



Remarks by Roy Underhill at the Opening Session of WPA's 19th Annual Home Education Conference on May 4, 2002, titled *The Constacy of Change*. Published in *WPA Newsletter* #72 - June 2002 pp. 7-8

This fall will mark ten official years of homeschooling for our family. During that time we have seen many changes. When we began homeschooling almost 10 years ago, it provoked vague unease in most people. The most common reaction I got was a quick change of subject, as if I'd just admitted I had six toes. Or, if someone did have any more to say it was the infamous "What about socialization?", or comments such as, "Well, and when will your children enter school?" In other words, homeschooling was viewed as an aberration and, since I seemed to be an otherwise sensible person, it was assumed I would eventually wake up, conform to the norm and put my kids back where they belong. I cannot remember one single person asking what homeschooling was, or how it worked.

Well, times change, and if homeschooling hasn't exactly become mainstream, its image has definitely improved. These days, if someone we meet finds out we homeschool, the response is more likely to be, "That's wonderful! You know, my sister (or niece or neighbor) home-schools. I don't know how she does it with those three (or five or seven) kids, but she seems to love it." I have even met a few people who seem genuinely interested in learning more about it. However, despite this more favorable reaction and these few exceptions, I still sense in most people about the same level of ignorance as to what homeschooling actually is, and the same disinterest in finding out about it, as before.

I used to be astonished at most other parents' lack of curiosity about homeschooling, but more recently I have come to see this disinterest as a form of self-protection. These parents may not understand what homeschooling is exactly, but I believe they do sense that homeschooling would require big changes in their lives, changes they cannot imagine making. These changes would involve time and money, but the biggest and most important change would be their level of responsibility.

Raising a child is a huge responsibility, and we all look for assurances that we are doing the right thing. One way to achieve peace of mind is to hire acknowledged experts to take over some of this task. When it comes to education, these experts are called teachers, administrators and counselors. But in the name of efficiency, a large group of children is assigned only a few of these experts, so the school's mission is seriously compromised right from the start. The school is like a large and efficient greenhouse, with rows and rows of pots and a carefully set schedule of light, warmth, water and just the right kind of fertilizer. The problem is that the whole setup assumes that only one kind of plant will be put in all the pots—all tomatoes. So all the pots are the same size and shape and the amount and timing

of everything needed for growth has been designed to be optimum for just this one kind of plant. Now some of the plants do turn out to be tomatoes, so they thrive. But others are different: they are daisies or roses, broccoli or watermelon. These are all plants, so they all grow to some extent, but not as much as they could, and some are left permanently stunted.

The homeschooling greenhouse, by contrast, is small and has just a few plants, so each can receive exactly what it needs, when and how it needs it, and so the homeschooled plants grow and flourish and But wait a minute, isn't this analogy getting a bit ridiculous? It's too cute and convenient, and applying labels is the mistake schools make. My daughter is not a daisy and my son is not a watermelon. (Sometimes I wish they were, because then I would know exactly what to do to help them grow.) But no, they are much more complicated and interesting. They are mystery plants, unfolding to become something unique in all of history, a one-specimen species never seen before that will never be seen again. And therein lies the challenge: how do I guide the growth of a plant that has no label, does not come with a tag telling its requirements and, moreover, sometimes changes its requirements without any notice? To properly guide my children, I must be wholly open to their unique set of talents and interests as those grow and change day by day, guiding, responding, suggesting and even demanding in the ways that will help them realize their potential.

And yet at the same time I crave some reassurance, some form of approval that this approach, this activity, this book I am suggesting, this praise or criticism I am voicing is the right one, the one that will help open doors and not close them. It is that uncertainty, that tension between a child's uniqueness and my desire for some reassurance that I am doing the right things, that Janet Kassel, in last year's opening remarks, referred to as the "threshold of unknowing." David Albert, in his foreword to Lisa Rivero's wonderful new book *Creative Home Schooling*, describes it as being "cast adrift on a journey with neither compass nor map[, and] sometimes it feels like there is a small being from another planet in the boat!"

In past years I would sometimes feel this urge for reassurance so strongly that I would try to measure my children against some external standard. I would get a book like *What Your Fifth Grader Should Know*, pore over the list of what should be covered in whatever subject was making me nervous and ask myself, "Does my son know that? Can he do that?" But if he does know it, and can do it, what does that prove? Perhaps his potential is to know and do much more than what this expert says he should. And if he doesn't know it or can't do it, again, so what? He may not be ready for that yet or, just maybe, that particular knowledge or skill isn't really so essential. So my attempt to take comfort in external standards always came to naught. These standards are always some sort of average, and comparing my children to an average requires me to deny at least some of their unique qualities, which is the same as denying one of our basic motives for homeschooling.

In the end, the only standard I can measure them against is their own potential, and that is discovered day by day, watching and listening, helping and sometimes provoking them as they create themselves through their activities. Through the years, I have learned to trust this

standard more and more, and I can now see by my children's accomplishments in their various endeavors that it is the only standard that makes sense. That does not mean books like *What Your Fifth Grader Should Know* are bad; indeed, I have the whole series on my shelf and have referred to it often for ideas. These kinds of guides, including even standardized tests, can be very helpful as resources; the danger comes in resorting to them as a refuge.

Sometimes, in our early years of homeschooling, the incredible challenge of constantly experimenting and evaluating and never really knowing if we were headed in the right direction would seem too great a burden. Now and then a day would come when we would arrive home after driving in traffic jams for what seemed like hours going to and from my kids' activities, during which I had nearly starved them to death by forgetting to bring a snack and afflicted them with carsickness by insisting they study while we drive, and I would find in the mail an alumni newsletter from my law school full of the noteworthy accomplishments of my former comrades on the academic fast track. On such days I could almost believe that life would be so much easier if I were the 60-hour-per-week corporate lawyer I trained to be, and maybe, perhaps, my kids would do just fine in school.

Yes, there were some bad days, but they became ever more rare as the years went on. And even on the worst bad days, my commitment to homeschooling never wavered. My wife, who has always been closely involved in our homeschooling on top of her demanding career, would sometimes, out of concern for my mental stability, gently wonder whether our kids should be sent to school. But I never seriously considered it. If I could be certain about anything, I felt certain even in those early years that homeschooling would continue to be best for my children. And now that we have almost 10 years behind us, I can say, with more conviction than I would have ever thought possible, that my children have flourished as homeschoolers; it has been the best possible path for us.

When I think back on this half-finished journey, and ponder alternative paths I could have taken, I am convinced that nothing I could have done in this wide world would have been more important or fulfilling than what I have done and am doing. I feel incredibly fortunate to be so fully involved in the lives of my two children and to enjoy a closeness to them that sadly seems all too rare.

For me, homeschooling is one of life's great truths, the kind of truth that everyone should rejoice in knowing but most seem unable to risk opening their eyes to see. I know that the freedom it gives us, while often daunting, is also a spur to supremely satisfying achievements, both for my children and for me.

But like most valuable freedoms, the freedom to homeschool is fragile and under nearly constant siege. I have not always appreciated this fact. When I first joined the WPA, about 9 years ago, I remember receiving my first issue of the WPA newsletter with excitement. As a neophyte homeschooler, I was hungry for guidance, advice and reassurance. To my dismay, the newsletter had little of that. Instead it had articles with exciting titles like "Impact of DPI's Inaccurate Document on Home Schooling" and "Effects of Collaboration Plans on Families, Schools, and Society." At that time I knew nothing about the WPA's role in creating our cur-

rent homeschooling law, and I remember thinking that the WPA seemed practically paranoid in the way it saw threats to homeschooling around every corner.

Over time, my ignorance has turned to appreciation. Gradually, I came to realize that the defining characteristic of homeschooling is not that our children are at home when others are at school, or that our children can study nuclear physics at age 9, or learn to read at age 11, or study creationism, atheism or any other topic that seems worthy and interesting. The essence of homeschooling is not in these particular choices, important though they may be to some families. The essence of homeschooling is in the freedom to make our own choices, the freedom from any state regulation telling us when, where, how or what in particular we must learn. Protecting this freedom is absolutely essential for us to realize the full benefits of homeschooling. Anything that diminishes that freedom, however slightly, turns me, to that extent, into an unpaid agent of the state, carrying out someone else's directives as to how my children should learn. For example, if I want to have my children take a standardized test, I can do so. But if the state requires me to do so, our freedom is diminished. If the state then labels my son a watermelon based on his test score, our freedom is significantly undermined. If the state then specifies what exactly I must do to turn him back into a tomato, then our precious freedom is largely gone.

So I now see that the WPA's vigilance, which is to say, our vigilance in protecting this freedom is the most important work it - and we - can do. And, yes, unfortunately, threats to that freedom are around every corner. Having worked as a lawyer, I know how quickly a law, even a seemingly well-established one, can change or even disappear if the powerful are against it and those who rely on it stay silent. I also have seen how an apparently unrelated or innocuous law can be twisted and put to quite different purposes if that suits those who have the power to enforce it. We are fortunate to have this great freedom called homeschooling, but we must keep in mind that we are not lucky to have it. Luck has nothing to do with it. This freedom was won by hard work on the part of many, and it can only be maintained with help from all of us. ❖