

What We Really Need

Thoughts at the Start of the School Year

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Depending on when one starts counting, this fall marks about our twentieth year of homeschooling. Daughter number four graduated from college last May. Daughter number six was married in December. Our youngest is close to being a young woman and no longer my sweet little girl. So I wax philosophical. What really matters and what really doesn't? It's easy for me to run around the country giving advice, but sometimes it's hard to follow that same advice. So this question seems an appropriate contemplation for me here at the start of the school year, and here are four things I know I must better attend to, what I might call some "new school year's resolutions":

Get outside more.

Read out loud more.

Play more games.

Lighten up and smile more.

It's a short list, but these are the things I need to remember.



**“ Go outside and finish your work.
You can come in and check your
Facebook page when you’re done. ”**

Plato’s Academy supposedly gathered under the trees and the sky. According to Augustine, nature was God’s “first book.” While we imagine that somehow “school” has to happen inside at desks or tables, and “recess” is the outside time, there’s no real reason for that. Too often, I catch myself saying some stupid thing like, “You can go outside once you’ve finished your work.” But why not try, “Go outside and finish your work. You can come in and check your Facebook page when you’re done.” I like this because it’s hard to engage with social media where there are no plugs; one must engage with reality—insects, dirt, plants. Additionally, I’ve noticed that my children have done some of their best writing either while outside or immediately after having been outside. Where I live, summer is brutal and autumn is by far the best season to get outdoors; it’s not too hot, the ticks and chiggers are waning, the air is crisp and the colors are broadening. Sadly, the tasks I often think most urgent—for myself and for my children—are those that require “inside” things like screens, electronics, tables, and paper. But seasons pass quickly, and our souls need the trees and the sky, so I am determined to get outside more (or at least kick my children outside now and then).



Even though I run around the country explaining to parents why they must read out loud to their children—a lot, and even into their teenage years—it’s terrifyingly easy to lose the habit, especially when the youngest in the family aren’t so young. It requires a bit of determination for me to compel everyone into the living room to listen to me read, but every time I do it I feel happy, like something genuinely good is at work. I just have to make it happen. It’s also how I can read (or reread) a few more books that I myself want to read but could never take the time away from “real” work to do so. Last year, we had several serious tornado warnings, a hugely dramatic event around our place, and a time when 5, 6, 7, or more of us (whoever’s in the house) have to crowd into a little concrete pantry and wait it out. Last time that happened, I rushed over to the bookshelf and grabbed *Jane Eyre*. By the time the tornado watch was over, I had almost finished the first chapter, and was once again swept up by Bronte’s masterful and elegant use of language, beginning to vividly re-create the story in my mind. While I would have happily stayed crammed in the pantry reading to everyone for hours, others felt compelled to get back to “normal” life, and of course I had urgent things to do as well. But I was disappointed. So I am determined that we won’t have to wait for tornado warnings to dig in to a great book with the whole family.



It seems like I used to be better at playing, having reached a peak of skill at around ten years old and gradually losing the ability ever since. At fifty-two, it now takes work, especially since my youngest two are spending most of their time trying to be older than they are. I just don't spontaneously think of playing much anymore, especially not with things like blocks or Legos. Games now have to be "appropriate" and "productive"—two adjectives that should never be applied to pure play! G.K. Chesterton theorized that the reason adults don't play more is that it requires too much effort. That's entirely true. Even nasty tasks like emails and tax paperwork seem easy in comparison to forgetting the urgent and building a tower with Kapla blocks. My son-in-law visits often and reminds me of what it was like to be a young dad; he keeps building whether his son shows interest or not! And clearly, my students love games: Jeopardy in Latin class or the "simile bluff" game in writing. If I'm teaching a class down in my office classroom, I can justify playing games—it makes the students happy and they get excited about learning. But up at my house it's not "serious" study, and I forget to make learning fun the way I know I can.

Once, years ago, I took my sweet eight-year-old on a trip with me for the first time. On day one, she sat in a writing class with older students, and although she probably didn't do much at all during the three hours, I didn't notice, nor did I really care, as I was busily doing my job—helping other people's children. After that class she went to another family's home while I taught two more groups. I picked her up at around six o'clock and headed for the hotel. In the car, I asked her, "How did you like the writing class?" With unabashed, pure, beautiful sincerity, she answered, "Oh, Daddy, it was wonderful." Feeling satisfied and proud, I was completely stunned by her next, painfully honest question: "How come you're not like that at home?" And I realized how easy it is for me to be jovial, mirthful, non-judgmental, unconditionally enthusiastic, and appreciative with other people's children, and how easy it is to forget to be that way with my own, falling into an unspoken context: "Yes, I love you, you love me, and we know that, so get to work, okay? We have a lot to do." But I'm not fooling anyone, not even myself. My own children need me to be the best teacher I can be.

Yes, this year our two youngest are the only ones at home now, and they do have a lot of tough stuff on their plates—debate club, geometry, AP History, more logic, more Latin, and it's easy for my expectations to change during these years; I think they should "get serious" about study and about life. Though true in one way, I also need to remember that all of us—whether we are five or fifteen or fifty—need to frequently reconnect with nature, need to sometimes sacrifice "school" for a good read-aloud, and need to be willing to laugh and joke and play and not always be so serious. They grow up so fast.

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