


Freeing Butterflies: A Grandmother's Journey to Homeschooling Acceptance

Written by Zann Carter.

"I've had it, Mom—the last straw has landed. I'm taking Shaun out of school this week and I'm going to have him learn at home. And I'm never going to send Patrick and Molly to school. And if Ian wants to homeschool, he can, too!"

With those words, I let my mother know I'd taken the drastic step I'd been contemplating and researching for months. That January, her only apparent reaction was something along the lines of, "My, that's... interesting," accompanied by a facial expression with which I was fairly familiar. Eyes wide, a bland smile, it was a face struggling to look "interested" in her daughter's latest wild idea, rather than dismayed. Interested won and, subsequently, I received only her encouragement and saw only her pride in her grandchildren's accomplishments.

A year and a half later my husband's job required our moving to another state, 1200 miles away. Mom and I talked frequently on the phone, but it was three years before we saw each other again, when she came to visit us in Indiana. During her stay, she attended support group meetings with us and met my new homeschooling friends and their children.

As I listened to her talking with them, I discovered the true depth of her initial concerns about homeschooling. In an effort to be supportive, she had kept her fears about homeschooling confined to prayer and therapeutic conversations with friends. It became clear to me that she had had the same worries that most grandparents have when their children decide to homeschool. However, I had no stories to match those of many homeschoolers—stories about grandparents' fears, disapproval and criticisms that often created serious strains on family relationships, some even to the point of estrangement. How had my mother handled her concerns in a way that led to her present enthusiasm for home education? What enabled her to keep her own counsel and not undermine me in those crucial first months? 

While there are some things about Mom's story that are unique to our family relationships and her personality, I believe that some of the ways she chose to deal with her homeschooling concerns might be useful to other grandparents. Over the last year, in conversations and letters, my mother has shared with me her thoughts and experiences in becoming a grandmother of homeschoolers.

She says the story should start with butterflies.

Shortly after we began homeschooling, a friend gave me a large bunch of dill crawling with small caterpillars destined to become black swallowtails. We fixed up a box to house them, calling it the Butterfly Birthing Center. Every two days we bought fresh dill from the market to feed the fast-growing, voracious creatures. Our whole family was enthralled with this project and we watched with fascination as the metamorphoses began. As the butterflies emerged, we took turns releasing them. On one of those days, Mom happened to visit.

“It was one of those ephemeral moments that pass so quickly,” she wrote recently, “yet leave me with a lasting memory to treasure. Even now, when I talk about it, I get a lump in my throat and my eyes fill with tears.

“At the time, I had been searching for assurance that your decision to keep the children out of school was right. That was on my mind as I watched Patrick extend a chubby forefinger to the butterfly, whose shaky, damp wings were rapidly unfolding. Soon the insect was walking boldly across his hand, slowly flapping its wings, testing them, getting ready for its first flight. As we stood in a hushed circle, I looked at the eager faces around me—three generations, sharing this special moment. I saw joy in learning and family togetherness at the core of homeschooling. I realized this was the assurance I had been seeking and I felt directed, as mother and grandmother, to set you little butterflies of homeschooling free in my mind and heart. I knew that it wasn’t right to try to change your mind—that you all needed my support while your wings dried. I still didn’t know particular answers to my questions, but I did feel able to wait with peace of mind until I found them. When that butterfly leaped from Patrick’s finger and flew off, I felt as though I’d seen a little miracle and my heart was so much lighter.”

As time went by, Mom realized that many of the difficulties she had experienced as a public school parent were the same ones that led me to homeschool—the arbitrary and capricious nature of school policies, the inability of schools to meet individual children’s developmental needs and the powerlessness a parent feels when sitting across from the ‘experts’ who say they know what’s best for your child.

“Life was very stressful when I had you three kids in public school,” she says now, “but at that time, you couldn’t keep your children out of school for anything. I felt so much pressure to keep your attendance high and to co-operate with the teachers and principals, even when I thought they were being unfair or were just plain wrong. Since I was a substitute teacher myself, I found it very hard to buck the system.”

In recalling the not-so-rosy parts of our school lives decades ago, Mom was able to begin to see home education as a reasonable response to serious shortcomings in that system, a valid option to put before those who would say that those shortcomings must be borne for some nebulous greater or future good. However, she also kept in mind that she made the best choices she could at the time, and concentrated on feeling grateful that her

grandchildren have this opportunity for a better educational experience, rather than feeling guilty for not being able to give us the same opportunity.

In those early days of our homeschooling, especially after we moved away, Mom had times when she felt very alone with her concerns. She knew that my late father would have reminded her that I was a grown woman, leading my own life, responsible for making the decisions for my children, but she needed more than that thought. Among her friends, Mom found sympathetic listening ears, but no reassurances.

“They said that homeschooling isolates children and would prevent them from being able to cope with real life,” she remembers, “Friends who were teachers were flatly opposed to the very idea of homeschooling. People whose own children were talking about homeschooling were more bewildered than I was! My biggest concerns were about the isolation and the lack of resources and materials that the children would have access to in school. I decided I would try to find out as much as I could about homeschooling.”

She started her own research on homeschooling, looking up articles in periodicals and newspapers. Most of the articles were reassuring to her, reporting academic achievements that met or exceeded standards set by the educational establishment, or profiling families who were successfully homeschooling.

“I saw that while families didn’t have the same resources that schools had, their children were still learning about the same things. I read about children learning at their own pace and enjoying their education when it was led by their own interests. Worries about whether you had the expertise to “teach” all the subjects dissipated—I learned that homeschooling parents are often simply guides and that teachers come in many forms.

“Then, of course, I was starting to see how Shaun’s education was progressing. Through volunteer work and apprenticeship in the community, he was learning science, art history, literature, small business management. He had real-life opportunities to use writing and math skills.”

She laughs, “It was also hard to see how he was being isolated or would wind up unable to cope with real life when he was out in the community so much!”

In the last two years, Mom has been spending time with other homeschoolers and lingering doubts have vanished.

“In Florida, I visit with homeschoolers meeting in the park. I especially enjoy speaking with the children and I am so impressed with the teenagers! I watch them willingly help with smaller children on the playground, allowing their parents to talk and exchange ideas without lots of interruptions. When they sit to talk to me, we have real conversations. Speaking about their interests and homeschooling, they are friendly and articulate. In

Indiana, I saw the same good relationships between children of all ages and also met teens who weren't alienated from adults."

These days, when Mom is speaking with friends and contemporaries, she notices that they are not quite so vehemently against homeschooling. Many are looking "interested" and asking polite questions. Some are coming to see that home education is a legitimate alternative to schools for many families. She encourages other grandparents whose children are homeschooling, or considering it, to try to put aside prejudices and fear, do their own research and, most especially, to give their children and grandchildren the gift she gave us—a gift of initial trust and support, a chance to dry new wings and fly.

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