural expectations of predetermined roles in raising children. Such notions seem plausible, yet in some ways they strike me as beside the point for women asking the question: Should I do this for my child? So often, theoretical discussions of gender expectations don't leave much room for an appreciation of the real and costly claims that the people we love make on us. Missing from such discussions is a willingness to acknowledge that when we enter into certain relationships, expectations do shape our decisions and actions—and that this may not be all bad.

When we commit ourselves in marriage—and later if we become parents—we agree to be bound to, and by, these relationships. Paul writes in his Letter to the Galatians (5:13) that we are called to use our freedom to serve one another in love. Though we may bristle at being considered "servants" to one another, that word comes close to capturing what it is that we give up in exchange for our vocation to family life. Every vocation, after all, requires sacrifices. Just as scholars are duty-bound to the rules of scholarship and the needs of their students, and journalists are obligated to tell the truth and to meet deadlines, so do parents have curbs on their freedom. And so, yes, I grant that by giving two years to homeschooling my sons I operated according to certain expectations of what a mother owes her children. But I willingly submitted myself to those demands when I had children.

In my case, taking leave from my doctoral studies meant relinquishing both a full scholarship and (almost as painfully) the esteem of a particular professor who went from hailing me as an up-and-coming scholar to dismissing me as a flailing older student lacking commitment. I trusted, however, that I would find a way to remain faithful to my own aca-

demical calling; and I'm glad that when my eldest son repeatedly asked for homeschooling, I was able to say yes. There were any number of good reasons not to. We knew very few people at the time who were schooled at home. I had never even considered the possibility for our family. And I am certainly not the most organized or patient of mothers.

But there were also good reasons to take the leap. My son was on the cusp of his middle-school years, an anxious and uncertain moment for many, and at an age when kids can benefit from a parent's full, individual attention. That's hard to accomplish when every day is so full and busy. Families today (ours included) tend to be involved in so many worthwhile endeavors—work, school, sports, music, drama, and church activities—that we can be left with no time for the unhurried and unplanned experiences that allow us to grow together. And indeed, though each of my sons was home for only one year, we all gained rewards best captured in one word: time. The year at home with each boy enabled me to take the time to be with each of them.

For the schooling itself, I chose a curriculum that relied principally on literature. It came with lesson plans heavy on reading aloud and guided discussions. Science, religion, history, and English were all explored primarily through literature. In addition, both boys studied Latin as a road to English grammar. (Math was the only subject for which they relied largely on a textbook.) The approach instilled in each of us the value and the habit of taking our time—time for reading on the couch by the fireplace, time for bike rides and lingering lunches. The home setting helped, too. It afforded me many opportunities for relaxed and easy discussions with each boy about such things as the meaning and beauty of sexuality; the dignity of women; the importance of balance; the need to respect one another; the joy to be had in learning; and the importance of always growing in mind, body, spirit, and soul. These conversations opened crucial lines of communication that served us well as each boy moved on into middle school and then high school, a period of life when "easy conversation" becomes an oxymoron.

Though I am now back pursuing my doctorate and am no longer at home with the boys, I know that my march toward finishing my dissertation could be interrupted again. My daughter, currently in fifth grade, might request her turn at homeschool. Or, as time goes on and I am hopefully teaching at a university, the needs of our parents might interrupt either my or my husband's professional plans. And that will be all right with me. What the homeschool experience taught me is that when an opportunity arises to spend valuable, even costly, time with a cherished person, it is imperative that we seize the moment. This is the calling of every one of us, no matter what other vocation we are faithfully pursuing. ■

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