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Fill Yourself

By Andrew Pudewa

One role a homeschooling parent often inadvertently takes on is that of “administrator of curriculum,” providing worksheets, assignments, projects, and writing tasks for his children much like a doctor prescribes a regimen of medicine and exercise for his patients. This is most likely to happen in larger families with children of widely varying ages or with newer homeschooling families who feel a compelling need to “cover all the bases.” While this is to some degree inevitable, it is also good for us to consider ways to avoid this trap, which so easily leads to burnout and frustration. Therefore, this month let us contemplate a contrasting idea: Study something yourself.

In the book *A Thomas Jefferson Education*, Oliver DeMille lists as one of the Seven Keys of Great Teaching, “You, Not Them.” At first, this seems counterintuitive. Isn’t homeschooling about giving your children a good education? Wouldn’t stealing time to focus on yourself cause you to lose valuable time with your children?

However, as a wise man once said, “Teaching is the overflow from the soul of the teacher to the soul of the student.” Now that’s a frightening thought, as it has several challenging implications. Initially, we are forced to think about what it really suggests—that education is the filling of a soul. This begs several questions: Does a soul a need to be filled? What should it be filled with? How can we effect this “overflowing” from our soul? What do we do if we don’t feel filled ourselves? So let us consider three reasons why we, as home educating parents, should consistently and aggressively study something ourselves, for the preceding questions may be answered in the process.

One reason (and for some the most important) is this: It gives us empathy for our children. It’s so easy for us to forget what it is like to be a beginner—to not know something. Often we lose patience with children who just don’t “get it” or who seem to require more repetition than time allows and workbooks provide. By studying something completely new as a SOTA (Student Over the Traditional Age), we will realize how difficult it can be to master content that might seem simple or easy to others. With struggle we will gain empathy, with empathy we grow in understanding, with understanding we become better teachers.

Another significant reason to energetically pursue learning something new is that we will have another thing to pass on to our students. For those of you with young children, this is especially applicable, since you’ll have time to get a good head start and really know something quite well before you begin to teach it. Study Greek or calculus now, and you’ll be able to teach it to your children it later. For those of us with older students, this can still be done, though it’s harder to stay ahead of the students since most of them can learn faster and more efficiently than we can! But either way, knowing something is prerequisite to teaching it, and planning ahead by studying now what you’ll want to teach later makes a lot of sense.

The third and possibly best reason for aggressively studying something for your own benefit is that it will allow you to illustrate for your children, in the best possible way, the value of study. When your children see you using your precious free time to pore over a history book, work some trigonometry problems, or conjugate some French verbs, for no other reason than to learn it yourself (instead of browsing Facebook posts or watching YouTube videos), you will be teaching them two vital lessons in a direct but non-verbal way: the value of learning and how to use time well. Another of DeMille's Seven Keys is "Inspire, Not Require," which is undoubtedly one of the hardest to practice, but certainly one of the most powerful. If your ultimate goal is to nurture independent, self-directed scholars, then you must create a home environment where scholarly pursuits are honored above all else.

However, creating a home culture of learning is far more important than just understanding students' challenges, learning something more to teach, or showing our children that it's important to us. The word *school* is actually derived from the Greek *scholae*, which literally means *leisure*. While few children consider "doing school" a form of leisure, in truth it is a great blessing to have time to study and learn, not only because it makes us better people, but because it fulfills a basic human desire. Historically, the opportunity to study the "liberal" arts was the privilege of the free and wealthy, while slaves and the poor would engage in the "servile" arts. And now we are both relatively free (for the time being) and wealthy (at least compared to most of those in the past), and if we wish to retain our freedoms, we would do well to aggressively pursue the study of the liberal arts. Thomas Jefferson rightly noted the importance of this: "If a nation expects to remain ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

This helps answer the question of what to study. The liberal arts in the traditional sense are seven: the Trivium, consisting of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the Quadrivium, being mathematics, geometry, astronomy (and by extension all the natural sciences), and music. These are the arts of language and the arts of science by which we can better understand the incarnate Word and His creation; these are things that we are free to study in order to better know and appreciate our God and His universe. And in pursuing these things, we begin to fill our soul with His truth and beauty. However, we are limited in time and energy and won't be able to study everything we might want to learn.

So choose something from the great liberal arts menu—something that interests you, something you perhaps always wanted to learn but never had the chance. Maybe you've always wanted to study another language (Latin is the best place to start!), or revisit one of the sciences, or you might pick up with math where you left off in school, or return to the study of a musical instrument. All are good choices; any one of them will help you begin the process of developing empathy, preparing yourself to teach more and to inspire your children.

And there will be an interesting side benefit: Your children will be very curious about what you're doing. You may, in fact, have to shoo them away to play while you study (which will, of course, cause their interest to soar). And inevitably you will talk about what you are learning, the trivia as well as the insights, and the children around you won't be able to ignore your excitement. They will learn by osmosis, or we might say, by the overflow from your heart to theirs.

This has happened to us time and time again, and in retrospect it seems that it was the best kind of learning that ever occurred in our home. My enthusiasm became contagious, and the children couldn't help but imitate me to some degree. I suspect, however, that I will continue daily study, at least a little bit, even after they have all left home, because I have experienced a joy that can only be had by filling one's self through learning. Try it!

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