



Remarks by Sarah Gilbert at the General Session of WPA's 29th Annual Home Education Conference on May 5, 2012. [The Conference theme was *Homeschooling: Working Together for Your Freedoms and Mine.*] Published in *WPA Newsletter #112*, June 2012, p. 3.

I don't know if you've noticed this, but Wisconsin seems to be a wee bit politically divided these days. Okay, deeply divided. I'm not here to pull you one way or another on that matter – I'm sure you've already decided how you'll vote on Tuesday. No, I'm here to celebrate an example of a much healthier community, the Wisconsin Parents Association.

I've been a member of WPA for a very long time – I think this is our 22nd conference – and from the beginning of my family's involvement I have been impressed with the range of people represented at these gatherings. Look around you. Scan the variety of workshops offered. Browse the wealth of materials at the Used Book Sale. Listen to the stories of today's graduates and their families. Talk with people you encounter in the hallways and bathrooms and workshop rooms. You will find examples of the wide spectrum of politics, religion, educational philosophy, income, family size, clothing, diet, interests and passions that people can choose. No two families are exactly alike. We could find all kinds of things to disagree about.

But WPA, as a healthy community, manages to hold all of us together. Despite our differences we come together to celebrate what we have in common. We come together and we gain energy and inspiration and encouragement from each other. We are better for each others' presence. We are stronger for our diversity. Rather than two or more opposing sides, what we have here is a circle, a strong, stable circle in which we all matter, all hold each other in life-giving tension. A community that welcomes otherness and empowers each personal voice builds the courage and expands the lives of its members. We are all valued here, like instruments in an orchestra. We depend on each other to share our perspectives, our stories, and to work together to keep homeschooling in Wisconsin the lovely free experience that it is.

We have in common that we cherish the freedom to homeschool in the way that works best for our families. We are family centered people who think of home as much more than a place to sleep and store our stuff. Homeschooling is a lifestyle, not just an educational choice, and the decision to homeschool usually leads to or stems from other "outside the box" choices. We have all had to learn to cope with the people who challenge those choices, who don't understand where we are coming from. My family isn't still technically homeschooling, since our youngest daughter is now a sophomore in college, but when I see another family with school-age children at the library or at a museum or out walking or playing during the school day, I know that we have much in common, that there are things we understand about each others' values and priorities and how we shape our days.

I'd like to share with you a poem written by the Arab American poet, Naomi Shihab Nye. It's about hospitality, about opening our ears and our hearts when we encounter the other.

Red Brocade

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.

Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.

No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.

I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.

If we can extend this level of hospitality to each other here at this conference and at home in our communities, we will be much stronger, richer, and healthier. We have a pretty great homeschooling law here in Wisconsin, and it is critical to each one of our families that we keep that reasonable law. We are free from egregious oversight by state or school authorities. We are free of testing mandates. Each family can tailor the homeschooling experience to fit each child in it. Our law gives us the flexibility that makes us such an intriguing mix of homeschoolers. We are not forced into sameness in our approach – and isn't the power to create our own unique learning paths one of the biggest reasons we homeschool? To maintain this law WPA needs all of us to pull together, to look out for each other. As the March WPA newsletter said, "If your homeschool freedoms aren't secure, neither are mine."

I want all of you to be secure in your homeschool freedoms, secure enough to carry on learning joyfully and creatively, empowered to choose what homeschooling looks like for you. Wisconsin only asks a few things of us: to file the PI-1206 form, and in doing so to declare that we meet the minimal requirements all private schools in Wisconsin must meet, even tiny ones like ours, and that we comply with the compulsory attendance law. Other than that the options are wide open. Whether you use workbooks at the kitchen table, online materials, the public library, your farm or woods or stream, a neighbor with a telescope, a grandparent who knits or fixes cars or speaks another language; whether your child volunteers at an animal rescue or takes a college class or plays the ukulele or competes in Bible quizzes or writes a novel – I want you to choose what works, what will be true to each learner’s needs and gifts, and to your family’s understanding of how best to nurture the blossoming of each child.

So let’s stay together in this circle. Let’s look around and across at each other and know that our working together is what keeps Wisconsin homeschooling freedoms secure. Let’s celebrate the way that WPA embraces all of us in all our rich variety, and appreciate those intrepid homeschoolers who founded this organization, whose vision made it what it is. Perhaps we can be an example to others and to ourselves of how to practice hospitality, how to make community, how to create harmony from many voices, and recognize that we are all in this together. ❖