

Hate of Learning

One Cause and a Possible Remedy

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When one of my daughters was around twelve years old, we faced a significant problem with her motivation and quality of work. Her school days went pretty much like this: She would get up, do everything on her checklist with as little effort as possible, often being “finished” by 10:00 a.m., and then spend the rest of the day snacking and annoying everyone else in the house. When confronted on the quality of her work, she would counter, “I did it—what more do you want?” When it was pointed out to her that she was “finished” in a couple of hours and that perhaps she could have a bit more added to her checklist, an ugly, hormone-enhanced argument would ensue: “I’m already doing everything I have to. More wouldn’t be fair! How come you want to make my life miserable? I’m doing enough, okay? Can’t you just leave me alone?”

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Sound familiar? If you have a large enough family, you’re likely to have at least one child who develops this attitude at some point, which might be appropriately termed a “hate of learning” stage. The danger, of course, is that Mom and Dad start thinking evil thoughts such as, “We’re failing her ... maybe we should put her in a good school ... of course, she wouldn’t necessarily spend any more time studying, but at least she’d be out of our hair for a while ... maybe we just need to be more strict” Such were the thoughts my wife and I entertained at that time. Fortunately, I came across a possible strategy that involved neither sending her to school nor using a heavy-handed approach.

Late one night, driving home from a business trip, I was listening to a talk entitled “The Seven Keys of Great Teaching” given by Oliver DeMille (author of *A Thomas Jefferson Education*). I had heard this talk many times before and thought I understood it well—all except one part. Six of the seven keys made perfect sense to me:

- Classics, not textbooks
- Mentors, not professors
- Quality, not conformity
- Inspire, not require
- Simplicity, not complexity
- You, not them

I wasn’t necessarily implementing these keys perfectly, but I understood them and with a bit of success had been using these ideas with my children and students. However, the one I found enigmatic was “Structure time, not content.” What does that mean? What would that look like? How would one actually structure time? What about content?

And then it hit me. This was my exact problem with my twelve-year-old daughter; I had been structuring her content, not her time! By giving her a checklist of scholastic tasks to accomplish each day, we had focused on the things she got done, not how she was using her time. Indeed, if I wanted her to progress from a “love of learning” phase to a “scholar” phase, I had first to get her out of “hate of learning” and teach her the value of time. Would it work to shift over from a checklist to a schedule? Couldn’t she procrastinate and manipulate that just as well? What would it look like in her life if we could somehow structure her time and not worry so much about content?

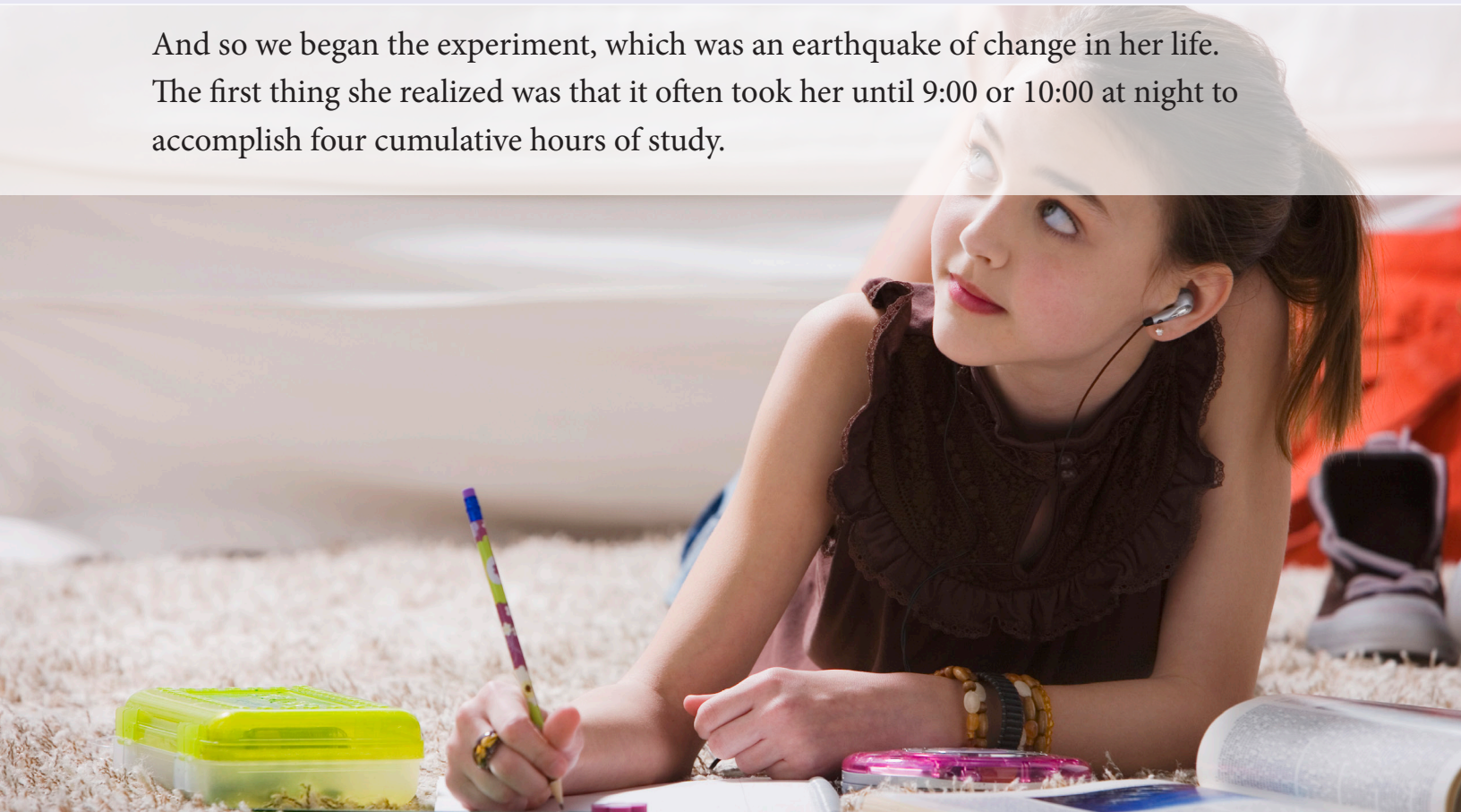
So after prayer and consultation with my wife (who was basically willing to try anything at that point), I sat down with said daughter and explained her new program: She would be responsible for studying four hours each day. Within those four hours, she would be free to study whatever she wanted to study—within certain parameters. I printed for her a time log whereon she would record her activity for each fifteen-minute block of time, starting from when she woke up until she had completed the four hours of cumulative study time. No more checklist; she would have to determine how she would use her time, and she would have to be much more responsible for her own education. However, a bit of content guidance was needed, since a twelve-year-old unmotivated child will not become a self-directed, enthusiastic student overnight.



Together, we made a list of people from history who might be interesting to study and put them in chronological order. I created a list of body parts from the encyclopedia. We created a list of somewhat challenging classics to read. Math could be done every day. Her instructions were as follows:

Take the first thing on this list and begin to study it. You are free to study that one thing for as long as you like—five minutes, five hours, five days, or five weeks. You can use the encyclopedia, the Internet, any book in the house, and we'll try to take you to the library whenever you need to go. When you've learned as much as you wish to about that thing, go to the next thing on the list and study that for as long as you like—five minutes, five hours, five days, or five weeks. When you finish the list, we'll make a new one. Every day you must fax me [I put a fax machine in her room!] your time log and two written paragraphs summarizing what you learned during your four hours of study. Within those guidelines, you are free to choose how to use your study time.

And so we began the experiment, which was an earthquake of change in her life. The first thing she realized was that it often took her until 9:00 or 10:00 at night to accomplish four cumulative hours of study.



Her second epiphany was about how she used her time. A couple weeks into this program I was out of town and called home to check in with her, and she said to me, “Daddy! I just realized something today!”

“What, sweetheart?” I prompted, delighted with her enthusiasm.

“I realized that I spent an hour and a half—just eating snacks!” Now, I’m sure that her mother could have told her that, but for her to realize it herself was priceless.

While she had many other remarkable insights over time, the most important change was a return to excitement about learning. Over the course of the next two years, she exercised her freedom to pursue her interests and eventually engaged in an extensive study of food, searching the Bible for every reference to food she could find, studying the history of food preservation, and writing a paper on how refrigeration changed the course of history, eventually leading to a continuing and in-depth study of nutrition, health, and natural healing.

Yes, there were some bumps in the road, some difficult days where goals were not met (but there always are), and certainly moments of doubt, but the end result, I must say, was gratifying: a motivated, self-directed teenage student who had learned how to use her time well. From “hate of learning” to “love of learning” to scholar—thanks to the grace of God and one missing ingredient; what more could I ask for?

